***Why Resurrection Still Matters***

**Summer 2022, Acts 22:30-23:11 August 28, 2022**

***But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead,   
how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?   
13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.   
14 And if Christ has not been raised,   
our preaching is useless and so is your faith.*** **1 Corinthians 15:12-14**

**A new reason to preach the resurrection**

*30 The next day, since the commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them.*

*Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, “My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.” 2 At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. 3 Then Paul said to him, “God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!”*

*4 Those who were standing near Paul said, “You dare to insult God’s high priest?”*

*5 Paul replied, “Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: ‘Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.’”*

*6 Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, “My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead.” 7 When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. 8 (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.)*

*9 There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. “We find nothing wrong with this man,” they said. “What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?” 10 The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks.*

*11 The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.”*

Acts 22:30-23:11

1. Paul’s relationship with the Gentiles ultimately gets him into trouble in Jerusalem

2. Paul takes advantage of his Pharisee training about the resurrection

3. God uses riots and Romans, temple politics and family connections, even two years in prison in Caesarea, a to open doors for Paul’s preaching the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome

**What would be your resurrection text?**

*26 “Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. 27 The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognize Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. 28 Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. 29 When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. 30 But God raised him from the dead, 31 and for many days he was seen by those who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people.*

*32 “We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers 33 he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm:*

*“ ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father.’*

*34 The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words:*

*“ ‘I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.’*

*35 So it is stated elsewhere:*

*“ ‘You will not let your Holy One see decay.’*

*36 “For when David had served God’s purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. 37 But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.*

*38 “Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. 39 Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses.*

Acts 13, Paul’s sermon in Pisidian Antioch (quoting Psalm 2, Isaiah 55 and Psalm 16)

1. The “good news” (“What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us”) is confirmed by the resurrection

2. Resurrection shows Jesus fulfills the promises made to David and Abraham

3. But resurrection also proves that Jesus fulfills the shadows of the promises to Moses: forgiveness and justification (see Romans 4:25)

**The value of resurrection today**

1. It keeps our focus on Jesus and the cross

*7 But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. 10 I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*

*12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. 13 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

*15 All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. 16 Only let us live up to what we have already attained.*

*17 Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. 18 For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things. 20 But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.*

*Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!*

Philippians 3:7-4:1

2. Resurrection challenges the heart of secularism

I believe in . . . .  
      the resurrection of the body,  
   and the life everlasting. Amen.*.*

The final lines of the Apostles’ Creed

3. Resurrection is our glorious hope!

*16 Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. 17 For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. 18 So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

*Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. 2 Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, 3 because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. 4 For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. 5 Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.*

2 Corinthians 4:16-5:5 (see also Keller’s “Growing my Faith in the Face of Death” article)

**Resources for further studies in Acts**

The Bible Project team has great stuff on Acts at [*https://open.life.church/items/179224-poster-jpg*](https://open.life.church/items/179224-poster-jpg)

Spurgeon has several sermons on texts in Acts which are available at [*https://www.biblebb.com/brefindex/act.htm*](https://www.biblebb.com/brefindex/act.htm) He has no sermons available on this text, but several of his resurrection sermons from Acts would apply:  
Acts 24: <https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/0066.htm>  
Acts 13: <https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/3191.htm>  
and especially this sermon from Acts 2: [*https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/2102.htm*](https://www.biblebb.com/files/spurgeon/2102.htm)Spurgeon has 45 more sermons on the resurrection. One of the best is from Philippians 3:10,   
[*https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-power-of-his-resurrection/#flipbook/*](https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/the-power-of-his-resurrection/%23flipbook/)

Tim Keller has a wonderful article at Christianity Today (April, 2021) on hope and resurrection at [*https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/april-web-only/timothy-keller-hope-times-fear-resurrection-better-world.html*](https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/april-web-only/timothy-keller-hope-times-fear-resurrection-better-world.html) Keller also addresses the impact of the resurrection on his own diagnosis of pancreatic cancer in *The Atlantic* at [*https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/03/tim-keller-growing-my-faith-face-death/618219/*](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/03/tim-keller-growing-my-faith-face-death/618219/)

For a resurrection primer check out Michael Horton’s “Risen Indeed” at [*https://whitehorseinn.org/resource-library/articles/risen-indeed-2/*](https://whitehorseinn.org/resource-library/articles/risen-indeed-2/)and “Can We Still Believe in Resurrection” at [*https://www.monergism.com/can-we-still-believe-resurrection*](https://www.monergism.com/can-we-still-believe-resurrection)

This Gospel Coalition “Why the Resurrection Changes Everything” article includes a survey of many of the key resurrection texts: [*https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-the-resurrection-changes-everything/*](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-the-resurrection-changes-everything/)

I found Persis Lorenti’s “The Resurrection and the Life” article on the Apostles’ Creed interesting at [*https://www.placefortruth.org/blog/the-apostles-creed-the-resurrection-the-life*](https://www.placefortruth.org/blog/the-apostles-creed-the-resurrection-the-life)

D. A. Carson has a wonderful essay from Acts 17 on “Worldview Evangelism” at [*https://www.monergism.com/athens-revisited-exegetical-study-acts-17-da-carson*](https://www.monergism.com/athens-revisited-exegetical-study-acts-17-da-carson)

Deffinbaugh’s Acts messages are at [*https://bible.org/series/studies-book-acts*](https://bible.org/series/studies-book-acts) His sermon on Acts 23 is at [*https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335*](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335)

Allistair Begg has a sermon in this text which focuses on the how God works through the circumstances of Paul’s life at [*https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/all-things-god-works/*](https://www.truthforlife.org/resources/sermon/all-things-god-works/)

For those who want to dig deeper into the worldview clash at Mars Hill, I recommend Andrew Klavan’s challenging “Speaking Truth into Modern Culture” at [*https://youtu.be/Cckiti7as44*](https://youtu.be/Cckiti7as44)

John Stott’s *The Spirit, The Church and the World: The Message of Acts* (IVP, 1990) and F. F. Bruce’s work: *New Testament History* (Doubleday, 1980) and *The Book of the Acts* (Eerdmans, 1984). For this passage, I also like Kistemaker’s commentary (Baker Book House, 1990).

Harry Boer, *That My House May Be Filled* (Eerdmans, 1957)



Table

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# Acts Timeline (ESV Study Bible)

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# From the Sanhedrin to Caesarea (Acts 22:30 - 23:35)

Bob Deffinbaugh at [*https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335*](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335)

30 The next day, because the commanding officer wanted to know the true reason Paul was being accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and the whole council to assemble. He then brought Paul down and had him stand before them.

1 Paul looked directly at the council and said, “Brothers, I have lived my life with a clear conscience before God to this day.” 2 At that the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. 3 Then Paul said to him, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit there judging me according to the law, and in violation of the law you order me to be struck?” 4 Those standing near him said, “Do you dare insult God’s high priest?” 5 Paul replied, “I did not realize, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, ‘***You must not speak evil about a ruler of your people***.’” 6 Then when Paul noticed that part of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, he shouted out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead!” 7 When he said this, an argument began between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. 8 (For the Sadducees say there is no resurrection, or angel, or spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.) 9 There was a great commotion, and some experts in the law from the party of the Pharisees stood up and protested strongly, “We find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?” 10 When the argument became so great the commanding officer feared that they would tear Paul to pieces, he ordered the detachment to go down, take him away from them by force, and bring him into the barracks.

11 The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, “Have courage, for just as you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.”

12 When morning came, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink anything until they had killed Paul. 13 There were more than forty of them who formed this conspiracy. 14 They went to the chief priests and the elders and said, “We have bound ourselves with a solemn oath not to partake of anything until we have killed Paul. 15 So now you and the council request the commanding officer to bring him down to you, as if you were going to determine his case by conducting a more thorough inquiry. We are ready to kill him before he comes near this place.” 16 But when the son of Paul’s sister heard about the ambush, he came and entered the barracks and told Paul. 17 Paul called one of the centurions and said, “Take this young man to the commanding officer, for he has something to report to him.” 18 So the centurion took him and brought him to the commanding officer and said, “The prisoner Paul called me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you.” 19 The commanding officer took him by the hand, withdrew privately, and asked, “What is it that you want to report to me?” 20 He replied, “The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as if they were going to inquire more thoroughly about him. 21 So do not let them persuade you to do this, because more than forty of them are lying in ambush for him. They have bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink anything until they have killed him, and now they are ready, waiting for you to agree to their request.” 22 Then the commanding officer sent the young man away, directing him, “Tell no one that you have reported these things to me.” 23 Then he summoned two of the centurions and said, “Make ready two hundred soldiers to go to Caesarea along with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen by nine o’clock tonight, 24 and provide mounts for Paul to ride so that he may be brought safely to Felix the governor.” 25 He wrote a letter that went like this:

26 Claudius Lysias to His Excellency Governor Felix, greetings. 27 This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, when I came up with the detachment and rescued him, because I had learned that he was a Roman citizen. 28 Since I wanted to know what charge they were accusing him of, I brought him down to their council. 29 I found he was accused with reference to controversial questions about their law, but no charge against him deserved death or imprisonment. 30 When I was informed there would be a plot against this man, I sent him to you at once, also ordering his accusers to state their charges against him before you.

31 So the soldiers, in accordance with their orders, took Paul and brought him to Antipatris during the night. 32 The next day they let the horsemen go on with him, and they returned to the barracks. 33 When the horsemen came to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. 34 When the governor had read the letter, he asked what province he was from. When he learned that he was from Cilicia, 35 he said, “I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive too.” Then he ordered that Paul be kept under guard in Herod’s palace.[1](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P15_5326)

### Introduction[2](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P17_6229)

Among all of the disciples, I find that Christians most readily identify with Peter. It’s no wonder, because Peter is the fellow who is always getting himself into trouble by saying the wrong thing. It isn’t that the other disciples are so much better, but at least they keep their mouths shut. Perhaps they were more aware of this proverb:

Even a fool who remains silent is considered wise, and the one who holds his tongue is deemed discerning ([Proverbs 17:28](javascript:%7b%7d)).

On the other hand, very few Christians find it easy to identify with Paul. He is a man who always seems to get it right. In this lesson, we come to a text where we find that even Paul has feet of clay. I find myself in a rather interesting position here. While others have accused Paul of wrongdoing earlier in the Book of Acts,[3](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P21_7616) I have consistently defended him. I cannot do so here, for even Paul admits he was wrong.[4](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P22_7969)

Paul was determined to reach Jerusalem, to worship in the temple, and to deliver the offerings of the Gentile churches in Macedonia and Achaia ([Acts 24:11, 17](javascript:%7b%7d)-18). Along the way, he met with believers. Consistently the Holy Spirit made it known to Paul, and to the churches, that imprisonment and persecutions awaited him there ([Acts 20:22-23; 21:4, 8](javascript:%7b%7d)-14). Paul could not be persuaded to set aside his plans to visit Jerusalem, and thus he and his traveling companions finally arrived in Jerusalem, where they received a warm welcome from the church ([Acts 21:17](javascript:%7b%7d)). Paul’s report of his ministry and of many new Gentile converts was also well received ([Acts 21:18-20](javascript:%7b%7d)a). But there was concern expressed over the false reports that had reached Jerusalem before Paul arrived. Rumor had it that Paul was teaching the Jews who lived abroad (among the Gentiles) to abandon their Jewish culture and customs, such as circumcision and the observance of Jewish holidays ([Acts 21:21](javascript:%7b%7d)).

To prove this rumor false, James and the elders urged Paul to publicly participate in temple worship, accompanied by four Jewish men (whose expenses Paul would pay). This would show that Paul himself was still worshipping as a Jew and that he did not discourage others from being Jewish Christians as well ([Acts 21:22-24](javascript:%7b%7d)). This was not an abandonment of their decision several years earlier in the Jerusalem Council, because the intent of that decision was to nullify the false teaching of some Jews that Gentiles must embrace Judaism in order to be saved ([Acts 21:25](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Paul promptly and happily complied with the counsel given him by James and the elders in Jerusalem. But just as they were completing their purification rites, some Hellenistic Jews from Asia accused Paul of a most serious offense. On the basis of half-truths and flawed logic, they accused Paul of taking Gentiles into a part of the temple restricted to Jews. They called on their other Jewish brethren to come to their aid. By doing this, they precipitated a riot. The Jews seized Paul and were starting to tear him limb-from-limb when the Roman commander came on the scene, just in time to spare Paul’s life ([Acts 21:27-32](javascript:%7b%7d)).

When Paul spoke to the commander in Greek, it caught him off guard (pardon the pun), because he assumed that Paul was an Egyptian revolutionary. Finding that Paul was a citizen of a prominent city of Cilicia, the commander allowed Paul to address the crowd. Unfortunately for the commander (and the Hellenistic Jews present), Paul spoke to the crowd in Aramaic, so that only the native Hebrews of Jerusalem and Judea understood him. Paul told the story of his conversion, but when he got to the part where God ordered him to go to the Gentiles (because of Jewish unbelief), the crowd exploded, precipitating another riot. The Roman commander was more determined than ever to discover what Paul had done to cause such an uproar, and so he set out to have him tortured (whipped) until he confessed. But when Paul informed the Romans that he was a Roman citizen, this “**interrogation**” was immediately terminated ([Acts 21:37](javascript:%7b%7d)—22:29).

The commander would have to discover the truth some other way, and so he handed him over to the Jewish Sanhedrin for trial. Now, he thought, he would get to the root of this problem. Our lesson takes up as Paul is brought before the Sanhedrin.

#### Chaos in the Courtroom [Acts 22:30](javascript:%7b%7d) – 23:10

30 The next day, because the commanding officer wanted to know the true reason Paul was being accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and the whole council to assemble. He then brought Paul down and had him stand before them.

1 Paul looked directly at the council and said, “Brothers, I have lived my life with a clear conscience before God to this day.” 2 At that the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. 3 Then Paul said to him, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit there judging me according to the law, and in violation of the law you order me to be struck?” 4 Those standing near him said, “Do you dare insult God’s high priest?” 5 Paul replied, “I did not realize, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, ‘***You must not speak evil about a ruler of your people***.’” 6 Then when Paul noticed that part of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, he shouted out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead!” 7 When he said this, an argument began between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. 8 (For the Sadducees say there is no resurrection, or angel, or spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.) 9 There was a great commotion, and some experts in the law from the party of the Pharisees stood up and protested strongly, “We find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?” 10 When the argument became so great the commanding officer feared that they would tear Paul to pieces, he ordered the detachment to go down, take him away from them by force, and bring him into the barracks ([Acts 22:30](javascript:%7b%7d)—23:10).

This is not the first time Luke has taken us into the hallowed halls of the Jewish Council – the Sanhedrin. We were there in [Acts 4](javascript:%7b%7d) when the Council attempted to intimidate Peter and John, and thereby silence them from proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus and the gospel of salvation by faith, apart from law-keeping. Once again, we find Peter and John before the Sanhedrin in [Acts 5](javascript:%7b%7d). Again these two apostles refused to be silenced. On this occasion, Gamaliel, a highly respected Pharisee (and Paul’s teacher – [Acts 22:3](javascript:%7b%7d)), came to their defense.

In these first two encounters with the Sanhedrin, Peter and John escaped with their lives, but then Stephen is hauled before the Council in [Acts 6](javascript:%7b%7d):

8 Now Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and miraculous signs among the people. 9 But some men from the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), both Cyrenians and Alexandrians, as well as some from Cilicia and the province of Asia, stood up and argued with Stephen. 10 Yet they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke. 11 Then they secretly instigated some men to say, “We have heard this man speaking blasphemous words against Moses and God.” 12 They incited the people, the elders, and the experts in the law; then they approached Stephen, seized him, and brought him before the council. 13 They brought forward false witnesses who said, “This man does not stop saying things against this holy place and the law. 14 For we have heard him saying that Jesus the Nazarene will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us” ([Acts 6:8-14](javascript:%7b%7d)).

This time the Sanhedrin seemed to have its way, though it was obviously not legal, either by Jewish law or Roman law:

54 When they heard these things, they became furious and ground their teeth at him. 55 But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked intently toward heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 56 “Look!” he said. “I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” 57 But they covered their ears, shouting out with a loud voice, and rushed at him with one intent. 58 When they had driven him out of the city, they began to stone him, and the witnesses laid their cloaks at the feet of a young man named Saul. 59 They continued to stone Stephen while he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” 60 Then he fell to his knees and cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” When he had said this, he died ([Acts 7:54-60](javascript:%7b%7d)).

This time Paul (Saul) was there, in hearty agreement with what they were doing ([Acts 8:1](javascript:%7b%7d)).

There is something unique about Paul’s “**trial**” before the Sanhedrin in our text, something I failed to notice until I looked more carefully at [Acts 22:30](javascript:%7b%7d):

30 The next day, because the commanding officer wanted to know the true reason Paul was being accused by the Jews, **he released him and ordered the chief priests and the whole council to assemble**. He then brought Paul down and had him stand before them ([Acts 22:30](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

On this occasion, no Jews and no member of the Sanhedrin initiated this “**trial**.” Luke makes it clear that the commander, Claudius Lysias, summoned the Council in order to learn what Paul had done to cause a riot. So far, he had been unsuccessful in learning why the crowds had reacted violently against Paul. No wonder the commander allowed Paul to address the mob. He expected to learn from Paul’s words what he had done to offend his Jewish brethren. He didn’t understand a word Paul said (in Aramaic), but he did see the crowd violently erupt a second time. He was about to “**examine**” (torture) Paul to find out the truth when he learned that Paul was a Roman citizen. And so the commander summoned Israel’s high court. Let them officially press charges and try Paul. Then he will finally know the charges against Paul.

I don’t think the Sanhedrin was very eager to meet. There was less unity than ever among its members, as we shall soon see. In addition, they had to know that the charges against Paul would not hold up. And, worst of all, the Roman commander would be looking on with great interest, eager to learn why the riots had begun. Perhaps this is why we do not get the impression that all of the same formalities took place which are implied in [Acts 4](javascript:%7b%7d). This was not the high priest’s doing; it was the commander’s doing. Perhaps there was some hesitation, because no one knew exactly what they were doing or how to proceed. Perhaps the proceedings began with a formal reading of the charges. Who wanted to take this task?

Was this why Paul spoke out, seemingly without a formal invitation to do so? Does this help to explain why the first recorded words are those of Paul, claiming his innocence? Paul looked the Council in the eye and said,

“Brothers, I have lived my life with a clear conscience before God to this day” ([Acts 23:1](javascript:%7b%7d)).

If there was silence and hesitation, this may have invited Paul’s statement and added emphasis to it.

We cannot be certain as to all the factors which prompted Ananias, the high priest, to react, but there are several possibilities. Luke has not told us *why* Ananias reacted, but only that he did so, instructing those[5](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P45_18416) close to Paul to strike him on the mouth. To strike Paul on the mouth informs us that it was what Paul said that was so offensive. (Some may remember having their mouths washed out with soap because they said something they should not have said.) What was so offensive to the high priest? Perhaps it was a combination of factors like these.

*(1) Paul seems to have spoken before he was prompted to defend himself.* One would expect that charges against Paul would first be read. We know that the accused was entitled to offer a defense ([John 7:50-51](javascript:%7b%7d)), and it would seem reasonable that the charges would be read first, so that the accused would know what to say in his defense. Paul seems to have spoken first. Perhaps the high priest (who surely wanted to be perceived as being “in charge”) was offended by Paul’s quick defense.

*(2) Paul addressed the entire Council using the term “brethren” (*[*Acts 23:1*](javascript:%7b%7d)*).* It would be perceived that Paul looked upon these men as his peers. There is no title of honor used here. Paul was certainly not intimidated by them. It was a kind of “kangaroo court,” and Paul’s words might have touched a nerve in this regard.

*(3) Paul appears to claim more than just “innocence” with regard to the current charges.* Paul was not claiming to be innocent of some specific charge here; he was claiming to be innocent of any charge. While Paul may be claiming to have a clear conscience with regard to his conduct “as a citizen”,[6](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P49_20218) he seems to be saying more than this. Paul is standing before a religious body, not a Roman judge. The charges are (or would almost certainly should be) religious in nature as well.

*(4) Paul is claiming something that no Jew could claim who sought to be righteous by law-keeping:*

8 The Holy Spirit is making clear that the way into the holy place had not yet appeared as long as the old tabernacle was standing. 9 **This was a symbol for the time then present, when gifts and sacrifices were offered that could not perfect the conscience of the worshiper**. 10 They served only for matters of food and drink and various washings; they are external regulations imposed until the new order came. 11 But now Christ has come as the high priest of the good things to come. He passed through the greater and more perfect tent not made with hands, that is, not of this creation, 12 and he entered once for all into the most holy place not by the blood of goats and calves but by his own blood, and so he himself secured eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a young cow sprinkled on those who are defiled consecrated them and provided ritual purity, 14 **how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our consciences from dead works to worship the living God** ([Hebrews 9:8-14](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

21 And since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a sincere heart in the assurance that faith brings, because we have had our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water. 23 And let us hold unwaveringly to the hope that we confess, for the one who made the promise is trustworthy. 24 And let us take thought of how to spur one another on to love and good works, 25 not abandoning our own meetings, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and even more so because you see the day drawing near ([Hebrews 10:21-25](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

I think this is the real reason Ananias reacted so strongly to Paul’s claim. Paul, as a Christian, could claim to possess a clean conscience before God. This is due to the saving work of Jesus, which is vastly superior to the sacrificial system of the Old Testament law. No good Jew could ever be good enough to claim a clean conscience before God, and Ananias was not a good Jew. This man was a scoundrel, and an embarrassment to the Jews. He used his office for material gain, and he did not hesitate to use violence to achieve his goals. He was so hated by the Jews that he was violently killed in the Jewish uprising in Jerusalem a number of years later.

Ananias sat in judgment on Paul for alleged offenses that could cost him his life. But rather than cower before this group (and especially Ananias himself), Paul boldly proclaimed his innocence in a way that no law-keeping Jew could ever hope to do. If Ananias had any conscience left at all,[7](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P55_23307) he would have been pricked by the words Paul spoke. And so the high priest ordered that Paul be slapped on the mouth.

Paul’s reaction is quick and sharp:

“God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit there judging me according to the law, and in violation of the law you order me to be struck?” ([Acts 23:3](javascript:%7b%7d))

I take Paul’s words in verse 5 at face value, and thus I believe that Paul did not know that Ananias was the high priest. There are a number of reasons why this could have been so, but Luke doesn’t bother to explain, and so neither will I attempt to do so.[8](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P59_23907) Had Paul known what we know about Ananias, he could have said a great deal more about the hypocrisy of this man. But he restricted his comments to the case at hand. Ananias, as a member of this Council, was sitting in judgment of Paul. He was supposedly seeing to it that the law was upheld. And yet, in contradiction to the law, he had just ordered Paul to be struck in the face. How ironic this is! We just read that the Roman soldiers would not “**examine**” Paul with lashes because he was a Roman citizen ([Acts 22:25-29](javascript:%7b%7d)). And now, Ananias would have Paul punished when he was still presumed innocent under Jewish law.[9](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P60_24592) Roman soldiers (“pagans”) are more meticulous about law-keeping than these Jews – and not mere Jews, but Jews who are sitting on the highest judicial council in the land. They are roughly the equivalent of our Supreme Court justices.

It is interesting to note that Ananias does not rebuke Paul for his harsh words; rather, some of those standing nearby (perhaps not even members of the Council) respond:

“Do you dare insult God’s high priest?” ([Acts 23:4](javascript:%7b%7d))

I wonder if the truth of Paul’s words had not stunned Ananias, at least momentarily. Not only was Paul right about this man’s hypocrisy; Paul’s indictment aptly rebuked Ananias for his conduct during his entire tenure as high priest.

The issue here is not the truth or accuracy of Paul’s response, but its inappropriateness due to the position of the high priest. For one reason or another (which Luke does not include in this account), Paul did not realize that Ananias was the high priest. Thus his words, spoken hastily and in hot anger (it would seem) were inappropriate. Actually, that’s an understatement; by Paul’s acknowledgement, they were contrary to the Old Testament law:

“You must not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people” ([Exodus 22:28](javascript:%7b%7d); cited in part by Paul in [Acts 23:5](javascript:%7b%7d)).

While Paul rightly cites [Exodus 22:28](javascript:%7b%7d), we have a higher standard than this by which to judge Paul’s response to Ananias – the example of our Lord Jesus, in very similar circumstances:

19 While this was happening, the **high priest** questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. 20 Jesus replied, “I have spoken publicly to the world. I always taught in the synagogues and in the temple courts, where all the Jewish people assemble together. I have said nothing in secret. 21 Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said. They know what I said.” 22 When Jesus had said this, **one of the high priest’s officers who stood nearby struck him on the face and said, “Is that the way you answer the high priest?**” 23 Jesus replied, “**If I have said something wrong, confirm what is wrong. But if I spoke correctly, why strike me?**” ([John 18:19-23](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine)

Paul immediately acknowledged his sin as a transgression of the law,[10](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P69_26867) so much for getting started on the right foot. Paul’s foot is now in his mouth. To cite an often-used phrase, “This does not bode well.” Paul has definitely gotten off to a very bad start. He has managed to insult and offend the presiding official over his own trial, resulting in a rebuke from some of those standing nearby (perhaps only observers). In light of this, how could Paul possibly get a fair trial before this group? Knowing full well that the Council had a mixture of Sadducees and Pharisees, Paul cried out, identifying himself as a Pharisee:

Then when Paul noticed that part of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, he shouted out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead!” ([Acts 23:6](javascript:%7b%7d))

I am reminded of David’s actions, when he realized that living among the Philistines might not have been such a great idea:

10 So on that day David arose and fled from Saul. He went to King Achish of Gath. 11 The servants of Achish said to him, “Isn’t this David, the king of the land? Isn’t he the one that they sing about when they dance, saying, ‘Saul struck down his thousands, But David his tens of thousands’?” 12 David thought about what they said and was very afraid of King Achish of Gath. 13 He altered his behavior in their presence. Since he was in their power, he pretended to be insane, making marks on the doors of the gate and letting his saliva run down his beard. 14 Achish said to his servants, “Look at this madman! Why did you bring him to me? 15 Do I have a shortage of fools, that you have brought me this man to display his insanity in front of me? Should this man enter my house?” ([1 Samuel 21:10-15](javascript:%7b%7d))

It seems clear that Paul has grasped the fact that there is no chance of a fair trial, and thus his outcry is intended to produce the results that Luke describes. That poor Roman Commander, whom we will learn shortly is named Claudius Lysias ([Acts 23:26](javascript:%7b%7d)), keeps suppressing riots and seeking to learn what Paul has done that has caused such strong reaction from other Jews. I’m sure he expected that this trial would finally produce some charge against Paul and some indication of guilt or innocence. I can only imagine the amazement of the commander and his frustration at having to put down a riot, this time in the highest court of Israel.

But let’s not get ahead of the story.

*First, let’s consider Paul’s claims.* Although they seem to be intended as a disruption *I believe they are truthful and accurate.*

*Paul was a Pharisee* – not only was this his background (taught by Gamaliel, etc.), but *they shared the same essential beliefs* (the resurrection of the dead, and the existence of angels and spirits – verse 8).

*The real issue was the gospel, and the resurrection (of Jesus, and of all the dead) was a central theme of the gospel* – the apostles were witnesses of the resurrection. This is the real reason why the Jews opposed Paul. (Remember, the Sanhedrin instructed Peter and John not to preach in the name of Jesus, who had been raised from the dead.)

*Second, let us consider the response of the Sadducees.* They clearly disagreed with both Paul and the Pharisees. *They believed Paul was guilty, and they wanted to execute him on the spot*, just like Stephen.

*Third, let us consider the response of the Pharisees.* This, I believe, is most significant. Look at what they have to say about Paul:

There was a great commotion, and some experts in the law from the party of the Pharisees stood up and protested strongly, “**We find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?**” ([Acts 23:9](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine)

The Pharisees agree with Paul, insisting that he is innocent. They have not said that Paul is innocent of a specific charge, but rather that no charges should be made. There is no reason for this “**trial**” in the first place (other than the fact that the commander ordered it).

In my opinion, the most significant statement made by the Pharisees is that Paul may well have received a vision from a spirit or an angel. This statement makes no sense unless it takes Paul’s statement in chapter 22 about his vision (the one that caused such an uproar) seriously. Remember what Paul said there, and the result:

17 When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance 18 and saw the Lord saying to me, ‘Hurry and get out o**f Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’** 19 I replied, ‘Lord, they themselves know that I imprisoned and beat those in the various synagogues who believed in you. 20 And when the blood of your witness Stephen was shed, I myself was standing nearby, approving, and guarding the cloaks of those who were killing him.’ 21 **Then he said to me, ‘Go, because I will send you far away to the Gentiles.**’” 22 The crowd was listening to him until he said this. **Then they raised their voices and shouted, “Away with this man from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live!**” 23 While they were screaming and throwing off their cloaks and tossing dust in the air ([Acts 22:17-23](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

Paul’s account of his vision is what caused such an uproar. In that vision, God spoke to Paul. He instructed Paul to leave Jerusalem quickly because the Jews would not receive his message (the gospel), and thus he was to take the gospel to the Gentiles. To admit that this “message” may have been from God was an amazing concession. This implies that the message could well be true. If so, God was turning from the Jews and sending the gospel to the Gentiles. Can you imagine the impact of this concession? No wonder the Sadducees completely cast all reason and order aside, seeking to kill Paul on the spot.

Not only have the Pharisees been silenced by the resurrection of Jesus and the preaching of the apostles, they seem to have lost all desire to oppose the gospel. Gamaliel, a Pharisee, warned the Sanhedrin against violent opposition to the gospel, lest they might be opposing God ([Acts 5:38-39](javascript:%7b%7d)). Now all the Pharisees are standing with Paul and against the Sadducees. How amazing this is!

The commander must now put down yet another riot, all on account of Paul (or so it seemed). He called in the troops and restored order, putting Paul in confinement in the barracks (away from the Sadducees). Paul’s life is spared once again by Roman soldiers. I suspect that Claudius Lysias (for that is the commander’s name – [Acts 23:26](javascript:%7b%7d)) intended to give his next move much more thought. But we shall soon see that he will not be granted this luxury.

#### Paul Has a Visitor [Acts 23:11](javascript:%7b%7d)

The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, “Have courage, for just as you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome” ([Acts 23:11](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Consider how Paul must have felt at this time. Against the counsel of his fellow-believers, Paul had pressed on to Rome, where he had met with the church leaders and had embraced their counsel. Doing so had resulted in false charges, a riot, and an attempt to take his life. His efforts to address the crowd by sharing his testimony had not ended well either – another riot, another attempt to kill him. He escaped an “examination” (beating) by claiming his rights as a Roman citizen, but then was taken before the Sanhedrin. While he was supported by the Pharisees, he was not officially declared innocent and released. And, once again, there was a riot and another attempt on his life.

When was this all going to end? Why was his innocence not obvious to all? Why was he not free to go about the ministry he had up to this point? Was he to blame for his circumstances? He had made all the decisions which brought him to this place. Paul must have been discouraged as he sat in confinement, pondering his life. It is at the low point – perhaps the lowest point since he had come to faith in Jesus – that our Lord appeared to him. Allow me to point out several observations regarding this visitation.

*(1) This visit is much more intimate than the “vision” of which Paul spoke in chapter 22 of Acts*.Look at Paul’s description of this earlier vision (or trance) once again:

17 When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance 18 and saw the Lord saying to me, ‘Hurry and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’ 19 I replied, ‘Lord, they themselves know that I imprisoned and beat those in the various synagogues who believed in you. 20 And when the blood of your witness Stephen was shed, I myself was standing nearby, approving, and guarding the cloaks of those who were killing him.’ 21 Then he said to me, ‘Go, because I will send you far away to the Gentiles’” ([Acts 22:17-21](javascript:%7b%7d)).

The best way for me to contrast Paul’s “vision,” mentioned in chapter 22, with the appearance of our Lord in chapter 23 may be by turning to this passage in [Numbers 12](javascript:%7b%7d):

1 Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married (for he had married an Ethiopian woman). 2 They said, “Has the Lord only spoken through Moses? Has he not also spoken through us?” And the Lord heard it. 3 (Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than any man on the face of the earth.) 4 The Lord spoke immediately to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam: “The three of you come to the tent of meeting.” So the three of them went. 5 And the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent; he then called Aaron and Miriam, and they both came forward. 6 The Lord said, “Hear now my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself known to him in a vision; I will speak with him in a dream. 7 My servant Moses is not like this; he is faithful in all my house. 8 With him I will speak face to face, openly, and not in riddles; and he will see the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” ([Numbers 12:1-8](javascript:%7b%7d))

I conclude from this that Paul’s “vision” in chapter 22 was second class (inferior) when compared to the appearance of our Lord to Paul in chapter 23. The revelation Paul received from his trance was something like watching a video. But in [Acts 23:11](javascript:%7b%7d), we are not told that Paul saw a vision. We are told that our Lord stood at Paul’s side and spoke to him. That is what I would call a first-class encounter with Christ. It is in our times of deepest need that our Lord is most near:

4 Even when I must walk through the darkest valley,  
I fear no danger, for you are with me;   
your rod and your staff reassure me ([Psalm 23:4](javascript:%7b%7d)).

23 But I am continually with you;   
you hold my right hand.   
24 You guide me by your wise advice,   
and then you will lead me to a position of honor ([Psalm 73:23-24](javascript:%7b%7d)).

18 Then Jesus came up and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. **And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age**” ([Matthew 28:18-20](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

1 Brotherly love must continue. 2 Do not neglect hospitality, because through it some have entertained angels without knowing it. 3 Remember those in prison as though you were in prison with them, and those ill-treated as though you too felt their torment. 4 Marriage must be honored among all and the marriage bed kept undefiled, for God will judge sexually immoral people and adulterers. 5 Your conduct must be free from the love of money and you must be content with what you have, for he has said, “***I will never leave you and I will never abandon you***.” 6 So we can say with confidence, “***The Lord is my helper****,* ***and******I will not be afraid****.* ***What can man do to me?***” ([Hebrews 13:1-6](javascript:%7b%7d))

At this low point in Paul’s life (low, from his perspective), our Lord is near to him in a most intimate way.

*(2) There is not one word of rebuke from our Lord at a time when we would have expected it.*Think of what we might have said to Paul. “Paul, you made a bad decision in coming to Jerusalem, and now you’re suffering the consequences.” “Paul, you certainly lost your temper with Ananias, and look at the trouble you’ve gotten yourself into.” “Paul, you may need to take a class in anger management.” “Paul, you should have kept your mouth shut.”

Instead of a rebuke, Paul receives encouragement. The translators may be right when they render our Lord’s words, “**Have courage. . .**” Many of the Bible translations render it this way, or something similar to it. But the King James Version and the New King James Version both render it, “**Be of good cheer. . .** **.**” The sense of the message is this:

“Cheer up, Paul. Things are not nearly as bad as they appear to be at the moment. You’ve faithfully fulfilled your assignment of proclaiming the gospel in Jerusalem; now you are about to do the same thing in Rome.”

The only person who seems to have done it right (thus far) is the Roman commander, Claudius Lysias. The high priest failed, along with the Sanhedrin, and even Paul. How wonderful it is to know that God’s plans and purposes are certain and secure, based upon His sovereignty, and not upon our perfection.

I believe that our Lord’s visit with Paul and His words of comfort, cheer, and encouragement are the key to understanding the entire chapter. We have seen that our Lord assured Paul that he would bear witness to the gospel in Rome. The remaining verses describe how God worked to bring this to pass, while Paul sat “helplessly” in his confinement.

#### A Conspiracy Revealed [Acts 23:12-24](javascript:%7b%7d)

12 When morning came, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink anything until they had killed Paul. 13 There were more than forty of them who formed this conspiracy. 14 They went to the chief priests and the elders and said, “We have bound ourselves with a solemn oath not to partake of anything until we have killed Paul. 15 So now you and the council request the commanding officer to bring him down to you, as if you were going to determine his case by conducting a more thorough inquiry. We are ready to kill him before he comes near this place.” 16 But when the son of Paul’s sister heard about the ambush, he came and entered the barracks and told Paul. 17 Paul called one of the centurions and said, “Take this young man to the commanding officer, for he has something to report to him.” 18 So the centurion took him and brought him to the commanding officer and said, “The prisoner Paul called me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you.” 19 The commanding officer took him by the hand, withdrew privately, and asked, “What is it that you want to report to me?” 20 He replied, “The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as if they were going to inquire more thoroughly about him. 21 So do not let them persuade you to do this, because more than forty of them are lying in ambush for him. They have bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink anything until they have killed him, and now they are ready, waiting for you to agree to their request.” 22 Then the commanding officer sent the young man away, directing him, “Tell no one that you have reported these things to me.” 23 Then he summoned two of the centurions and said, “Make ready two hundred soldiers to go to Caesarea along with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen by nine o’clock tonight, 24 and provide mounts for Paul to ride so that he may be brought safely to Felix the governor” ([Acts 23:12-24](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Verse 12 begins with an indication of time: “**When morning came. . . .**” I take it that this was the morning after our Lord had stood with Paul, assuring him that he would continue to bear witness to the gospel, all the way to Rome. In other words, by indicating the time, Luke is informing the reader that what happens in verse 12 through the end of the chapter is the first step in the outworking of God’s promise.

This is not the way I would have expected God to get Paul and the gospel to Rome! More than 40 men formed a conspiracy and bound themselves by oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. How interesting. Paul joined himself with four men by the taking of a vow. Then there are the more than 40 men who bind themselves in an oath and fast until it is fulfilled. Paul’s kind of religion is vastly different than that of these assassins. If Paul cannot be killed in a way that has the appearance of legality, then they will kill him in a way that completely sets aside justice and the law.

It is important to recognize that this conspiracy could not succeed without the full cooperation of the members of the Sanhedrin (almost certainly including the high priest). And so you have something over 40 men who are willing to do the killing, but they can only kill Paul if the Sanhedrin summons him for another hearing. Then, while Paul is being brought to them, the execution squad can do its work. A number of the members of the Sanhedrin (I doubt that those who were Pharisees were a part of this conspiracy) agreed to inform the commander that they needed to question Paul further, so that he would bring him from the place of his confinement to the Sanhedrin. The assassins[11](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P113_44851) who planned to kill Paul assured these Sanhedrin members that they would kill Paul while he was still some distance away ([Acts 23:15](javascript:%7b%7d)). I assume this was to give the impression that the Sanhedrin had nothing to do with this plot.

Here is where things begin to get interesting. Up until now, we have never heard anything about Paul’s family. Suddenly we learn that he had a sister, and that his sister had a son. And it “just so happened” (a secular euphemism for a clear case of divine intervention) that this nephew overheard the plot to kill Paul, his uncle. This nephew was allowed to visit “Uncle Paul” and tell him what he had heard. Paul called for a centurion and asked that he escort the lad to the commander. Once again the commander meets and exceeds what we would expect of him. Like a grandfather, he takes the lad by the hand and leads him aside to learn what he had to report. The lad told the commander what he had overheard. He listened and then sent the boy away, cautioning him not to tell anyone about what he had just done. He quickly summoned two centurions and instructed them to assemble a sizeable force to escort Paul to Caesarea, where he could stand before Felix the governor.

What are the chances of Paul’s nephew overhearing this top secret conspiracy? What are the chances that he could visit Paul and report what he heard? What are the chances that a Roman commander would listen to what this lad said? What are the chances Paul could survive such an elaborate plot? Clearly this was God’s doing, and He was doing it to fulfill His promises and purposes.

#### Paul Is Sent to Caesarea [Acts 23:25-35](javascript:%7b%7d)

25 He wrote a letter that went like this:

26 Claudius Lysias to His Excellency Governor Felix, greetings. 27 This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, when I came up with the detachment and rescued him, because I had learned that he was a Roman citizen. 28 Since I wanted to know what charge they were accusing him of, I brought him down to their council. 29 I found he was accused with reference to controversial questions about their law, but no charge against him deserved death or imprisonment. 30 When I was informed there would be a plot against this man, I sent him to you at once, also ordering his accusers to state their charges against him before you.

31 So the soldiers, in accordance with their orders, took Paul and brought him to Antipatris during the night. 32 The next day they let the horsemen go on with him, and they returned to the barracks. 33 When the horsemen came to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. 34 When the governor had read the letter, he asked what province he was from. When he learned that he was from Cilicia, 35 he said, “I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive too.” Then he ordered that Paul be kept under guard in Herod’s palace ([Acts 23:25-35](javascript:%7b%7d)).

We don’t know exactly how Luke obtained the information contained in this letter. Divine inspiration sometimes lets us in on information that would not normally be available to us (see, for example, [Matthew 9:4-5](javascript:%7b%7d)). But here it is possible that the contents of this letter were read at Paul’s hearing. The letter itself is far from “inspired.” It was written by a Roman commander who, so far as we know, never came to faith in Jesus. Claudius Lysias is absolutely accurate in his assessment of the situation, so far as it concerns Paul’s guilt or innocence. The controversy surrounding Paul was not about Roman laws; it was about differences among the Jews regarding their religion, particularly concerning their law. Paul was not guilty of any crime, and certainly not guilty of anything deserving of death or imprisonment. Like the Pharisees who were members of the Sanhedrin, the commander found Paul “not guilty.” Do these words, written by Claudius Lysias, not sound a great deal like those spoken by Pilate in regard to the charges against Jesus?

13 Then Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers, and the people, 14 and said to them, “**You brought me this man as one who was misleading the people**. When I examined him before you, **I did not find this man guilty of anything you accused him of doing**. 15 Neither did Herod, for he sent him back to us. **Look, he has done nothing deserving death**. 16 I will therefore have him flogged and release him” ([Luke 23:13-16](javascript:%7b%7d), emphasis mine).

This letter is accurate in its assessment of Paul and the charges against him. It is not quite so accurate in regard to the role that Claudius Lysias has played in this drama. The commander has given himself just a bit too much credit. He makes it appear that he rescued Paul from the hands of the Jews because he knew that he was a Roman citizen. We know that, at the time, he assumed Paul might be an Egyptian revolutionary ([Acts 21:38](javascript:%7b%7d)). He was not aware that Paul was a Roman citizen until Paul informed him, just before he was about to illegally “**examine**” him by scourging ([Acts 22:24-29](javascript:%7b%7d)). The commander knows how to put himself in a good light, and this letter reveals that. Nevertheless, it is a fair assessment of Paul’s case, from a Roman point of view.

Claudius Lysias had seen how violent Paul’s Jewish adversaries could get, and he was not about to have an innocent man torn to pieces on his watch. And so he assembled an impressive force to serve as Paul’s escorts on his journey from Jerusalem to Caesarea, where he would stand before Felix, procurator of Judea.

The commander did not wish to give the conspirators the opportunity to adjust their plans, and so these 470 soldiers set out from Jerusalem at 9:00 p.m. and marched all through the night. When they reached Antipatris, some 35 miles or so from Jerusalem (and nearly 30 miles from Caesarea, their destination), the infantry of 400 men were released to return to Jerusalem. The 70 mounted soldiers remained with Paul until they reached Caesarea.

In Caesarea, the commander’s letter was delivered to Felix. Having discerned that Paul’s case was in his jurisdiction, Felix agreed to hear Paul’s case when his accusers arrived. Until then, Paul was kept under guard in Herod’s palace. It may not seem like such good news to us, but let us remember the dangers Paul has faced in this chapter (not to mention the earlier chapters of Acts). Paul stood before the Sanhedrin, led by a high priest that Paul had angered and then insulted. Paul’s words had divided the Sanhedrin and, had the Roman commander not called in his troops, Paul would have been torn to pieces by the Sadducees on the Council. Then, while he was in the custody of the Roman army, a plot is conceived to kill Paul. It was a conspiracy between more than 40 Jewish assassins and Paul’s enemies on the Council. It looked like Paul was doomed. And yet God delivered Paul, using Paul’s young nephew and a conscientious Roman commander (assisted by 470 armed soldiers, some of whom were on horseback). As Jesus had told Paul while standing by his side, he was on his way to Rome.

### Conclusion

I would like to conclude this message by attempting to view the events of our text from two opposing perspectives. First, I would like to view the more recent events of Paul’s life from the Roman commander’s perspective. To begin with, this would mean that we are trying to make sense of the chaotic life of Paul through the eyes of an unbeliever. As men go, the commander is a good man. He is dedicated to his job, he is kind and attentive to Paul’s nephew, he is disciplined, and he follows the rules. He upholds the law. He is self-controlled, when he could easily vent his anger on Paul, or on his adversaries (or both). He is, in most regards, a better man than Paul’s Jewish adversaries. But, as a friend of mine would say, “He’s lost as a goose.”

To him, the events he has witnessed have been pure chaos. He can make no sense of it at all. He does not grasp the gospel, and thus he will never understand the intensity of the opposition to Paul. From his point of view, this whole thing is a mess, a Jewish mess. He cannot identify the central issue (the gospel), nor does any of this make sense. He cannot and does not see the big picture – what God is doing. He does not see the sovereign hand of God in all this. From his letter to Felix, I would say that Claudius Lysias congratulates himself for any good that has happened.

As Paul has written elsewhere,[12](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P130_53455) we live in a chaotic world. At the time this lesson is being written, there is a very serious war between Israel and Lebanon. It is but one of many armed conflicts in our world at this moment in time. To the unbelieving eye (that is, the eye of those who have not embraced Jesus as the only way of salvation), the world is a mess, and the best they can hope for is some human remedy. No wonder so many live in despair, without any hope.

Now let us consider the events Luke has recorded from a Christian’s point of view. That is to say, let us view these events as Luke expects us to understand them, assuming that we are believers in the Lord Jesus. The Christian life was never intended to be easy, safe, and comfortable – a continuation of things as they were before our conversion. As our Lord made clear to Paul, he was saved to be a witness to the good news of the gospel, and this involved suffering ([Acts 9:15-16](javascript:%7b%7d)). This is not only true for Paul, it is true for all Christians (see [Acts 14:22](javascript:%7b%7d); [2 Timothy 3:12](javascript:%7b%7d)). When Paul determined to visit Jerusalem, all along the way, he was informed that trouble awaited him there. We should not be surprised that he was falsely accused; so was our Lord. We should not be surprised that the unbelieving Jews wanted to kill Paul. They did kill Jesus (with the help of the Gentiles), and they killed Stephen.

But what Luke expects us to see in our text is that in spite of great opposition, opposition by those who are powerful and dedicated to their mission, God’s will was done in Paul’s life. It is not enough to say that God’s will was accomplished and His promises were fulfilled *in spite of great opposition and human failure*. God’s will was accomplished as God used human failure to further His purposes. Our text is a beautiful example of the truth of [Romans 8:28](javascript:%7b%7d):

And we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose ([Romans 8:28](javascript:%7b%7d)).

As I think about this passage, one word in particular comes to mind – HOPE. This passage gives me great hope because it demonstrates God’s sovereignty in such a way that I am greatly encouraged. God’s promises and purposes will be accomplished, in the midst of chaos, confusion, conflict, and human blundering. God finishes the work that He began:

For I am sure of this very thing, that the one who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus ([Philippians 1:6](javascript:%7b%7d)).

My confidence does not rest on my perfection (thank the Lord), or even on my faithfulness. It is God’s faithfulness that gives me confidence, that assures me that God will accomplish everything He has purposed and promised. Why lose hope, why quit, when you know that God’s purposes cannot and will not fail?

Strangely, I find it encouraging to see that even Paul can fail. In our text, I learn that in the darkest moments of Paul’s life, the Lord is near and encouraging him by assuring him that his purposes and promises will not fail. Paul will testify of Jesus in Rome.

Two texts of Scripture came to my mind as I reflected on the hope that I found from our text. The first passage speaks of God’s grace and compassion toward His children, knowing that we are frail and fallible:

8 The Lord is compassionate and merciful;   
he is patient and demonstrates great loyal love.   
9 He does not always accuse,   
and does not stay angry.   
10 He does not deal with us as our sins deserve;   
he does not repay us as our misdeeds deserve.   
11 For as the skies are high above the earth,   
so his loyal love towers over his faithful followers.   
12 As far as the eastern horizon is from the west,   
so he removes the guilt of our rebellious actions from us.   
13 As a father has compassion on his children,   
so the Lord has compassion on his faithful followers.   
14 For he knows what we are made of;   
he realizes we are made of clay ([Psalm 103:8-14](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Do we not see this in our Lord’s gentle dealings with Paul in our text? Have we not experienced it in His tender mercies toward us? What comfort there is for fallible men to know that God deals graciously with His children.

The second text of Scripture that came to mind as I reflected on the hope this passage inspires is found in [Romans 15](javascript:%7b%7d):

For everything that was written in former times was written for our instruction, so that through endurance and through encouragement of the scriptures we may have hope ([Romans 15:4](javascript:%7b%7d)).

Paul is talking about the Old Testament Scriptures here. He tells us that the whole Old Testament was written to instruct us and to encourage us so that we would have hope. But how can this be? So far as man is concerned, the Old Testament gives us a clear and simple assessment that can be summed up in one word: FAILURE. Even the best of men failed badly. So far as what the Old Testament teaches us about God, we can sum that up in one word: FAITHFUL. *Although men fail, God is faithful*. That is what we see in our text as well. As I was reading in Nehemiah this week, I came to the ninth chapter. Here Nehemiah confesses his sins and the sins of his people by reviewing Israel’s history, citing case after case where God was faithful in spite of Israel’s failures.

How is the Old Testament an encouragement to the Christian, inspiring hope and endurance? By reminding us that God is faithful when we fail. That is what our text in [Acts 23](javascript:%7b%7d) teaches us as well.

I have a final word to those who have not trusted in Jesus as God’s only provision for the forgiveness of sins and the assurance of living forever in His presence. How foolish it was to resist and oppose the gospel. In the end, it didn’t work. The more men opposed Paul and the gospel, the more it spread. Some who opposed Him, like Paul, were stopped in their tracks and converted to faith in Jesus. Others, like Ananias (ten years later) and Herod ([Acts 12](javascript:%7b%7d)) came to a violent end, and then spent eternity in hell. Resisting Christ and His offer of salvation is choosing eternal death (hell) over eternal life (heaven).

16 For this is the way God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world should be saved through him. 18 The one who believes in him is not condemned. The one who does not believe has been condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the one and only Son of God ([John 3:16-18](javascript:%7b%7d)).

I have a final word to those who have not trusted in Jesus as God’s only provision for the forgiveness of sins and the assurance of living forever in His presence. How foolish it was to resist and oppose the gospel. In the end, it didn’t work. The more men opposed the gospel, the more it spread. Some who opposed the gospel were stopped in their tracks and converted to faith in Jesus. Paul is an example of this. Others, like Herod ([Acts 12](javascript:%7b%7d)) came to a violent end, and then spent eternity in hell. Resisting Christ and His offer of salvation is choosing eternal death (hell) over eternal life (heaven).

[1](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P15_5327) Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the NET Bible. The NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION, also known as THE NET BIBLE, is a completely new translation of the Bible, not a revision or an update of a previous English version. It was completed by more than twenty biblical scholars who worked directly from the best currently available Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. The translation project originally started as an attempt to provide an electronic version of a modern translation for electronic distribution over the Internet and on CD (compact disk). Anyone anywhere in the world with an Internet connection will be able to use and print out the NET Bible without cost for personal study. In addition, anyone who wants to share the Bible with others can print unlimited copies and give them away free to others. It is available on the Internet at: [www.netbible.org](http://www.netbible.org).

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[3](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P21_7617) I am referring to those who find Paul to have erred when he pressed on to Jerusalem, in spite of warnings to the contrary (see, for example, [Acts 21:4, 8](javascript:%7b%7d)-14), and when he acted on the counsel of James and the elders of the church in Jerusalem ([Acts 21:18-26](javascript:%7b%7d)).

[4](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P22_7970) See [Acts 23:5](javascript:%7b%7d).

[5](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P45_18417) It may be that Ananias’ order was simply for someone standing near Paul to strike him (once) on the mouth. The language also makes it possible to understand that the high priest ordered several to strike Paul, not just one. This is certainly more than a slap on the face. Knowing what we do about Ananias, this would not be surprising.

[6](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P49_20219) A marginal note in the NASB informs us that Paul’s expression may specifically refer to his “conduct as a citizen.”

[7](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P55_23308) See [1 Timothy 4:2](javascript:%7b%7d).

[8](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P59_23908) Although the commentators seem most interested in this.

[9](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P60_24593) Once again, I would refer the reader to the words of Nicodemus in [Acts 7:50-51](javascript:%7b%7d).

[10](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P69_26868) I believe we would all agree that Paul was wrong to say what he said *to the high priest*, because of his position of authority. As pointed out to me by some of my fellow-students of Scripture, there are other texts which must also be taken into account. We should recall that Jesus spoke very strongly against the Jewish authorities in [Matthew 23](javascript:%7b%7d). True, we are not Jesus, and thus He can do things that we cannot. But Jesus also submitted to the authorities. Then, too, we must consider how Stephen spoke to the Sanhedrin in [Acts 7](javascript:%7b%7d). But in our text, Paul knew in his heart that he had not responded appropriately, given the fact that Ananias was the high priest.

[11](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P113_44852) From what I have read of Ananias, he was quick to employ assassins to further his ambitions, so entering into a conspiracy with these 40+ assassins was nothing new for him.

[12](https://bible.org/seriespage/sanhedrin-caesarea-acts-2230-2335" \l "P130_53456) See [Romans 8:18-25](javascript:%7b%7d).

# Growing My Faith in the Face of Death

I spent a lifetime counseling others before my diagnosis. Will I be able to take my own advice?

By [Timothy Keller](https://www.theatlantic.com/author/timothy-keller/) at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/03/tim-keller-growing-my-faith-face-death/618219/>

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About the author: [Timothy Keller](https://www.theatlantic.com/author/timothy-keller/) is the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, chairman of Redeemer City to City, and author of the forthcoming book [Hope in Times of Fear: The Resurrection and the Meaning of Easter](https://bookshop.org/a/12476/9780525560791).

I have spent a good part of my life talking with people about the role of faith in the face of imminent death. Since I became an ordained Presbyterian minister in 1975, I have sat at countless bedsides, and occasionally even watched someone take their final breath. I recently wrote a small book, [On Death](https://bookshop.org/a/12476/9780143135371), relating a lot of what I say to people in such times. But when, a little more than a month after that book was published, I was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, I was still caught unprepared.

On the way home from a conference of Asian Christians in Kuala Lumpur in February 2020, I developed an intestinal infection. A scan at the hospital showed what looked like enlarged lymph nodes in my abdomen: No cause for concern, but come back in three months just to check. My book was published. And then, while all of us in New York City were trying to protect ourselves from COVID-19, I learned that I already had an agent of death growing inside me.

I spent a few harrowing minutes looking online at the dire survival statistics for pancreatic cancer, and caught a glimpse of On Death on a table nearby. I didn’t dare open it to read what I’d written.

My wife, Kathy, and I spent much time in tears and disbelief. We were both turning 70, but felt strong, clear-minded, and capable of nearly all the things we have done for the past 50 years. “I thought we’d feel a lot older when we got to this age,” Kathy said. We had plenty of plans and lots of comforts, especially our children and grandchildren. We expected some illness to come and take us when we felt really old. But not now, not yet. This couldn’t be; what was God doing to us? The Bible, and especially the Psalms, gave voice to our feelings: “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?” “Wake up, O Lord. Why are you sleeping?” “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?”

A significant number of believers in God find their faith shaken or destroyed when they learn that they will die at a time and in a way that seems unfair to them. Before my diagnosis, I had seen this in people of many faiths. One woman with cancer told me years ago, “I’m not a believer anymore—that doesn’t work for me. I can’t believe in a personal God who would do something like this to me.” Cancer killed her God.

What would happen to me? I felt like a surgeon who was suddenly on the operating table. Would I be able to take my own advice?

One of the first things I learned was that religious faith does not automatically provide solace in times of crisis. A belief in God and an afterlife does not become spontaneously comforting and existentially strengthening. Despite my rational, conscious acknowledgment that I would die someday, the shattering reality of a fatal diagnosis provoked a remarkably strong psychological denial of mortality. Instead of acting on Dylan Thomas’s advice to “rage, rage against the dying of the light,” I found myself thinking, What? No! I can’t die. That happens to others, but not to me. When I said these outrageous words out loud, I realized that this delusion had been the actual operating principle of my heart.

The cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker argued that the denial of death dominates our culture, but even if he was right that modern life has heightened this denial, it has always been with us. As the 16th-century Protestant theologian John Calvin wrote, “We undertake all things as if we were establishing immortality for ourselves on earth. If we see a dead body, we may philosophize briefly about the fleeting nature of life, but the moment we turn away from the sight the thought of our own perpetuity remains fixed in our minds.” Death is an abstraction to us, something technically true but unimaginable as a personal reality.

For the same reason, our beliefs about God and an afterlife, if we have them, are often abstractions as well. If we don’t accept the reality of death, we don’t need these beliefs to be anything other than mental assents. A feigned battle in a play or a movie requires only stage props. But as death, the last enemy, became real to my heart, I realized that my beliefs would have to become just as real to my heart, or I wouldn’t be able to get through the day. Theoretical ideas about God’s love and the future resurrection had to become life-gripping truths, or be discarded as useless.

I’ve watched many others partake of this denial of death and then struggle when their convictions evaporate, and not just among the religious. I spent time as a pastor with sick and dying people whose religious faith was nominal or nonexistent. Many had a set of beliefs about the universe, even if they went largely unacknowledged—that the material world came into being on its own and that there is no supernatural world we go to after death. Death, in this view, is simply nonexistence, and therefore, as the writer Julian Barnes has argued, nothing to be frightened of. These ideas are items of faith that can’t be proved, and people use them as Barnes does, to stave off fear of death. But I’ve found that nonreligious people who think such secular beliefs will be comforting often find that they crumple when confronted by the real thing.

So when the certainty of your mortality and death finally breaks through, is there a way to face it without debilitating fear? Is there a way to spend the time you have left growing into greater grace, love, and wisdom? I believe there is, but it requires both intellectual and emotional engagement: head work and heart work.

I use the terms head and heart to mean reasoning and feeling, adapting to the modern view that these two things are independent faculties. The Hebrew scriptures, however, see the heart as the seat of the mind, will, and emotions. Proverbs says, “As he thinketh in his heart, so is he.” In other words, rational conviction and experience might change my mind, but the shift would not be complete until it took root in my heart. And so I set out to reexamine my convictions and to strengthen my faith, so that it might prove more than a match for death.

Paul Brand, an orthopedic surgeon, spent the first part of his medical career in India and the last part of his career in the U.S. “In the United States … I encountered a society that seeks to avoid pain at all costs,” he wrote in his recent [memoir](https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Gift_of_Pain/BF3sDwAAQBAJ). “Patients lived at a greater comfort level than any I had previously treated, but they seemed far less equipped to handle suffering and far more traumatized by it.”

Why is it that people in prosperous, modern societies seem to struggle so much with the existence of evil, suffering, and death? In his book [A Secular Age](https://bookshop.org/a/12476/9780674986916), the philosopher Charles Taylor wrote that while humans have always struggled with the ways and justice of God, until quite recently no one had concluded that suffering made the existence of God implausible. For millennia, people held a strong belief in their own inadequacy or sinfulness, and did not hold the modern assumption that we all deserve a comfortable life. Moreover, Taylor has argued, we have become so confident in our powers of logic that if we cannot imagine any good reason that suffering exists, we assume there can’t be one.

But if there is a God great enough to merit your anger over the suffering you witness or endure, then there is a God great enough to have reasons for allowing it that you can’t detect. It is not logical to believe in an infinite God and still be convinced that you can tally the sums of good and evil as he does, or to grow angry that he doesn’t always see things your way. Taylor’s point is that people say their suffering makes faith in God impossible—but it is in fact their overconfidence in themselves and their abilities that sets them up for anger, fear, and confusion.

When I got my cancer diagnosis, I had to look not only at my professed beliefs, which align with historical Protestant orthodoxy, but also at my actual understanding of God. Had it been shaped by my culture? Had I been slipping unconsciously into the supposition that God lived for me rather than I for him, that life should go well for me, that I knew better than God does how things should go? The answer was yes—to some degree. I found that to embrace God’s greatness, to say “Thy will be done,” was painful at first and then, perhaps counterintuitively, profoundly liberating. To assume that God is as small and finite as we are may feel freeing—but it offers no remedy for anger.

Another area of head work for me had to do with Jesus’s resurrection. Ironically, I had already begun working on a book about Easter. Before cancer, the resurrection had been a mostly theoretical issue for me—but not now. I’m familiar with the common charge that any belief in an afterlife is mere wish fulfillment without grounding in fact—and that belief in Jesus is in the same category as faith in the Flying Spaghetti Monster. But over the past 20 years, I’ve been drawn to the work of the British biblical scholar N. T. Wright, who mounts a historical case for Jesus’s bodily resurrection.

I returned to his material now, with greater skepticism than I had previously applied. I didn’t want to be taken in. But as I reread his arguments, they seemed even more formidable and fair to me than they had in the past. They gave me a place to get my footing. Still, I needed more than mental assent to believe in the resurrection.

The heart work came in as I struggled to bridge the gap between an abstract belief and one that touches the imagination. As the early American philosopher Jonathan Edwards argued, it is one thing to believe with certainty that honey is sweet, perhaps through the universal testimony of trusted people, but it is another to actually taste the sweetness of honey. The sense of the honey’s sweetness on the tongue brings a fuller knowledge of honey than any rational deduction. In the same way, it is one thing to believe in a God who has attributes such as love, power, and wisdom; it is another to sense the reality of that God in your heart. The Bible is filled with sensory language. We are not only to believe that God is good but also to “taste” his goodness, the psalmist tells us; not just to believe that God is glorious and powerful but also to “see” it with “the eyes of the heart,” it says in Ephesians.

On December 6, 1273, Thomas Aquinas stopped writing his monumental [Summa Theologiae](https://bookshop.org/a/12476/9780870612107). When asked why by his friend Reginald, he replied that he had had a beatific experience of God that made all his theology “seem like straw” by comparison. That was no repudiation of his theology, but Thomas had seen the difference between the map of God and God himself, and a very great difference it was. While I cannot claim that any of my experiences of God in the past several months have been “beatific,” they have been deeper and sweeter than I have known before.

My path to this has involved three disciplines.

The first was to immerse myself in the Psalms to be sure that I wasn’t encountering a God I had made up myself. Any God I make up will be less troubling and offensive, to be sure, but then how can such a God contradict me when my heart says that there’s no hope, or that I’m worthless? The Psalms show me a God maddening in his complexity, but this difficult deity comes across as a real being, not one any human would have conjured. Through the Psalms, I grew in confidence that I was before “him with whom we have to do.”

The second discipline was something that earlier writers like Edwards called spiritual “soliloquy.” You see it in Psalms 42 and 103, where the psalmist says, “Why are you cast down, O my soul?” and “Bless the Lord, O my soul. And forget not all his benefits.” The authors are addressing neither God nor their readers but their own souls, their selves. They are not so much listening to their hearts as talking to them. They are interrogating them and reminding them about God. They are taking truths about God and pressing them down deep into their hearts until they catch fire there.

I had to look hard at my deepest trusts, my strongest loves and fears, and bring them into contact with God. Sometimes—not always, or even usually—this leads, as the poet George Herbert wrote, to “a kind of tune … softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss, exalted manna … heaven in the ordinary.” But even though most days’ hour of Bible reading, meditation, soliloquy, and prayer doesn’t yield this kind of music, the reality of God and his promises grew on me. My imagination became more able to visualize the resurrection and rest my heart in it.

Most particularly for me as a Christian, Jesus’s costly love, death, and resurrection had become not just something I believed and filed away, but a hope that sustained me all day. I pray this prayer daily. Occasionally it electrifies, but ultimately it always calms:

And as I lay down in sleep and rose this morning only by your grace, keep me in the joyful, lively remembrance that whatever happens, I will someday know my final rising, because Jesus Christ lay down in death for me, and rose for my justification.

As this spiritual reality grows, what are the effects on how I live? One of the most difficult results to explain is what happened to my joys and fears. Since my diagnosis, Kathy and I have come to see that the more we tried to make a heaven out of this world—the more we grounded our comfort and security in it—the less we were able to enjoy it.

Kathy finds deep consolation and rest in the familiar, comforting places where we vacation. Some of them are shacks with bare light bulbs on wires, but they are her Sehnsucht locations—the spaces for which she longs. My pseudo-salvations are professional goals and accomplishments—another book, a new ministry project, another milestone at the church. For these reasons we found that when we got to the end of a vacation at the beach, our responses were both opposite and yet strangely the same.

Kathy would begin to mourn the need to depart almost as soon as she arrived, which made it impossible for her to fully enjoy herself. She would fantasize about handcuffing herself to the porch railing and refusing to budge. I, however, would always chafe and be eager to get back to work. I spent much of the time at the beach brainstorming and writing out plans. Neither of us learned to savor the moment, and so we never came home refreshed.

A short, green Jedi Master’s words applied to me perfectly: “All his life has he looked away to the future, the horizon. Never his mind on where he was.” Kathy and I should have known better. We did know better. When we turn good things into ultimate things, when we make them our greatest consolations and loves, they will necessarily disappoint us bitterly. “Thou hast made us for thyself,” Augustine said in his most famous sentence, “and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.” The 18th-century hymn writer John Newton depicted God as saying to the human soul, “These inward trials I employ from pride and self to set thee free, and break thy schemes of earthly joy that thou would find thine all in me.”

To our surprise and encouragement, Kathy and I have discovered that the less we attempt to make this world into a heaven, the more we are able to enjoy it.

No longer are we burdening it with demands impossible for it to fulfill. We have found that the simplest things—from sun on the water and flowers in the vase to our own embraces, sex, and conversation—bring more joy than ever. This has taken us by surprise.

This change was not an overnight revolution. As God’s reality dawns more on my heart, slowly and painfully and through many tears, the simplest pleasures of this world have become sources of daily happiness. It is only as I have become, for lack of a better term, more heavenly minded that I can see the material world for the astonishingly good divine gift that it is.

I can sincerely say, without any sentimentality or exaggeration, that I’ve never been happier in my life, that I’ve never had more days filled with comfort. But it is equally true that I’ve never had so many days of grief. One of our dearest friends lost her husband to cancer six years ago. Even now, she says, she might seem fine, and then out of nowhere some reminder or thought will sideswipe her and cripple her with sorrow.

Yes. But I have come to be grateful for those sideswipes, because they remind me to reorient myself to the convictions of my head and the processes of my heart. When I take time to remember how to deal with my fears and savor my joys, the consolations are stronger and sweeter than ever.