

**HOW ABOUT NOW?**  
*Series in Acts: Advancing the Gospel*  
**Acts 22:30-23:35**  
 Chadron Berean Church

Several years ago, there was a catchy wireless carrier commercial where a man would walk around on his cell phone testing the reception by asking the person on the other line, “*Can you hear me now?*” The commercial portrayed him as doing this all day, every day, and everywhere. Day and night, at the beach or downtown, on a mountaintop or the airport, in the rain and snow, he would just walk around asking, “*Can you hear me now?*” “*How about now?*” “*Now?*” If we were honest, we would admit that sometimes our relationship with God feels that. We too go through various seasons and circumstances, valleys, and mountaintops, asking God, “*Can you hear me now? How about now? In this situation? That situation?*”

This year for our church we have a theme called, “*Trust more. Fear less.*” And I wonder if you’ve been challenged this year to trust God with something that you’ve been going through? Like the “*How about now?*” man, you’ve been challenged to trust God in different ways. Is there a situation in which we can’t trust God? That’s what we’re going to talk about this morning as we work our way through Acts 23, looking at two reasons why we can trust God in the *now*.

I’ll remind us that last time in Acts, Roman soldiers rushed into the temple complex in Jerusalem to stop some Jews from beating Paul to death for a crime he didn’t commit. Not knowing what was going on, the Roman commander, Claudius Lysias, arrested Paul. Hoping to gain intel, he allowed Paul to speak. Paul then gave a defense of his ministry before the Jews. It was all going well until he mentioned the resurrected Jesus wanting to send him to the Gentiles with the gospel. Once they heard that, they started chanting to do away with him. Claudius then brought him into the Antonia Fortress to be flogged like Jesus was, but upon learning that Paul was a Roman citizen, called it off. At this point, Claudius doesn’t know what to do with Paul, who now sits in protective custody. We pick it up in 22:30.

*“But on the next day, wishing to know for certain why he had been accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Council to assemble, and brought Paul down and set him before them. Now looking intently at the Council, Paul said, “Brothers, I have lived my life with an entirely good conscience before God up to this day.” 2 But the high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth. 3 Then Paul said to him, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law, order me to be struck?” 4 But those present said, “Are you insulting God’s high priest?” 5 And Paul said, “I was not aware, brothers, that he is high priest; for it is written: ‘You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.’”*

**I. PAUL BEFORE THE COUNCIL. (22:30-23:11)**

**Claudius** orders the Jewish **Council** of religious leaders, also known as the Sanhedrin, to assemble for somewhat of an informal investigative session. This is something of a pretrial hearing for Claudius to gather information (v. 30, “wishing to know for certain”). At this point, he still doesn’t know why the Jews are so upset with Paul or what to charge him with, if at all. It’s interesting to note the continuing parallels between Jesus and Paul as Claudius reminds us of Pontius Pilate who didn’t know what to do with Jesus because Jesus was innocent according to Roman law, but was being bombarded with irrational, belligerent appeals to kill him. There’s just many ways Paul really is experiencing the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings (Phil. 3:10).

The description of Paul **looking intently** at the Council gives us a sense of the feel of this whole meeting. It’s tense. I think Paul is even tense. As far as he knows, this could be his last day. Add to that the fact that many of these Council members are old colleagues of his. Some 20 years ago this Council authorized him to persecute Christians and though many faces on the Sanhedrin likely changed, there were many familiar faces who now turned on him and wanted him dead. And Paul is standing before them willing to die for Christ and the gospel’s sake (Mark 8:35).

Paul starts his speech by stating how he has lived with a **good conscience** before God. The conscience is an internal faculty that God hardwires into us that declares us guilty or not. Warren Wiersbe calls it the inner judge that condemns us when we do wrong and encourages us when we do right.<sup>1</sup> Of course, our conscience can be misled so we want it to be guided and matured by the truth of God’s Word. When Paul says his conscience is clear before God, I think he means to say that he has always sought to follow the one true God of his fathers, the best he could, according to God’s revelation. Paul is saying he has responded obediently to God, even in his calling to the Gentiles (non-Jewish people). Paul’s conscience, guided by God’s Word and the revelation of Christ under the New Covenant, is free. He’s innocent before God. However, the Council thinks that Paul is a guilty heretic – that he has apostatized from the true faith (i.e., the Old Covenant).

Really this whole scene reminds me of the famous Reformer, Martin Luther, who stood before a Roman Catholic Church (RCC) council at the Diet of Worms. They were trying to get him to recant his teachings like that of salvation by grace through faith in Christ according to Scripture’s authority. As a former monk, he had practiced their manmade teachings and religious dogma trying to absolve him of his guilty conscience, but none of it worked. Only when he read the Word of God and the purity of the gospel of grace was exposed with God’s authority in the book of Romans, did the doors of heaven open and light up his soul, setting him free from his guilty conscience just like **Hebrews 9:14** says. Only the work of Christ on the cross to forgive our sins can purge the conscience of our guilt as sinners before God.

Luther said that through the pope’s and RCC’s doctrines of indulgences, that denied the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice, *“the consciences of the faithful have been most pitifully ensnared, troubled, and racked in torment.”* He’s speaking from personal experience. And with his life on the line, I’m sure he stared intently at a familiar council as he said, *“Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of the popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I*

*cannot and I will not recant anything for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe.”* After his refusal to recant, they released an edict saying he could be killed by anyone without threat of punishment. While the Reformers weren’t perfect, we certainly appreciate their stance on the gospel and their return to a historical-grammatical interpretation of Scripture.<sup>2</sup>

But back to Paul: Paul’s comment about his good conscience infuriates **Ananias**, this terribly corrupt high priest at the time who has Paul **struck** in the face, probably with his fist. We can’t help but think that Jesus stood before the same Council before a high priest named **Annas** and was struck in the face too. An officer similarly said to Jesus, *“Is that how you answer the high priest?”* (John 18:22). It’s another parallel. But the strike on the mouth was **unlawful**. It was clearly out of order, and Paul is quick to point that out the hypocrisy of breaking the Law to defend the Law.

In response to the hit, Paul lets out an honest warning of divine judgment for the high priest’s hypocrisy. Paul calls him a **white-washed wall**. The idea, according to **Ezekial 13:10-16** is that a wall might look nice and freshly painted white, but if you leaned on it, it would collapse. It had no integrity. It was a façade. It also reminds us of when Jesus was denouncing this same group of religious leaders in **Matthew 23:27-28**, saying, *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”* So in essence, Paul was saying this man was a spiritually dead man on the inside but looked nice on the outside. And indeed, history records him as being a greedy, harsh, corrupt collaborator with Rome during his rule from 47-59 A.D. His own people, the Jewish zealots, would eventually kill him.

While Paul’s comment was certainly accurate, I think he blew his top and was unlawful too. It was unlawful to **revile** a high priest or other sacred leader in Israel and the consequences for it were death. If you didn’t respect the person, you at least had to respect the office. There’s a lot of debate as to whether or not Paul slipped up here or not. But the Council’s understanding it to be **revilement**, along with Paul’s honest **confession** and **recitation of Scripture** all tell us Paul blew his cork. In his defense, Paul honestly didn’t know this was the high priest for various reasons we can surmise. 1) This is a fairly new high priest and Paul has been away for a long time, 2) we know he had impaired vision to an extent (Gal. 4:15; 6:11) and 3) since Claudius called this informal meeting probably outside the Council’s official courtroom (maybe in the temple area or just outside the Fortress again) the high priest probably wasn’t wearing his royal garb. Even if Paul did slip up, this is encouraging for us because it shows us that not even the apostle Paul was perfect. God uses imperfect people. We might even say He specializes in it.

*6 But Paul, perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, began crying out in the Council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!” 7 When he said this, a dissension occurred between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. 8 For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. 9 And a great uproar*

*occurred; and some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party stood up and started arguing heatedly, saying, "We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?"*  
*10 And when a great dissension occurred, the commander was afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, and he ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force, and bring him into the barracks.*

So Paul, recognizing that there are both **Pharisees and Sadducees** on this Council – who passionately believed differently on the resurrection and the afterlife – stirs the pot a bit and by reminding them of why they're there in the first place. Paul is ultimately on trial for **the hope of the resurrection** from the dead. And His comments re-spark this age-old civil war over doctrine and the Pharisees even start to side with Paul! They find nothing wrong with him now! Obviously the doctrinal war between these two groups took precedence over Paul's situation. Paul is now caught in the middle of them and fearing that Paul, as a Roman citizen, is going to be killed again on his watch, Claudius has him removed by force. If Paul was killed while in his custody, he may lose his job or his life. So, he puts him back behind bars and it's there, sitting in jail at night that we come across one of the most comforting scenes in all Scripture.

*11 But on the following night, the Lord stood near him and said, "Be courageous! For as you have testified to the truth about Me in Jerusalem, so you must testify in Rome also."*

Isn't this great? Here's the apostle Paul, alone in prison. It's dark. It's cold. He's been mistreated. Misjudged. Falsely accused. On top of that, he has screwed up by blowing his cork and maybe feel guilty about that or like he failed in his testimonial integrity. He probably has all sorts of questions rolling through his mind like, *"What if the prophets were right? Should I have come to Jerusalem? Why didn't I listen when people tried to stop me? I wish I would've done a better job of sharing the gospel when I had the chance. God busted Peter out of this place. Why doesn't He do the same for me?"* You know how questions start to flow when trials come. But the Lord stands beside him and says, *"Take courage!"* Other translations say, *"Be of good cheer!"* Cheer up! You've testified here and will be heading to Rome.

Paul had to be overwhelmed with joy after this. Even though he might not have felt like he did a good job of witnessing in Jerusalem and there were no revivals and no expressions of faith, Jesus told Him *"you **have testified** to the truth about Me."* And Paul was also going to get to go to **Rome** like he always wanted. He just wrote a letter to the church there telling them that he was eager to go to Rome to preach the gospel to them. And he would! It just wouldn't be the way that Paul planned. We find here our first reason to trust God in the *now*.

### **Reason #1 – He is always with us.**

He never leaves us nor forsake us. That is the most repeated promise in Scripture as far as I know. He is always with us. Right now. In the next moment. Next week. Next month. Next year. The next life. He's never *not* with us. When we go through the trials of life, we need to remember to **take courage** because though we don't see him, He is with us no matter what. So

forget your feelings and opinions and by faith trust His promise that He hasn't left you or forsaken you. Before Jesus ascended, He said, "Lo, I am with you always." And He can be because He is omnipresent and omniscient. There's nothing He doesn't see or know about. He also indwells us by through the Holy Spirit. On top of that, He's omnipotent (all-powerful). Nothing can stop Him from not being with us or separate us from His love (Rom. 8).

So to answer the question, "*Can He hear you now? Even in the present situation you're in?*" The answer is undeniably yes. But like Paul you're going to have to exercise trust in God. That's part of the whole reason for trials. Just to name a few purposes of trials, trials increase our humility, to help us examine ourselves and put away sin, to reshape our desires (more of Him and the eternal, and less of this world), give us a future ministry, and increase our trust and dependence on God. But get this: Paul is going to sit in protective custody in Caesarea for 2 years before he even leaves for Rome! That tells us that sometimes we just need to trust God and His promises while we wait on Him to do His thing. One man said, "*This assurance meant much to Paul during the delays and anxieties of the next two years, and goes far to account for the calm and dignified bearing which seemed to mark him out as a master of events rather than their victim.*"<sup>3</sup> Isn't that what trust does? It brings calm and dignity to our lives. We don't see ourselves as victims. We see ourselves as in the hands of God, wondering how He is going to use the trial to make me more like Him and to advance the gospel as I respond with faith in it. We trust He is sovereign over it all. That trials don't just happen to us by accident. In His providence, He is the one working in them for our good and that's the thrust of the rest of the chapter.

Do you know the difference between miracles and providence? A **miracle** is when God breaks the laws of nature to do something, like walking on water or parting the sea. But **providence** is when God works within natural laws to provide for us. Instead of parting the sea, he provides a boat. Providence is God working behind the scenes to put the right people or circumstances (even trials) in the right place at the right time to accomplish His will. There's an OT book called Esther that is all about God's providence. The name of God is never mentioned but God is behind the scenes orchestrating everything. And I think it's mainly how He works today.

## **II. THE CONSPIRACY TO KILL PAUL. (VV. 12-22)**

*12 When it was day, the Jews formed a conspiracy and put themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. 13 There were more than forty who formed this plot. 14 They came to the chief priests and the elders and said, "We have put ourselves under an oath to taste nothing until we have killed Paul. 15 Now therefore, you and the Council notify the commander to bring him down to you, as though you were going to investigate his case more thoroughly; and as for us, we are ready to kill him before he comes near the place."*

*16 But the son of Paul's sister heard about their ambush, and he came and entered the barracks and told Paul. 17 Paul called one of the centurions to himself and said, "Take this young man to*

*the commander, for he has something to report to him.” 18 So he took him and led him to the commander and said, “Paul the prisoner called me over to him and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you.” 19 The commander took him by the hand, and stepping aside, began to inquire of him privately, “What is it that you have to report to me?” 20 And he said, “The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down tomorrow to the Council, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more thoroughly about him. 21 So do not listen to them, for more than forty of them are in hiding to ambush him, and these men have put themselves under an oath not to eat or drink until they kill him; and now they are ready and waiting for assurance from you.” 22 Then the commander let the young man go, instructing him, “Tell no one that you have notified me of these things.”*

So the next morning, the Jews conspire to take Paul’s life again. Justice is too slow for them, so they try to take matters into their own hands.<sup>4</sup> Forty assassins place themselves under a curse, that it’s either them or Paul who will die. But Paul’s nephew (who knew he even had one!), providentially happens to overhear their plot and informs Paul, who has his nephew tell Claudius about it. Notice, he didn’t say, “*Thanks for telling me the news, but I’m trusting the Lord—so you can go back home.*”<sup>5</sup> He used the resources God provided like this and his Roman citizenship.

*23 And he called to him two of the centurions and said, “Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night [9 p.m.] to proceed to Caesarea [Maritima; where the Roman governor’s seat was in Judea], with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen.” 24 They were also to provide mounts to put Paul on and bring him safely to Felix the governor.*

Isn’t that amazing? God has Paul go first class with 470 soldiers. He even provides Paul with a horse to ride on. Talk about providence. Claudius was clearly flexing his military muscle.

*25 And he wrote a letter with the following content: 26 “Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix: Greetings. 27 When this man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them, I came up to them with the troops and rescued him, after learning that he was a Roman [he conveniently left out the part where he arrested him and almost scourged him]. 28 And wanting to ascertain the basis for the charges they were bringing against him, I brought him down to their Council; 29 and I found that he was being accused regarding questions in their Law, but was not charged with anything deserving death or imprisonment. 30 When I was informed that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, also instructing his accusers to bring charges against him before you.” [So Claudius, in a wise move, washes his hands of Paul with this letter and transfer]*

*31 So the soldiers, in accordance with their orders, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris [37 miles NW of Jerusalem]. 32 But on the next day they let the horsemen go on with him, and they [the foot soldiers] returned to the barracks. 33 When these horsemen had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. 34 Now when he had read it, he also asked from what province Paul was, and when he learned that he was*

from Cilicia, 35 he said, “I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive as well,” giving orders for Paul to be kept in Herod’s Praetorium.

So it just gets more amazing. Paul gets to stay in the **governor’s palace** under protection where he would be treated well. They’ve done excavations of this place and it was beautiful. It was located right on the edge of the sea there. But here we have 40 men who attempt to take matters into their own hands and kill Paul. *But God* (two very important words), in His providence, overrules again and again. In sum, that’s what this section is about: **God’s providence working to accomplish His will**. God works behind the scenes. And it’s the 2<sup>nd</sup> reason we have today as to why we can trust God now. Not only is He with us at all times, but He is also working out His will for us even when we can’t see Him or understand exactly why. Remember that...

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Reason – God is always working behind the scenes.**

God’s providence is mostly a mystery to us. Many times, God’s providence is taking place without us knowing it or us understanding it. But many times, in big and little ways, we see God work in ways that it is unmistakably Him. The right person shows up at the right time. The perfect amount of money need comes in at just the right time. Those are the things that just make you look up and smile. Like a backstage choreographer, our **Romans 8:28** God is working out His purposes for us through both the positive and negative aspects of our lives. So, to answer the question again, “*Can He hear you now?*” The answer is, “*Yes. And Yes.*”

This account reminds us that God specializes in using imperfect people in His providence to accomplish His will. He doesn’t bench us every time we screw up but uses it for good (Gen. 50:20). One commentator, Kent Hughes, I think captured the heart of this passage by telling the story of a little boy who, during a grand concert, slipped away from his mom to play “chopsticks” on the piano. With the whole crowd irritated and mom embarrassed, the master, Paderewski, came out to play a countermelody with him and enhanced his sound of “Chopsticks”. As the two of them played together, “*Paderewski kept whispering in the boy’s ears, “Keep going. Do not quit, son. Keep on playing. Do not stop. Do not quit.”*” Hughes says, “*Perhaps our service [to God] is sometimes more like “Chopsticks” than Swan Lake.*” But we have a heavenly calling and even at times when we blow it, Christ stands beside us and tells us to, “*Take courage. Be my witness. Do not stop. Do not quit.*” We can trust that the Lord’s providential countermelody is making our “Chopsticks” into something beautiful.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: New Testament* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2007), 394.

<sup>2</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth*, ed. Craig Bubeck Sr. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1991), 77. “When the Reformers... emphasized the need to get back to the Scriptures, they emphasized historical, grammatical interpretation. By “historical” they meant the setting in which the Bible books were written and the circumstances involved in the writing. By “grammatical” they meant determining the meaning of the Bible by studying the words and sentences of Scripture in their normal, plain sense.”

<sup>3</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts, Rev. ed.* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 430.

<sup>4</sup> Darrel L. Bock, *Acts* (BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 677.

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<sup>5</sup> J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee, Vol. 4* (Pasadena, CA: Thru the Bible Radio, 1983), 616. Full quote: “I find today that there is a group of super-pious folk, very sincere and very well-meaning, which tells me I should not go to a doctor concerning my cancer or other illnesses but that I should trust the Lord to heal me. Well, I certainly do trust the Lord; I have turned my case over to the Great Physician, and I believe He provides doctors. It would have been a simple thing for Paul to have told his nephew, 'Thanks for telling me the news, but I'm trusting the Lord—so you can go back home.' But we find here that Paul used the privileges of his Roman citizenship which were available to him. Obviously the Lord provides these means and He expects us to use them. This in no way means that we are not trusting Him. Rather, we are trusting God to use the methods and the means to accomplish His purpose.”

<sup>6</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway 1996), 306-307.