

Acts 23:11–35

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[0 : 00] I want to add my welcome to you. I'm so glad you're here today. Our last Sunday of the summer in this air-conditioned context.

So enjoy it and pray for a nice, cool Labor Day weekend. Next Sunday we will be back across on the other side of the building in the auditorium.

In fact, if you've got a little time after the service today, you could help us fold up a bunch of these rental chairs as they'll make their way out of the building this week. Well, I thought about various titles to the sermon.

One of them, the plight of Paul. It had kind of an assonance ring to it, but not much power. I thought about another judicial statistic, but felt it might require too much explanation.

[1 : 12] I thought about simply calling this lost in the system. And there's a reason why. As we come to our text today, Paul has been arrested.

In the midst of that, physically accosted, both by a populace that was unruly and a police force that was ungodly.

He was now incarcerated. And mind you, the text will make clear, without charges.

And he is awaiting trial, which as we will continue to read, won't be his for well over two years at least.

How does this happen? Let me put it differently. You still wonder if the Bible is relevant? How is it that a man is arrested, accosted, incarcerated, without charge, and awaiting trial for years upon years?

[2 : 36] Just this last week, I saw an expose in our own city of, I believe, more than a hundred who have been in Cook County jail for more than five years, awaiting their speedy trial.

How is it that a man who was once free to walk the world, now is in fetters and forever will be? Paul, who, with his gospel accordion, has taken it to the world, is from this moment on, confined until he will suffer capital punishment as an innocent man?

Well, let's slow it down. I want you to see how it happens. And I want you to take away what you need.

The arrest. The arrest. For that, you've got to walk back in what people would call the previous context.

[4 : 14] Chapter 21. You can see it there, and I hope you have your Bible open or on your phone. Verse 31. He was in Jerusalem.

And it says, And as they were seeking to kill him, that is the mob action, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.

He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains.

And he inquired who he was and what he had done. The arrest. Now notice, there was a case of mistaken identity at the arrest.

Look at verse 38 of that same chapter. The tribune, which at this time looked like a beat officer on the street, says, Are you not the Egyptian then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the 4,000 men of the assassins out into the wilderness?

[5 : 38] This is how it happens. In Paul's case, one of mistaken identity, the officer thought, he had fortuitously come across the leader of an Egyptian gang, the Egyptian gangster.

Let me put it to you, simply, a black terrorist from another country. Until, Paul had no alternative other than to pull out his own ethnicity card, whether he wanted to play it or not.

And he says to him, that's not me. I'm a Jew. I'm a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia.

Evidently, we don't know what Paul looked like, but I'm just kind of surmising here. He must have looked either like a dark-skinned Jew or a light-skinned sub-Saharan African.

The arrest was a case of mistaken identity.

[7 : 14] Not only that, it made him, by nature, because of the world in which he lived, now open to police brutality.

in order to find out what he was here for, this tribune, by the time you get to chapter 22 and verse 22 and following, notice what happens.

Verse 24, the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging to find out why they were shouting against him like this.

In other words, now that he is arrested, the officer is not aware for what reason and so he tells those who are under him, get him in there and find out.

Beat it out of him. find a confession from him because I'll need it for my paperwork. Until Paul miraculously somehow pulled out his state ID card and it was no longer just an ethnic card of I'm a Jew, not an Egyptian, I am a Roman citizen.

[8 : 55] And until that card was played, his purported sense of innocence would have been run right over.

What effect did the arrest of Paul have on his psyche? Well, that's where our verses started today, verse 11. The fact that he gets a vision in the barracks of the Antonia Fortress, the county jail of Jerusalem, that's where he is.

You've got to actually see him there. He's in Cook County Jail. He's been arrested by a precinct officer. He's been placed temporarily into the county system, which even in our own world you should do before 24 hours is up.

And he's there overnight and he gets a vision where the Lord actually stands by him and says, take courage for you have testified of the facts about me. What is the effect of arrest in a case of mistaken identity that leads one to possibly be subject to brutality?

The effect is this, people, fear. Fear. Paul is afraid. He's afraid. the only time I was behind bars was in upstate Florida in a federal prison.

[10 : 47] I remember turning my phone over all my stuff and going back to get way deep into the pods where I met with about 40 men who were taking an online video class on how to study the Bible with an eye toward teaching it something that we had put together for them.

And I've seen men back beyond gate after gate after gate. I've seen a man baptized in a little plastic swimming pool.

I've seen the church at live in the midst of that. But I can't tell you how wonderful it was to know that I was going to walk out.

I never had any fear. There were cameras everywhere. Paul's afraid because he is now in the system and he makes never get out.

Arrest and incarceration without charge. No charges. It's kind of stunning.

[12 : 09] No charges. No charges. chapter 21 verses 33 B and following.

Take a look because the writer wants you to see multiple times that we don't even know why he's here yet. chapter 21 33 B he inquired who he was and what he had done.

Some in the crowd were shouting one thing some another and he could not learn the facts because of the uproar. Chapter 22 we've already seen it verse 24 examine him by flogging to find out why they are shouting against him like this.

Verse 30 of the same chapter but the next day desiring to know the real reason why. In other words when when he finally realized he couldn't just beat a confession out of him at some point to put it in the books he moved toward more conventional means and had Paul show up at a religious courtroom with the Sanhedrin and he came himself to inquire maybe I'll get the charges here.

Look at chapter 23 and verse 9. Then a great clamor arose and some of the scribes of the Pharisees party stood up and said we find nothing wrong with this man.

[13 : 30] We got no charges to bring against this man. And then when you look all the way later in chapter 23 verses 28 and 29 which is in this letter of transfer when he's moving from the county jail to really more of a state run institution the language that actually accompanies the letter of transfer is this and desiring to know the charge for which they are accusing him I brought him down to their council I found that he was being accused about questions of their law but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment and by the time he finally moves from the county jail to the state

run institution verse 35 the new leader at that point says I'll give you a hearing when your accusers arrive incarcerated without charge arrest incarceration and then awaiting trial chapter 24 it is in verse 27 you will learn how long he's at least awaiting trial that's how it really happens a man is lost in the system he's moved from a moment on the street and boy you begin to see now why so many are operating from fear presuming themselves to be a threat when they are neither divisive nor at fault now you come to our text while he's incarcerated and awaiting trial there are 40 guys on the outside who put a hit on him they actually say

I'm not eating till that guy's dead and they must have had some pull within the inside because they went to the Sanhedrin and said find a way to get to that tribune because when you transfer him from his cell to the Judaistic courtroom we have somebody in the hallway in between and he will never make it we have vowed he will be murdered before he ever gets out of jail this too is a contemporary question for many am I more safe behind bars or beyond bars some of us never have considered that but others do fortunately we live in a world where there are fewer murders among the incarcerated than there once were in fact the number one cause of death once you've been arrested whether you're awaiting trial or not is suicide and the number of suicides happen very early after arrest but even some of those suicides get caught up in this conversation of was it was it that or not take the recent death of one in our own city depending upon your experience in having to encounter the questions you may say obviously a suicide he ran from arrest and was afraid to do it or you may say another corrupt system and they found a way to make it look like he did it himself we found the same thing a few years ago with a woman who had been arrested and in jail we don't know these forty put a hit out on

Paul went on their own lent like fast it's a little humorous because you know you and I know how it goes Paul doesn't actually die I'm trying to wonder when they first picked up a meal again eventually who knows they ate though I'll tell you this they ate at some point the hit was out but what's the takeaway for you and me the takeaway is sixteen to twenty two let me put it to you this way help comes from the most unlikely of places now the son of Paul's sister verse sixteen heard of their ambush and entered the barracks and told Paul and Paul called the centurion and said get the son of my sister to the tribune and he tells the tribune you need to know that they're coming to you with transfer orders to courtroom

B or it should be J and there's a vow out among forty that are going to take his life before he ever arrives what's the take away help came to Paul from the most unlikely of persons we didn't even know Paul had a sister let alone a sister who had a son he suddenly appears on the pages of scripture like a nine year old boy on the porch who overheard the hit that had been called and he had a way to get word to the one who could prevent it think of it Paul owes his life to the boy on the front porch let me tell you this by way of encouragement help can come in an unjust world in a complicated world in a contradictory world help can come

God you are never beyond the helping hand of God is that something you might need to know this morning no matter what you are into no matter no matter how you feel about the way in which it went down you are not beyond the helping the helping hand of God this is something that many need to know I remember my dad once when I was with him if my memory serves me correct he had access to unbelievable places and people and if you asked him how did you get that kind of access he goes oh I've got friends in low places see we're always trying to cultivate friends in high places my dad said

[22 : 17] I got friends in low places they're the ones that get me behind the doors I need to get behind that's what happened here for Paul as a result boy you better treat everybody the same because the nine year old is as lucky to be the one to save your life as the circuit court judge I want you to know that this morning help can come from the most unlikely of places what else do I want you to know look at the latter half here 23 and following I'm not sure really what what to call this part of it I mean the first half is simple a hit is put out help arrives but what do you call what the tribune does look at verse 23 he called 200 of the centurions and said get ready 200 soldiers with 70 horsemen 200 spearmen take this guy as far as

Caesarea at the third hour of the night and provide mounts for him to get on and ride safely to Felix the governor and do it with the letter of transfer that I'm now penning for you and is placed actually in the scriptures I mean do you call that a commitment to protect Paul or do you call that the tribune's commitment to protect himself I'm not sure I do know that if you got 470 soldiers involved in the transfer of a prisoner from Jerusalem to the coast and then 30 miles north of Jospa to

Caesarea you have some firepower and some protective vehicles on the road I mean this is a massive movement for one man and it even says give him his own mount almost as if to say if somehow they get through to 470 maybe he can still get his way clear

I do not want this guy dead what do you call that normally in our world if you get a prisoner that's got that much detail they have that much detail because they are an incredible danger to society right but we already know that Paul is not a danger to society this guy knows it so then what are your other options maybe the prisoner needs to be protected or in other words he needs the government to protect him from the rabble that's in society so maybe he's actually out to protect the life of Paul but maybe he's actually just trying to establish his own job security because he actually already had nearly beaten this guy and if he dies under his charge as a Roman citizen he's now an accomplice to being incredibly incompetent and so he might actually be sending him out just to push him up the road higher up the ladder let me get him out of the county jail and put him in the system deeper you're not really told but there it is notice his letter this guy

Claudius Lysias verse 26 the fact that we have his name and the fact that he's in the book of Acts I like to think that this guy he's one of the Luke's sources for the material of the narrative I mean someone provided the writer of Acts original source documents for him to construct the narrative and the fact that somehow Luke came on to the actual letter of transfer seems to imply to me and he knows the story all the way from his arrest to being in the Jerusalem council to the time he gets up and over to Felix that perhaps Claudius Lysias is here as a man who purchased his own freedom under the emperor Claudius through his birth name of Lysias which is someone who has been loosed or freed himself and perhaps he actually is part of the believing community and therefore

Luke had access to him I don't know but I do know this this guy knew how to put himself in the best light look at his letter verse 27 Claudius Lysias to his excellency the governor Felix greetings this man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him having learned that he was a Roman citizen now it's all true but there's a couple things in there that he aren't said he doesn't say and by the way I was going to beat it out of him until I learned he was a citizen all he says is I rescued him so he's definitely carving out a place for himself here and what happens what happens is Paul is is deposited in Caesarea according to the text the very last one inherits praetorium he get this now the text opened he's in the county jail in

[28 : 16] Jerusalem it closes he's in the state run joint from Caesarea which oversees the whole district and he's moved from Antonia's fortress just outside the temple area for their religious thing and he's moved to a capital place in which there are palaces and buildings and great archaeological work going on and there was a theater and there was an amphitheater with the Mediterranean in the backdrop and he's actually in Herod's praetorium and if you want to know what a praetorium is in an old way it would have been where the head of the army was actually encamped in the midst of the battle but because Rome already had won the world and Caesarea had been set up as overseeing of the district what it really means is he was in the residential palaces of the leader of the whole area he moved from the county jail to the headquarters of the guy who ran the whole region he was in his house that's the kind of house arrest you want to be in in other ways he was more protected now than ever this guy was safely deposited what do you need to know when the hit was out help came from unlikely sources but you also need to know this you can be sure that God will get you wherever he wants you to go come on he had told

Paul even back in verse 11 where we started so you must testify in Rome before that in chapter 19 if you look back and in verse 21 Paul had resolved in the spirit to go on to Jerusalem saying after I had been there I must also see Rome in chapter 9 at his conversion in verse 15 it's going to be indicated that when he had come to Christ there was a revelation that he was a chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings so what is happening to Paul as he is lost in the system is this God is getting him wherever God wanted him to go that's the only comfort you've got in a word like this there's no comfort in his arrest there's no comfort in his incarceration there's no comfort that he's awaiting trial there's no comfort that he's going to be there year after year after year no comfort in that but in this

God is going to accomplish all that he has for Paul and if he does it for Paul he can do it for you I don't know how else you get up and go man who mentored me in ministry put it this way God's servants are immortal until their work is done he put it this way no servant of God dies a premature

death does Paul die an unjust death yes does Paul live in the most difficult of circumstances yes when he's finally beheaded under Nero and his head rolls along the Ostian way was it premature no and it won't be for you as a result fear in the church must give way to faith you must walk from this place with an internal sense of

I know I am not divisive even though I feel I must be a threat you must walk from this place I will not and am not a victim because God can help me from anywhere at any time from anyone and he will complete in me the work he has called me to well I hope that's an encouragement to you let me say it I hope it's especially an encouragement to any and every African American man and young man under the hearing of my voice take courage take courage my beloved ones take courage oh valiant ones take courage prized possession of

Christ and may God give us all help and hope until our labors are done our heavenly father thank you for your word help us to live better as a result of being under it in Jesus name amen to to to to!

[34 : 54] to