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Acts 23:12-22 Plots Against Paul

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Let's ask God to bless us as we open His Word. "Father in Heaven we are about to open Your Word and we are praying that You would be the One to teach us today. And we ask this in Jesus Name, Amen."

When I was a little boy, Easter was a very special time in our household. My grandma Chance, my mother's mom, was a widow. Her husband, my mom's dad, died about 40 days after my mother was born, and grandma never remarried. My grandma had nine grandchildren. My mother had five and then one of her sisters had four children. And grandma Chance wanted Easter to be special. In her thinking, Easter was a wonderful time, and she would go out of her way to make it special for us. I remember that every year she sent money for my three sisters so they could all get a new Easter dress. And they would get a new Easter dress and they would wear it to church that Easter day.

I don't recall whether my brother and I ever got a new outfit or not? I am just not remembering. If I did, it wasn't that big of a deal to me. But we would get presents. I remember getting a dump truck, and a fire truck, and those types of things. And that was great because spring was starting up there in Northern Michigan and you knew you could get out in the dirt. And so you have this nice Easter truck and you play with it in your bedroom and sleep with it in the bed that night. And then as soon as you can, you can get out in the dirt with it and you lose it. But anyways, we enjoyed Easter in our household.

My mother was very celebratory. She made all the occasions of the family to be a great big deal; birthdays and those types of things. And Easter was another one of those where we spent time as a family doing things. Mother would hard boil a bunch of eggs, and we children would color those eggs. And it was a big deal. We would do them the best we could. And then we would hide the eggs around, and we had the Easter egg hunt. On Easter morning itself we always had a nice basket. Each one of us children filled it up with plastic, green grass. And then with all kinds of candies and chocolate bunnies, and stuff like this, and they would be hidden and we would have to go and find those. So Easter was -- it was a great time for our family. We really enjoyed it.

In 1963, that Easter, I was in the fourth grade. My brother Tom was in the second grade. And that Easter is very memorable to me. That year, grandma Chance sent us cards. Each one of us children got cards. I cannot tell you what it said on the inside. I'm not sure I even read what was on the inside because as soon as I opened that card there were two, brand new, one dollar bills. Hey, in '63 that was big money. Especially when you are just in the fourth grade, you know. Two, brand new one dollar bills! And when you held them they were crisp, never been folded, and they are just begging, "Spend me, spend me!"

Well, my brother and I had that notion. We put the two dollars in our pocket, and we got on our bikes. And these are days of old where you could get on your bike and ride anywhere in town. We lived in a small town in Northern Michigan. Basically your parents would tell you when they expected you to be home. They had no idea where you had been, and where you were going, and seldom asked. You just knew if you weren't back on time... And anyways, we

head it downtown. One street, Newman Street it was called, downtown because that's where all the little shops were. And we were headed for the hardware store. Now hardware stores, back in those days, I mean it was a paradise for a little boy. Everything right there, and all within hand's reach, and just so much to see and to look at. And all the different tools and building things, just hardware stores had everything. It was a magnificent place.

But my brother and I had a mission. We had a purpose for going to the hardware store. The day or two before we had seen a sign in their window, and it said, "Bunnies for sale, \$1." Easter Bunnies! Oh man, \$1. That means, we could buy a bunny and still get to the Dairy Queen. What a day! How exciting! So we went to the hardware store, and we each bought a bunny. Now they are just little, little things. And we never really gave much thought as to what we were going to do with them. How we were going to keep them, how we were going to feed them? All we knew is they were soft and neat. And their little ears laid back on their neck, and when you padded them they were so cool. Well we just put them in our pocket and we went home. When we got home something told us we ought not to tell anybody about this.

Well what do you do? Well, our house had a basement in it. And we decided, well, we'll put them in the basement. And we did. We put the bunnies in the basement. And I'll be honest with you, after a day or two we forgot about the bunnies. We forgot about them. And in those older homes back there in Michigan, almost all of the houses had a *laundry chute* it was called. It's a rectangle box built right down the center of the house, usually associated with the bathroom area. And when your clothes were dirty, you just threw them in that thing and poof, down they would make a big pile, down in the basement where the washer and dryer were.

Well, these bunnies didn't have any food, and they are the type of creatures like a mouse or rat that it has to keep chewing all the time or their teeth would grow too big. So they are constantly chewing. And we hadn't put out any lettuce or any food. We might have the first day, but after that, you know, oh well, done playing with the bunnies. But here, all these clothes stacked there in the pile. It was like a Golden Corral for the bunnies. They were synthetic materials and pure cotton, and they just had all kinds of different flavors of materials to chew on and to destroy. And also, I don't know if you know much about bunnies, but not only can they procreate at the great deal, but they are also able to leave tracks. Lots of them!

Well we forgot about the bunnies until one day. My mother found them. We knew she found them because of the scream. There was this loud scream and my three sisters ran downstairs to see what was happening to mother. My brother Tom and I kind of suspected we ought not to go. So we didn't go. Mother found us. We ended up in our room sore and bruised. And the last thing mother said before she shut the door is, "You wait until you father comes home," boom, door shut. Well we are already in pain, now dad is coming. You know when you are a child, and you hear, "You wait until your dad gets home," that's a death sentence.

Well dad came home. And the door opened going into the bedroom, and we were just staring at him. Looking for a glimmer of hope, looking for some reflection of humanity and tenderness, you know something! You know where we could appeal to his better nature. You know, "We are your children!" Well, he walked in, and he shut the door. And we had a glimmer of hope because my dad could not contain himself. He thought the whole thing was hilarious. He was

laughing, but not out loud because mom was in the hall you know. And so dad was a picture of deliverance to us. And he even found a home for the bunnies, and they were taken care of. And after a day or two, my mother started loving us again. And so when I think of that Easter, I think of deliverance. And that's what I'd like to study with you today. Deliverance!

If you will, please turn in your Bibles to Acts chapter 23. We'll be reading verses 12-22. That will be our passage for study today. Acts 23 beginning with verse 12: "And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy. They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, "We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul." "Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near."

"So when Paul's sister's son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. Then Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to tell him." So he took him and brought him to the commander and said, "Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to bring this young man to you. He has something to say to you." Then the commander took him by the hand, went aside, and asked privately, "What is it that you have to tell me?" And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask that you bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more fully about him. But do not yield to them, for more than forty of them lie in wait for him, men who have bound themselves by an oath that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him; and now they are ready waiting for the promise from you." So the commander let the young man depart, and commanded him, "Tell no one that you have revealed these things to me."

You recall that Paul had been in the temple area. And some Jews from Asia saw him and cried out, "Men of Israel help! This is the man who goes around and he cries against us and our people in this place." And the riot started and they nearly killed Paul, except the soldiers came running down out of the fortress, which is right there on the north-west corner of the sanctuary piecing. They came down and they delivered Paul from the mob. And as they are seeking to carry him away, they literally had to carry him because of the violence of the mob. And they take him up the stairway. And half way up Paul says, "Please let me speak to these folks." And he begins to speak to them, and they listened. And they hear the story of how he tells how he was the Pharisee of the Pharisees, how he was raised a Pharisee. How he was taught by Gamaliel, and how he was zealous for the law just like they were. And how he had orders from the priests to go and to arrest people who were Christians. And along the journey to Damascus Jesus met him, and he met Jesus. And he became converted.

They all listened in silence to this powerful story until Paul said and Jesus told him to go to the gentiles. When they heard the word "Gentiles," the whole thing started up again, and the soldiers had to carry Paul off to jail. When he was in the jail they found out he was a Roman citizen, and took the chains off him and stopped the process where they were going to beat him to find out what was going on? Well the next day, the commander of the soldiers asked the

Sanhedrin council to meet so they could figure out what was going on? They brought Paul to the Sanhedrin council and it was just a short time before Paul realized, "This is a kangaroo court. This is going nowhere." And he said, "I am on trial today because I am a Pharisee. I am here because I believe in the resurrection." And another riot broke out because the Sadducees don't believe in the resurrection and the Pharisees do. And they hate each other, and they are the ones that made up the council.

And the soldiers had to get in there and deliver Paul again. They almost ripped Paul apart during the Sanhedrin meeting. So Paul goes to jail. He is there through that day and night. Jesus speaks to him encouraging words saying, "You will witness for me in Rome just like you have here." And then Paul gets a visitor, his nephew, his sister's son. The nephew comes and tells him of this plot. So Paul calls a centurion and says, "Here, please take this young man to Lysias the commander, and let him speak to him." So the young man goes and speaks to Lysias and Lysias kindly pulls the young man to the side and says, "What is it that you have to say?" And he is told of this conspiracy to kill Paul.

Lysias took it seriously, and we come to verses 23 and 24, same chapter. Acts 23 verse 23 it says, "...he called for two centurions, saying, 'Prepare two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at the third hour of the night; and provide mounts to set Paul on, and bring him safely to Felix the governor.'" Four hundred and seventy soldiers would take Paul that night at nine o'clock. Paul would be placed on a horse, probably dressed like a soldier so nobody could tell who he was and what he looked like. Four hundred and seventy men would take Paul thirty five miles up to Antipatris. They would take him thirty five miles there and then some of the soldiers would come back to Jerusalem.

Now the reason that they would only go that far is because those were windy roads with lots of hills around them. And for thirty five miles it was a great place to be ambushed. From Antipatris on it was a flat, alluvial like plane, from there to Caesarea, no ambush possible so just the fewer soldiers would be able to take Paul to Caesarea. These people were very serious about their commitment. Look at Acts 24 verse 27, and we'll realize a time period here. It says, "After two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul bound." He will stay in Caesarea a minimum of two years in that jail. Notice the next three verses in chapter 25.

Chapter 25 verse one: "Now when Festus had come to the province, after three days he went up from Caesarea to Jerusalem." So Festus is the new governor, and he goes to Jerusalem. "Then the high priest and the chief men of the Jews informed him against Paul; and they petitioned him..." Two years later and they are still stirred up about Paul. So they are saying they have a plan. They ask a favor, verse 3, against Paul, "...that he would summon him to Jerusalem while they lay in ambush along the road to kill him." Two years later they are still wanting to kill him. So they have a plan. They've got a new governor, they are saying, "Hey, we want to try him here. Why don't you bring him here?" If they do, they have plans to ambush him.

So we see deliverance in the life of Paul just in these few short days of his life. They tried to kill him at the temple, they tried to kill him after he spoke at the temple, they tried to kill him in

the Sanhedrin council, they tried to ambush him twice, and each time he was delivered. Now that's what we want to talk about today. Deliverance! Deliverance from enemies! We are going to look at three enemies today. I'd like for you to turn first to First Corinthians chapter 15. This is the worst enemy of all, First Corinthians 15. This is the ultimate enemy. So we are going to start there and work backwards if you will.

First Corinthians 15 verse 26, Paul in describing what the resurrection is all about says this: "The last enemy that will be destroyed is death." "The last enemy that will be destroyed is death." Death is the worst enemy and it will be destroyed ultimately. But it will be the last enemy that is destroyed. You may have lost a loved one in a foreign field defending our country. You may have lost a loved one through sickness, accidents or some violent act upon them. And we realize the pain that that puts us in, and we would all cry out today, "Yes, death is an enemy!" Death is an enemy.

Paul, referring to death calls it 'asleep' in First Thessalonians chapter 4, if you'll turn there please. First Thessalonians chapter 4 verses 13 and 14, he is talking about believers here. He says, "I do not want you to be ignorant brethren concerning those who have fallen asleep." That's what he is referring to as death. "...lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with him those who sleep in Jesus." Let's make something crystal clear. Christians grieve, Christians have sorrow; they have great sorrow. There are some psychiatrists, Christian psychiatrists that believe Christians have a deeper sorrow than non Christians because we have a greater commitment in our love, in our relationships. Plus, we have the expectations that maybe God would stop this thing that caused the death. Where was God?

And so grieving is very deep in the Christian experience. But we do not grieve as those who have no hope because we know that ultimately death will be destroyed. The last enemy to be destroyed will be death. It will be destroyed. And that carries us through these times of loss because we know some day; there will be no more pain. Some day there will be no more tears, some day, there will be no more sorrow, and some day, there will be no more death. We will be delivered from it all.

So the one enemy that we identified today as being delivered from is the enemy of death. Another enemy is people. Look at Psalm 59. Psalm 59, as I have mentioned from this pulpit on a number of occasions, the Psalms are the inspired expression of the human experience. This is the prayer language of heaven. This is what you can pray. And if you have people who are your enemies, I am going to give you three very short passages that you can pray to the Lord. These are divinely inspired prayers and they will help you and you will be blessed by them. Notice the cry of this author in Psalm 59 verse 1: "Deliver me from my enemies oh my God. Defend me from those who rise up against me. Deliver me from the workers of iniquity and save me from bloodthirsty men. For look, they lie in wait for my life. The mighty gather against me, not for my transgression nor for my sin o Lord. They run and prepare themselves through no fault of mine."

This is a prayer you can pray when people have become your enemy. Look at Psalm 64. The entirety of Psalm 64, all 10 verses is a prayer regarding this. We'll just read the first 4 verses.

“Hear my voice, O God, in my meditation. Preserve my life from fear of the enemy. Hide me from the secret counsel of the wicked. From the insurrection of the workers of iniquity, who sharpen their tongue like a sword, and bend their bows to shoot their arrows-bitter words that they may shoot in secret at the blameless. Suddenly they shoot at him and do not fear.”

It's a beautiful prayer that you can pray when people have become your enemy. One more expression found in Psalm 35. Psalm 35, just the first 3 verses, it says: “Plead my cause, O Lord, with those who strive with me; Fight against those who fight against me. Take hold of shield and buckler, and stand up for my help. Also draw out the spear, and stop those who pursue me. Say to my soul, “I am your salvation.”” Lord, help me and encourage me, and strengthen my faith in You. Tell me again that You are my salvation. Tell me again that You will fight my battles. Tell me again that You will deliver me from my enemy. These are prayers that we can pray regarding people who have become our enemy.

One question that begs to be asked and answered is, “Why is it that people become our enemy? How does that work?” And I am going to be very specific. I am going to talk about in the room of church because most of us, that's our room. Yes, we can have enemies at work and that's painful, but we don't live there. But when something happens in the family or in church, all of a sudden, that's a hard thing. It is very difficult. But it's a real thing. Paul deals with it in Second Thessalonians chapter 3. He tells us why there are enemies in the context of a community of faith. In Second Thessalonians 3 verse 1 he is asking for prayer. Paul says, “Finally brethren pray for us that the Word of the Lord may have free course and be glorified, just as it is with you, and that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men, for not all have faith.”

“But the Lord is faithful who will establish you and guard you from the evil one.” In the second verse he describes the problem. “That we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men for not all have faith.” You see, in the room of religion not all have faith. If we have faith we will not be unreasonable and wicked. We will not go there. If we have faith, we will let God fight our battles. We will not fight our own battles. We will not get loud and arrogant and forceful and mean. We will not take oaths that we will not drink or eat until we kill somebody who disagrees with us on how to serve God. That will not be our spirit. Our attitude will be, “Lord, they disagree with me in how I believe I should serve God. Help me to understand, am I right or are they? And if they are right, then help me to change. But if I am right and they are wrong, then You have to change them. But please, I don't want to rise up and get in their face and be ugly and be nasty.”

That is the activity of somebody who does not have faith in God. It is somebody zealous, but they do not have faith in God. Brothers and sisters, God will fight your battle if you let Him. If you don't let Him, you are not a person of faith. And you'll be out there creating tremendous havoc and pain and sorrow in people's lives. Paul says we will be unreasonable and we will be wicked. O to have faith that we not be an enemy to one another. Amen? Well what do we do? There is a promise that God has given us. I am just going to give you one promise today. Isaiah 41; I know other promises are available regarding deliverance from enemies. But better to give you one that you will remember than three of four that you will forget. Isaiah 41 verses 10 and 11. Now if you have not done this already in your Bible, these two verses are worthy of being

underlined. They are worthy of having a box drawn around them. They are worthy of having an arrow pointing to them so that when you come to them, you'll say, "Aha, there is something on this page." They are worthy of having a little note in the front or the back of your Bible, "When discouraged because of enemies, read this!"

Here is what God says to you: "Fear not, I am with you. Be not dismayed, I am your God. I will strengthen you. Yes, I will help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. Behold, all those who were incensed against you shall be ashamed and disgraced. They shall be as nothing. And those who strive with you shall perish." Let God fight your battles brothers and sisters. Let Him take care of it. Let's be people of faith.

There is another enemy we are going to talk about. We talked about the enemy of death; we talked about the enemy of people. We are going to talk about the enemy of self. Look at Second Corinthians chapter 5. You and I are an enemy to our own growth and faith in the Lord. How so? Let me describe an experience I had just Tuesday. On Tuesday, I was listening to one of Karen's CDs, I believe it was *The Martins*. And their singing is beautiful Gospel songs; three people, two sisters and a brother and they just have such beautiful harmony. And I am listening to them while I am walking on the treadmill.

And I've got that treadmill up as fast as it will go where I can -- if I have it any faster, I am going to have to start running; and so I am just puffing it, walking as fast as I can, listening to this Christian music. And all of a sudden, pow! I remembered something I had said years ago. And right behind it, pow, another thing that I had said. And these are things I am ashamed of, things I am embarrassed about, things I don't want to remember, things I don't want retelling around in my mind. And I said to God, "O Lord, forgive me!" I've already asked forgiveness for it, but it's a natural thing to say, "O Lord forgive me. How could I be so..." whatever it was -- I used a word Karen told me not to use in the pulpit, so. How could I be that way? And so I am frustrated because I am reminded of who I am and what I'm like, and what I've been, and on and on. And then I remembered.

I remembered what I am going to read to you. Second Corinthians 5 verse 17. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things have passed away. Behold, all things have become new." All things have become new! I didn't feel new. I felt just as rotten as I was when I said what I thought about. I wanted to go there in my mind and think about how pitiful of a person I am. But God says, "Don't go there. That's the enemy." A person of faith lives in the present and in the future, and lives with the belief and understanding that in Christ, all that's gone. All that has been buried in the sea; as far as the East is from the West, it is gone from you. God holds it no more as an account against you. Don't you do it. Don't let it destroy your faith. Don't let it cripple you. Don't let it hold you back. Let go of it, and grab on to God and look forward. All things are new in Christ! That's what we are told.

And so I realized, I need to act on faith and not on feeling. I didn't feel good until I begin to act on faith. And God gave me the present and the future to think about, and not the failures of the past. Deliverance from self!

There is part of this story that I skipped over rather quickly so that I could come back to it at this point. Deliverance of self! And that's the experience that Paul's nephew has. He will be

delivered from himself. Now I want you to know something. It is never mentioned, anywhere in the Bible, anywhere else that Paul had a sister. It's not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible that she had a son. This is the first mention of Paul's family anywhere.

Paul does talk about being raised a Pharisee. It is assumed his father was a Pharisee. His mother would have been inclined that direction. Paul was from a wealthy family. He lost all that when he became a believer. Twenty three years before this story takes place, Paul was a hero among the Pharisees. He was a hero with his father, he was a hero with his mother, he was a hero with his sister. He was out there fighting the battle for God in the context of the Pharisee's belief. And he was a hero to them. But something strange happened to Paul. He came back from Damascus different and he was no longer a hero. Not only was he not a hero anymore, he was disenfranchised from the family. They would have nothing to do with him. Paul became the enemy. His own family turned against him.

Now twenty three years later, he has a nephew. A nephew who is not even twenty three years old; a nephew who is at oldest probably eighteen or nineteen; a nephew who's never met him before but a nephew who's grown up all his life hearing about uncle Paul being the enemy. Uncle Paul being a turncoat, Uncle Paul turning against what is right and what is good. Uncle Paul was a bad, evil man. This nephew has heard that all his life. Now we have to do some reasoning from the back to the front to understand what we are talking about here. Let's go to the back here.

How did this young man know about the conspiracy to kill Paul? There are forty plus people involved in the conspiracy. There are elders and there are the priests. How does this young man know? The very nature of a conspiracy is secrecy. You can't let information out or something would happen like it did happen, and Paul will escape. How does he know about it? It's simple. He is one of them. He is one of them! His concept of service to God is that he has probably joined the sacarii, the assassins, he is one of them. And he was there in conversations to hear the blood oath, where these people are willing to die in order to take Paul out. He is there, he hears that. It is very likely he was there when the Sanhedrin council met. It is likely he saw his uncle being thorn by the limbs. It is likely he was in the temple area when he saw his uncle arrested. He may have thrown a stone; he may have thrown a punch or kicked. And you know he heard what Paul had to say when he was on the stairway.

Now this young man, who is committed to the destruction of evil people like Uncle Paul, has seen and met that evil person for the first time and something is happening in his heart. Something is happening to his faith experience with God. The Holy Spirit is convicting this young man that Paul is not the enemy and Jesus is not the enemy. That there is something to what Paul has said something about Christianity that is right. And this young man, this nephew goes to speak to Paul at the risk of his life, and at the risk of his future. Because if anyone of these forty men find out that this guy turned on them, they will kill him in a heartbeat. This young man goes to Paul. The story is not recorded, but can assure you, from everything I believe concerning God and His Word and Paul, and how the Holy Spirit works. They had a conversation before Paul called for the centurion. Paul is not going to let this moment go. His nephew is there seeking his safety. Paul knows. Paul is a wise man. He would have updated this guy or upgraded his understanding of Christ, probably led him to Christ at that time.

Now why would I say that? Well, we are going to piece some things together here. Paul will remain in jail for a number of years. If you read ahead you will find out one of the reasons for it is the governor wanted a large bribe from Paul. He wanted to enrich himself through a bribe. Now Paul was kicked out of the family. He lost everything and supported himself by making tents. When he arrives in jail he's got nothing. But somehow, during the time period he is in jail, he is restored back into the family and he gets the family's wealth again, and for the rest of his life he's got money. And he is not working. The governor must have heard about it. Paul is back in the family. How does that happen? Well you can only imagine that the nephew becomes a believer. And the nephew goes and tells mom, mom probably tells mom and dad if they are still alive, and before long, Paul has got a family again. And this young man is delivered from himself. That's the power of God.

I don't know what enemy you are struggling with in your life. You may have lost a loved one and the enemy of death is just haunting you with pain. Maybe there are people who have been unreasonable and wicked towards you. Or maybe, you are struggling with yourself. You can't let go of who you've been and you are having a hard time believing who you are in Christ. I don't know what enemy you are struggling with. But I do know this. God will defeat all of them and deliver you. My question for you is do you want deliverance? If you do, I am going to ask you to stand right where you are at.

"Father in Heaven we ask for Jesus to deliver us from our enemies. We thank you in His name, Amen."