Acts 22:30-23:35 - Godoy

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Preacher: Dan Godoy

[0:00] Well, good morning, friends, and it is a joy to greet you in the name of our risen Lord! Jesus today. If you're visiting, welcome. My name is Dan Godoy, one of the pastors here at Holy! Covenant Church. There are five pastors of Holy Covenant Church, but only two are really on duty today. We have the skeleton crew running, Tad and I. Daniel and John are away on other responsibilities, and Dave, our sabbatical elder, I don't even see him right now, but he's here. Anyways, it's a joy to be together. We are in our 28th sermon in the book of Acts, and after today we have five more, so we're really getting into the home stretch, the final leg of the journey in this amazing book. And as Tad pointed out to us last week, these next several chapters really trace the legal proceedings as the

Apostle Paul stands trial in several different venues, and it can get very detailed, technical, maybe a little bit monotone, like we start to hear some of the same things over and over, and so maybe there's a temptation to tune out a little bit, and let me urge you not to do that. As your pastors, as the preaching team, we come expectant to God's Word that God will speak, and we come desiring to, as a church, experience an encounter with God's Word when the scriptures are open on Sunday morning.

The author of Hebrews says that the Word of God is living and active, that God is speaking, and don't refuse the one who is speaking, the writer of Hebrews says. So let's keep that in mind and pay attention as we hear God speak this morning. We need God's help. Let's pray once more as we come to the text.

Father, we do believe that you are speaking, even now, by your Word, by your Holy Spirit, through your Son, Jesus. And so we come expectant to your Word this morning. Help me to be clear in what I say.

Give us ears to hear. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, in Acts 23, Christ turns his apostle toward Rome. It's kind of a summary statement of what's happening in this chapter that Tad just read for us. Christ turns his apostle toward Rome in a moment of clarity. Some of the great stories of Western civilization have this moment of clarity that kind of sets the course for the rest of the story. Like that one with Luke Skywalker. Great story of Western civilization, where Luke Skywalker, you remember this, he's about to die on this frozen planet, and the rebel alliance is about to fall apart and be destroyed. And there's this moment of clarity when Luke's old mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi, appears to him in a vision and says, you will become a Jedi. And that kind of sets the course for the rest of the story. And he becomes a Jedi, and they destroy the empire and all of this stuff. Great stories of Western civilization. Acts 23 features one of those stories. There's a moment of crisis for Paul, a moment of doubt, I want to suggest.

[3:25] Because Paul, up to this point, you remember back in 21, he has been willing to be imprisoned and even to die in Jerusalem for the sake of Jesus. And he's headed to Jerusalem following the footsteps of Christ to die if necessary for the name of Jesus. Then he gets to Jerusalem and he begins to make choices, some of them good, and as we thought about last week, maybe some of them unwise. And at the center of this experience, Christ appears, Paul hears him speak. Paul learns that his road is not to die like his Lord in Jerusalem, but his road is to testify for his Lord in Rome. And that sets the trajectory for the rest of the story, for the rest of Paul's life, for the rest of this story of the progress of the gospel in the first century. And I want to suggest that this story invites us to ponder our own part in the ongoing story of the gospel. We can consider with Paul how our choices interlock with the sovereign plans of God. This story, I think, helps us hear with Paul the voice of Jesus speaking when we need moments of clarity. So let's listen for that this morning. And now I am pleased to announce a moment of clarity for all of you, because I'm going to tell you the outline of my sermon for the next 30 minutes.

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Okay, in the back of our, in our snack area, we have these off-brand Oreo cookies. You may have seen these every week after the service. Kids, can you imagine one of those off-brand Oreo cookies that you love to eat? Okay, there's the two cookies and then this thin layer of sweet filling in the middle.
That's the structure of my sermon this morning. Okay, three parts, the last counsel of Ananias, and then right in the middle, this sweet filling, just one verse, verse 11, the commission of Christ, and then the third part, the choices of Claudius Lysias. Okay, three parts. You got it? Let's go.
The council of Ananias. This begins at verse 30 of chapter 22 and goes through verse 10 of chapter 23. And Paul here stands trial before the Jewish council. If you were here last week, you might remember Paul has arrived in Jerusalem and the mob in Jerusalem, the Jewish mob wants to kill him because they believe he's profaned the temple. They believe he's evangelizing the Gentiles. Well, he is evangelizing the Gentiles and they don't like that. They want the Gentiles to become Jews first.
You remember this. And so they want to kill him. The Roman tribune, who's in charge of the garrison in Jerusalem, he intervenes to break up the mob and to save Paul by arresting him. He doesn't know why the Jews are mad at Paul, so he wants to flog Paul to find out. Great strategy. Finds out he can't do that because Paul is a citizen. And so in verse 30 of our text, the start of our story, the Roman tribune decides to assemble the Jewish council to find out why they're mad at Paul. So that's where our story picks up. Now, Luke, I think, wants to frame this whole sequence at the Jewish council to flip the expectations. Okay, the Jewish council should be those who uphold the law of Moses. They protect it. But as we see, they are in fact the breakers of the law of Moses. And Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles is actually the one who upholds the will of God. So we'll see that throughout the story as it unfolds. Notice that the Jewish council does not seem to have all that much power as leaders of God's people. It is the tribune who convenes the council, the tribune who brings Paul down, and the tribune who sets Paul in their midst. Now, we know as readers of Acts that this is not the first time this Jewish council has assembled. Peter and John stood trial before this same council back in chapters 4 and 5. Stephen stood trial before this council in chapters 6 and 7. And this has happened before. But this is the last time that a disciple of Jesus will stand trial before the Jewish council. And you would think that this council, having finally got their hands on this hated enemy of Israel, as they call him, you would think they would not miss their shot to take him down, as they did with Jesus in the
[8:04] Passion narrative. But this council is ineffective. From the start, Paul has control. Verse 1, Paul stares intently at the council. From the start, he has control of the room. He uses intense eye contact and silence to control the room. They say sometimes in public speaking, it's the words you don't say that are the most powerful. And Paul uses that to great effect, to control the room.

We need to keep in mind that Paul is standing in a room of former colleagues. These are the same guys that 20 years ago, back in chapter 9, Paul co-conspired with to take down the early church. He went to this council to get letters to arrest and kill the Christians. And now he stands before them, kind of an awkward reunion. Paul then gets the opening argument. Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day. Again, the expectations are flipped. Paul is the one whose conscience is clear, not the Jewish leaders who think they have the high ground. And they can't even construct a rebuttal. They just strike him on the mouth, return his words with violence.
That's not what the law of Moses teaches. Paul reacts strongly. Verse 3, God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall. Are you sitting to judge me according to the law?
And yet, contrary to the law, you order me to be struck? Now, there are two ways to read what happens here and in the next sequence. Tad pointed out one possible reading last week that Paul loses his temper. He shouldn't have said this because you remember, Jesus says, if someone strikes you on the cheek, turn to him the other cheek. Jesus stood before this council, accused, and they struck him on the face. And Jesus was silent before his accusers.
So maybe Paul is in the wrong with his reaction. The other possible reading is that Paul is speaking in the prophetic voice, the way Jesus did when he confronted the Pharisees and Sadducees. We heard it this morning in our lectionary. Hypocrites, he called them. Whitewashed tombs, he called them.
[10:20] Beautiful on the outside, but morally rotten inside. I think that's what Paul is doing here. I think he's speaking in the prophetic voice to call out the fact that this council is not only failing to

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uphold the law of Moses, they break the law of Moses. And that's what he says.

Well, then those standing by correct him. Would you revile God's high priest, they say. And then Paul says, I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, you shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people. Now, how could Paul not know who the high priest was? Maybe it's just that everybody's got gray hair and receding hairlines since the last time he saw them. It's an awkward reunion. They're not exactly wearing name tags. He doesn't know who is who, and so he genuinely does not know. That's one possible reading. Again, I think that this is sarcastic Paul, the Paul that we see in 2 Corinthians, saying, I couldn't tell that he was the high priest because of how blatantly he violates the law of Moses, commanding me to be struck. Either way we read it, I think the narrative is that the Jewish council are the breakers of the law. Paul is the one following in the footsteps of the one who fulfills the law and the prophets. Then Paul maintains control of the room. Verse 6, he perceives the division in the council. He says, brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of the Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial. Okay, this is the perfect political move. Paul sees the weak spot in his audience and he drives a wedge through to divide them. I imagine an intense meeting at the local zoning board, and they're having conversations about setbacks and rights of way and parking and technical details, and somebody walks in and says, friends, this whole thing is really just about U.S. immigration policy.
Just drops a topic that divides every room. That's sort of what Paul is doing here. He knows the fault lines and he drives it through. But Luke, I think, has a more theological point to make as well. It is the proclamation of the resurrection of Christ that divides every room into those who believe and those who do not. The resurrection of Christ is a stumbling block for Jews and foolishness for Gentiles. And we see that on display in this reaction to Paul's proclamation.
The council turns violent in their division. The tribune is concerned that Paul will be torn to pieces. And so he shuts down the meeting. He started the meeting and he ends the meeting. He's in control. He takes Paul out. And notice what never happened in this trial. No charges were stated. [13:15] All the things the Jews are angry at Paul for, the Gentiles and the law and circumcision and all of these things are never accused. Paul is uncondemned by this council. There might be here a parable of what Paul writes about in the book of Romans, that there's no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? Not this council. Christ stood condemned in our place and we, like Paul, stand uncondemned. In any council trial or before, especially before our loving and holy, righteous God, those in Christ are uncondemned. Paul leaves with the Roman soldiers. He goes back into the barracks. And Luke doesn't tell us what he's thinking. As readers of this story, I think we are wondering, what just happened? What's going on? Because we kind of saw where this story was going.
Paul is going to Jerusalem, ready to die for the name of Jesus. But what just happened? We don't know what Paul's thinking. I imagine, anyways, that he's laying awake at night, pondering the words. Maybe I'm the only one here. I can lay awake at night before an important meeting, thinking about what I'm going to say and what other people will say. And then I can lay awake at night after the meeting, thinking about what was said and what other people said. And I imagine that's what Paul is doing. Laying awake, praying, Lord, what comes next? Maybe doubting his steps, his missteps, his choices. And it's into that moment that Jesus speaks. This is verse 11, the sweet filling of our passage, the words of Jesus.
The following night, the Lord stood by him and said, take courage. For as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome. This is the moment of clarity. This is the moment of purpose for Paul, as he understands the mission that Christ has called him to. And I want to slow down and hear these words this morning. Take courage. How badly we need words of courage in seasons of suffering, for hard roads, in moments of doubt, in moments when we're not sure if we are up to the task of following the call of Christ. A couple of weeks ago at work, if you're visiting, you may not know my main job is not here in the church, but at a local investment firm where I manage software development. And a few weeks ago, some of my teams were having a very difficult week, everything going wrong at once, political drama inside the firm, if you can believe that, people difficult to work with, long hours. And one night I sent an email to some of the senior leadership of our firm to report in on the crises and let them know how things were going. [16:33] And one of those senior leaders wrote back to me late at night and said, Dan, please thank our team for their hard work. This is challenging, but we will get there. A simple email, but a

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word of courage.

And I forwarded that to the team. And the next day, the team showed up at work, amped up, ready to go, shot in the arm, ready to keep on going. That's what a word of courage can do. And that's what Christ does for Paul in this moment. But it's more than a mere motivational message.
This is the consistent blessing of God to his people, gospel words to God's covenant people. Think of Jacob back in Genesis 28. You remember this? Jacob is on the road. He's moving, he's traveling from his hometown to the country of his uncle Laban. He's alone, he's on the road, it's late at night, he's tired, maybe afraid, surely afraid. And he stops for the night at a place called Bethel and goes to sleep and dreams, a vision of a ladder extending to heaven. And the Lord standing and saying, behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go. For I will not leave you until I have done all that I have promised you. I think of Jesus in the upper room.
In John chapter 16, he's with his disciples. His disciples are surely afraid because Jesus just said, I'm going to leave and you can't go where I'm going. And Christ speaks and says, in the world, you will have trouble, but take heart, take courage. I have overcome the world.
Brothers and sisters, this is at the heart of the gospel that Christ is victorious in his death and resurrection. And we who belong to Christ are victorious with him. So we can take courage.
[18:30] He knows our path and we are victorious with him. That's what Christ is saying to Paul in this moment. Words of courage that reveal that the council and the Roman tribune and Paul's obedience to the spirit and Paul's steps or maybe missteps in Jerusalem, all of this is somehow circumscribed by the sovereign will of God. Later in Acts, Paul is on a boat that's about to be shipwrecked and the sailors and the passengers are afraid. And Paul speaks up and says, take heart. God told me that I must go to Rome.

It's the same message that Paul will deliver to the people on the boat. It's a thread that runs all through the rest of this book. That Paul can take courage because God is sovereign. I think we can apply this to our own lives because this is a story about Paul, but Christ who spoke to Paul still speaks to us. Maybe the question is, are we listening to Christ speak? Maybe we need to back up and ask, does Christ still speak to us today? Because I don't know about you, when I'm lying awake at night pondering words that have been said or that I will say, I don't often hear Christ speak to me out of the darkness. Does Christ still speak? And if so, how? A couple weeks ago, my family and I were at Sam's Cafe in Lower Beamer Center at Wheaton College to get a little bit of ice cream. And I saw on the counter a coffee mug that I think had been left there by one of the students who may have been there earlier.
And this coffee mug caught my attention. So I took a picture and here's what it said. Good morning, Sophia. This is God. I will be handling all of your problems today. I will not need your help. So relax and have a great day.
Now, is that how Christ speaks to us today? No. And if he did, that's not what he would say. And that's maybe another sermon. And if anyone knows Sophia, invite her to Holy Covenant Church.
Friends, we don't need words on a coffee mug to tell us what God is saying. Because Christ speaks here. We have God's living and active word, the words of Jesus here. Christ speaks to us today.
[20:56] And as the author of Hebrews says, do not refuse the one who is speaking now. And God speaks to us here in this moment as we gather around his word at church.

And this is an amazing thing. But the Protestant reformers confessed and said, and we believe, that the preaching of God's word is the word of God. That's a frightening and challenging thing for us who preach, for us who listen.
But in this moment, Christ is speaking. And it is for us to listen. As Paul listens. As this story teaches us to do. So, brothers and sisters, let us learn to love the word of God. Let us learn to listen to Christ speak.
And let us hear these words. Take courage. I know your path. Well, we come to the third and final section of the passage, verses 12 through 35. I'm taking the whole thing as a single narrative chunk.
The choices of Claudius Lysias. You may have section headers in your Bible that break this into two chunks. Remember that those section headers are just helpful hints from the publisher of your Bible.
[22:05] If you're reading the ESV published by Crossway, those section headers are very, very helpful hints. Very, very good and helpful. Are there microphones in the ceiling here? Our landlords have put very good hints for us about how to break up.

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But this is one narrative unit, I want to say, because Luke is doing the narrative thing where the main character kind of drifts into the background and a secondary character steps up and takes the lead.
This Roman tribune, whose name we learn is Claudius Lysias. He drives the action in this whole sequence. Verses 12 through 15. We learn that there's a conspiracy to kill Paul.
They've decided not to eat or drink until they have killed him. There are echoes here of the passion narrative. The Jews who conspired to kill Jesus. Now they're conspiring to kill Paul. And Luke heightens the drama through repetition.
Verse 12. Neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. Verse 14. Taste no food until we have killed Paul. Verse 15. We are ready to kill him. Verse 21.
[23:07] They will neither eat nor drink until they have killed him. Okay, the Jews want to kill Paul. Got it? Paul and Luke emphasize this with repetition. And then verses 16 through 22.

Luke's nephew hears about the plot and goes to inform the tribune. And Luke zooms way in and tells this with almost excruciating detail.
Did you notice? The nephew enters the barracks and told Paul. And Paul called one of the centurions and said, Take this man to the tribune. He has something to tell him. So he took him and brought him to the tribune. What do you have to tell me?
The tribune took him by the hand. And going aside, asked him privately, Like, what are we doing? Just all of this detail. I think, first of all, it makes the story very vivid and memorable.
But also, Luke maybe wants to emphasize the Roman tribune. And his part in this story. And the way that Paul's life and Paul's mission and even the mission of the church seems to hang on the choices of Claudius Lysias.
[24:11] A pagan Roman official. What will he decide? Does this story sound familiar? The people of God in danger.

A plot to kill them. Somebody finding out and informing somebody else who can save them. I'm thinking of the story of Esther. You remember Esther.
Esther, the young Jewish girl who becomes the queen of Persia. And some of the Persians have plotted to destroy all the Jews. And Esther's uncle, Mordecai, learns of the plot and comes in and informs Esther and urges her to go to the king to plead on behalf of the Jews.
And he says, who knows if you were placed here for such a time as this? Of course, the whole story of Esther is that God is working behind the scenes on behalf of his people.
God is working behind the scenes through Esther's choices. Now here, God is working behind the scenes through Claudius Lysias' choices. It's the same story. And we want to know, what will he decide?
[25:16] Well, we find out in verse 23. He called two of the centurions, get ready, 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, 200 spearmen, 470 Roman military men to carry Paul out of Rome.

Think about this for a moment. This is not the midnight ride of Paul Revere on a couple horses. This is the midnight march of Paul the Apostle out of Jerusalem on the might of the greatest military empire of the first century.
470 soldiers. Taking Paul out of Jerusalem. And Lysias whisks him away to Caesarea. Caesarea will be the setting for the story in the next few chapters.
So we'll probably hear more about Caesarea in coming weeks. But you need to know that Caesarea is the seat of Roman power in this region. This is the city from which Rome projects its power into Judea.
So Paul is marching toward Rome. Lysias believes that he's marching Paul out under the full strength of the banner of the Roman Empire.
[26:23] But God in his providence is marching Paul out under the banner of Christ to testify to his Lord in Rome. Then in verses 26 through 30, Lysias makes sure everything is in order.

He writes a letter to Felix, the governor in Caesarea, to inform about the situation with Paul. This would be the standard custom when transferring a prisoner from one jurisdiction to the other.
The charges need to be provided along with the prisoner. And so Lysias is writing that letter. But did you notice the spin? There's a little bit of spin in this letter. He doesn't mention that he was about to flog him.
He makes it sound like he knew he was a Roman citizen and that's why he saved him. So there's a little bit of kind of self-promotion going on in this letter. But as he tells the history or maybe shapes

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the history, verse 29 is a very important piece of that history.
I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. This controls the future for the next few trials for Paul because he enters every trial presumed innocent.
[27:36] This drives the narrative in the next several chapters. George Orwell famously wrote, who controls the past controls the future and who controls the present controls the past.

In other words, if you're in the position to write down what happened, you have a lot of influence over what happens next. Historians have a lot of power. That's why Dave Papendorf decided to become a historian.
Lysias controls the past. This kind of controls the future, not only so that he looks good to his Roman superiors, but so that Paul enters trials presumed innocent. And what Lysias doesn't know is that through his choices, he has participated in God's sovereign plan that the mission of the gospel should go to the ends of the earth.
Verses 31 through 35 recount the midnight march to Caesarea. Paul is delivered there to the governor Felix, and the story will continue next week. And I asked at the start that we might consider how our choices, like Paul's, interlock with the sovereign purposes of God, the way we've seen in this story, with Paul's steps and missteps in Jerusalem, with Claudius Lysias' choices in how he deals with Paul.
And now, this is a story about Paul, about events in the first century. It's not a story about us. Or is it? If God's word is living and active, if Christ speaks today, does this story not invite us to consider how our choices participate in the plan of the sovereign God, who is sovereign over the events of human history, sovereign over the progress of the gospel?
[29:27] Well, several years ago, I was in high school, many years ago. And a few years after that, I was in college. And I remember the bright enthusiasm of those years.

The future seemed wide open, many choices to make, whether or where to go to college, who to date, who to marry, where to live, where to work, what to believe.
And I remember long discussions during that season with friends about this tension between my choices, all of my choices, and the sovereign will of God.
Like, if God is sovereign, are my choices really choices? Or is it all just predetermined? And how is that good? How is that fair? These are some questions floating through our minds as we see Paul bound by the Spirit, bound by the will of God, to go to die even in Jerusalem.
And a couple weeks ago, Megan and I went to my 20th college reunion. And I met up with some of my friends who I had those long discussions with and reflected on lifetimes of choices, some good, some it turns out not so good.
[30:43] And the question has now changed. If God is sovereign, why would he leave me in charge of so many choices? How is that good? How is that fair? Maybe these are questions we ask as we see Paul making choices in Jerusalem, some good, maybe some not so good.

And we'll see that in the next several weeks. This text, I think, invites us into the mystery of God's sovereignty and our freedom to make choices. In every season for God's people, this mystery has confounded and confused and frustrated people.
There are no easy answers. There's no Sophia coffee cup that tells us all the answers from God. But we stumble through wondering about our choices and God's sovereignty.
What shall we say to these things? From the text, I just want to leave us with two things. Number one, I've hinted at it already, with Paul, let us listen to the voice of Jesus.
He has spoken and he is speaking. High school and college students with so many choices before you, do you believe that God speaks in his word?
[31:56] That he has disclosed to his people his will for his people? Yeah, not every decision about where to go and what to eat for breakfast, but he has disclosed paths of flourishing, the ways to walk in step with his spirit.

He is speaking. Do you believe that? If you do, then listen. And second and finally, let us take courage that all things, even our choices, like those of Paul, like those of Lysias, all of our choices are working together to bring about God's story of redemption.
And if we belong to Christ, that story is for our good. These are not answers that satisfy all of our questions, but these are gospel-shaped answers that direct our gaze and our hope toward the Lord and toward a day when we shall know fully, even as we are fully known.

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Let us listen to Jesus. Let us pray God's will to be done. Let us take courage for Christ has overcome the world. And let's pray. Father, may we hear you speak.
Help us to be attentive to your word. Lord, give us confidence and courage in Christ. We pray in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
[33:22] Amen.

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