



Saved by the Empire!

Acts 23:22-35

October 22, 2006

9:00 A.M. Service

Last week, we left Paul in the custody of a Roman officer, a battalion commander named Claudius Lysias. Colonel Claudius had saved Paul from a murderous mob. Under the cover of that night, the forces that wanted Paul dead began to get ready to try again the next day. Forty religious zealots made a vow that they would not eat a morsel until they had killed Paul.

But Paul's nephew heard about it. Paul's nephew? I didn't know Paul had a nephew, and a sister! But there is the son of Paul's sister (Acts 23:16ff), warning Colonel Claudius about the plot. Here is what happened next:

Acts 23:22-25 (read)

This week I've been reading what Bible scholars have to say about this passage. It didn't take long, because they didn't have much to say. They found it a mildly interesting footnote in the story of Paul's journey to Rome.

But I am fascinated by this story, because I love history, and there is a lot of history in here. There is military history of the Roman army. There is political history of the Roman government in this backwater province of the Empire. And here that military and political history is weaved together with Paul's personal history. All of this I find fascinating. But most of all, this passage gives a revealing peek into how God is at work in history: in ancient history, and even in your history and mine.

MILITARY HISTORY

Colonel Claudius "called in two of his captains and said to them...

Get two hundred men ready to march to Caesarea, with seventy mounted soldiers and two hundred armed with spears, to leave at nine o'clock tonight. (Acts 23:23)

This commander was going to risk splitting his force to send half his battalion out of Jerusalem. It was a significant commitment of infantry, spearmen, and horsemen. Claudius was determined to give this Roman citizen the full protection of the Empire, until the governor could determine what to do with Paul. Hearing that 40 assassins were plotting to kill Paul, Colonel Claudius assembled a force ten times that size. His reputation as an officer was at stake. He was not going to allow any surprises.

The trip from Jerusalem to the provincial capitol in Caesarea would be dangerous. The first 35 miles wound through narrow valleys that were full of Judean zealots; the perfect situation and terrain for an ambush. So the colonel ordered two captains to lead a convoy on a forced march in the middle of the night. Think about this: nearly 500 Roman military marching 35 miles overnight, and all to protect one man! Then once the column reached the halfway mark, at Antipatris, the land flattened out into safer terrain, which was populated by more peaceable gentiles. The soldiers would then hurry back to Jerusalem to reinforce Claudius, while the 70 cavalry would ride with Paul the rest of the way into Caesarea.

It was a well planned mission, using overwhelming force and the cover of night to pass through dangerous territory, then sending back the bulk of the force so Claudius would not be too vulnerable in Jerusalem for too long. And all for one man! It is impressive the lengths to which the Empire would go to make sure that one of its citizens would receive justice.

ROMAN HISTORY

I find the political history contained here fascinating too. The letter from Claudias Lysias to his Excellency Felix is a typical letter from a subordinate to a superior. Claudias is truthful in his summary of the situation, although he conveniently leaves out his blunder that he nearly had Paul, a Roman citizen, scourged.

The addressee is a real character unto himself. Felix was originally a slave. His brother got the ear of Emperor Nero and had Felix freed. And then Felix rose in the ranks of power until he became the first slave ever to be appointed a Roman governor. He'd served in Samaria two years, and now had been in Caesarea for five years. Archaeologists are now digging through ancient Caesarea, finding out just how magnificent a place it was, erected in honor of Caesar. The palace complex was built on a jetty jutting out into the Mediterranean, a wonder to behold.

Felix had the power of a governor, and the survival instincts of a slave. He was a force to be reckoned with. Hence the letter of Claudias Lysias was very carefully worded.

When Paul arrived before Felix, the governor had Paul placed in the barracks under guard, then held a preliminary hearing to determine jurisdiction. Curiously, he could have remanded Paul over to Tarsus, but he chose to hear Paul's case himself, once Paul's accusers arrived from Jerusalem.

GOD AT WORK IN HISTORY

So there's a lot of military and Roman history in this story in Acts. But the reason this is in Acts is because God was at work in that history. In the midst of all this Empire intrigue, the text states that:

...the Lord stood by Paul's side and said, "Courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, you must testify for me in Rome, too. (Acts 23.11)

God was arranging for Paul's transportation, and God was going to borrow the services of the unknowing Emperor. Imagine that, the Empire gives the apostle of God a free military escort all the way to Rome. Even Caesar's legions can be useful as God protects his endangered messengers to do God's purpose. (Will Willimon, Anchor Commentary p. 173)

God protected Paul with whatever was at God's hand in Acts: sometimes with an angel, sometimes with an earthquake, this time with a level-headed Roman colonel. It all goes to show us that the plans of God cannot be blocked.

GOD AT WORK IN YOUR STORY

And that includes the plans of God for you and me. The message of Acts is world-shaking in its implications. The God of the universe can work through human history, through world events. That same God who was at work in history is now at work in our story too. God is at work opening some doors and closing others. God is at work using whatever is at God's hand to give us safe passage toward the mission God has for us.

Sometimes we say we feel as if God has an angel on our shoulder looking out for us. That's part of the truth. But God is not going to all this trouble just for our comfort. God is involved in our lives in order that we may get involved in God's great purpose for everyone's lives. The whole truth is that God's hand is at work around us in order that we may get to the point where we can do our mission for God, whatever our particular mission might be. So God arranged a Roman escort for Paul that eventually took him to his mission in Rome. And now God is arranging and protecting our journeys to our missions too. What mission? That's for each of us to find out. Sometimes God will give us a vision on the way. Sometimes we will know only when we get there. But one way or another, by God's power, we will get there.

-- Douglas E. Murray