

## One of the Darkest Hours of Paul's Life

Scripture often times leaves room between the verses for us to ponder thoughts, and events not written. ACTS 23:11 for example begins *...And the night following...* meaning the night following the day Paul was brought before the Jewish Sanhedrin council. Prior to this Luke took nearly a chapter and a half to go over the events in just one day in the life of Paul, (ACTS 21:26 through ACTS 22:29 occur in one day). Now we find between ACTS 23:10 and ACTS 23:11 that the rest of the day he was brought before the Jewish Sanhedrin council, that whole night, and another whole day in the life of the Apostle Paul has passed, without any thing be recorded of this period of time! We do know that the Apostle Paul was in custody of the Roman Empire at the castle Fort Antonia in Jerusalem. He was allowed the freedoms afforded a Roman citizen prisoner, whatever that meant. If he was given food to eat, or a place to sleep we are not told specifically, but reading ahead in ACTS 23:16 it seems he did have the liberty to receive acquaintances. We do know that Paul was isolated from his Jewish enemies, and may have been granted visits by his traveling companions, whom we haven't heard much about since his arrival in Jerusalem. We can safely assume that Paul was, for all practical purposes, alone. The Apostle unto the Gentiles, who had many friends, was now alone; alone with his thoughts; alone with his aches and pains; alone with Jesus. Considering that before this time Paul was on the move, everyday having a goal, and a plan in place, and was surrounded by his many friends, and traveling companions. The Lord had granted him his hearts desire to be in Jerusalem by the day of Pentecost. But now that day has come and gone, and as we have noted before, Paul had intentions in his heart to go to Rome, and to Spain. Again these intentions of Paul were written down by him in ROMANS 15 in his letter written unto the Romans.

ROMANS 15:22 *For which cause also I have been much hindered from coming to you. 23 But now having no more place in these parts, and having a great desire these many years to come unto you; 24 Whensoever I take my journey into Spain, I will come to you: for I trust to see you in my journey, and to be brought on my way thitherward by you, if first I be somewhat filled with your company. 25 But now I go unto Jerusalem to minister unto the saints. 26 For it hath pleased them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem. 27 It hath pleased them verily; and their debtors they are. For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things. 28 When therefore I have performed this, and have sealed to them this fruit, I will come by you into Spain.*

The Lord Jesus Christ Himself knew these heart felt intentions of the Apostle Paul, and knew also that these were a part of the thoughts racing through his mind during this time of confinement in Jerusalem. Paul himself also knew that "bonds and afflictions abide me," as noted in ACTS 20:23. Paul also, it seems, didn't have "a day off" since before he visited Ephesus, and now as a prisoner in Jerusalem Paul had a couple of days off, and this was not necessarily a time for relaxing either. Paul had time to think, and time to reflect on how the Lord had directed him up to this particular day in his life. Perhaps some of the words Paul had recently penned now flashed through his mind. Such as the following from ROMANS 14. ROMANS 14:5 *One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. 6 He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it. He that eateth, eateth to the Lord, for he giveth God thanks; and he that eateth not, to the Lord he eateth not, and giveth God thanks. 7 For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. 8 For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living. And certainly Paul was very familiar with ROMANS 8:28, a scripture Paul already has penned: *And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.* I doubt if Paul even for one second thought, "why did I*

write that," but I think he was now challenged in his mind about his current circumstances.

Perhaps as this time of confinement wore on, Paul thought back over his life as the Apostle Paul, and he may have once again considered the words of the Lord Ananias of Damascus had told him back in ACTS 9:15 *...he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: 16 For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.* Certainly Paul had filled all of these squares, except for one, bearing the name of the Lord before kings. If Paul pondered this fact, it probably was only briefly, for right now he had no real idea what was going to happen unto him next. How long would he be held prisoner? What did the Lord have in store for him next? Where were his friends? Was there anything his friends could do to help him now? These kinds of thoughts, and questions were no doubt going through his mind. The words Paul had penned back in his first epistle unto the Thessalonians were probably now being once again worked in his life. 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16 *Rejoice evermore. 17 Pray without ceasing. 18 In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.* And so he spent the day praying, and rejoicing in the Lord, and thanking the Lord for this day, and thinking of his current circumstance.

Certainly Paul also must have remembered penning these words: ROMANS 8:35 *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? 36 As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. 37 Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. 38 For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, 39 Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.* So we see that Paul knew that nothing could separate him from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Next Paul may have recalled writing the following: 1 CORINTHIANS 10:13 *There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.*

And as this day following Paul's appearance before the Jewish Sanhedrin council wore on into *...the night following...* enough time had elapsed for Paul to become somewhat discouraged, wondering where the way to escape was, wondering how he was going to be able to bear the events now taking place in his life. No doubt now thoughts of what was going to happen to him next flashed constantly throughout his mind. Paul knew the Jews well enough to know that they were hatching another plan to have him killed. And meanwhile the Roman chief captain, Claudius Lysias, still is trying to figure out what to do with his high profile prisoner, the Apostle Paul. As for Paul, we don't read of him singing praises unto God as this "night following" wore on, like he did with Silas back in ACTS 16:25. Perhaps Paul was feeling like he did when he wrote 2 CORINTHIANS 7:5, which in part reads: *...our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears.* In his mind more thoughts continued, like, what were the Romans going to do with me? What were the Jews going to do to me? And where are my friends? What are they trying to do for me? Is there anything they can do for me? What is it that Jesus is doing in my life here? As the night wore on, the aches and pains Paul experienced from nearly being killed by the Jews twice in the preceding days, and being violently rescued by the Roman soldiers, twice, magnified and became more intense the darker, and colder it got. Paul's patience, and hope, and faith were now being tested to what seemed beyond his limits. Paul must have felt like he had now reached the darkest hour of his Christian life.

1 SAMUEL 16:7 in part tells us that *...the LORD looketh on the heart.* JEREMIAH 17:10 also tells us, in part: *I the LORD search the heart...* so we know that the Lord Jesus Christ knew exactly how Paul was feeling at this dark hour of the night. Jesus knew that Paul felt like he had now reached the darkest hour of his life. Jesus knew that Paul needed cheering up, that Paul needed further comforting, and future direction in his life, so Jesus Himself came once again, and appeared unto Paul during this darkest hour in Paul's life, and said unto him: *"Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me*

in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome." {ACTS 23:11}. What a remarkable scripture! Let's look at it a little closer.

ACTS 23:11 *And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.* Note in this verse first of all that the Lord stood by Paul. In other words the Lord here once again made a personal appearance unto the Apostle Paul. Jesus had told Paul on the road to Damascus when He first appeared to him that He would appear unto Paul from time to time. ACTS 26:16 states: *But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee;..* . How many times our Lord and Saviour has appeared unto Paul by this time in his life isn't really known, but several appearances by the Lord Jesus Christ unto Paul have been documented in scripture. Of course the first time Jesus appeared unto Paul was on the road to Damascus, as noted in ACTS 9, 22, and 26. GALATIANS 1:12 indicates that Jesus Christ Himself appeared unto Paul in one fashion or another numerous different times, and revealed Himself unto Paul, and gave Paul the gospel he preached. In 2 CORINTHIANS 12:7 Paul writes of "the abundance of the revelations" that were given him of Jesus Christ. ACTS 14:19 along with 2 CORINTHIANS 12 indicate that the Apostle Paul died, and was taken to heaven where he saw and heard things too wonderful to speak about. No doubt he saw Jesus Christ at that time also. In ACTS 18:9 & 10 we read of the Lord speaking to Paul in the night by a vision. In ACTS 22:18 we find that Paul once again saw the Lord while praying, and in a trance. Later in Paul's life in ACTS 27 we will see the Lord, or the angel of God in another disastrous situation. And in 2 TIMOTHY 4:17 we will see that Paul wrote Timothy of the Lord standing with him at his appearance before Caesar. Think about all of these different appearances our Lord and Saviour made unto the Apostle Paul, and then consider this statement Paul makes in HEBREWS 12:2 *Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith;... .* No doubt the Apostle Paul was looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of his faith, the author of Paul's race course, the One who designed this current trial of Paul's, and as Paul thought about Jesus, the Lord came and stood by him this dark night in Jerusalem here in ACTS 23:11.

Then, after standing by Paul, the Lord spoke one simple sentence unto Paul, giving him direction that would carry him for the next several years of his life. *"Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome."* What a shot of spiritual adrenaline these words were to Paul's life. I doubt if he slept the rest of the night, no matter how tired he was! I imagine that Paul was then "of good cheer" just like Jesus encouraged him to "Be of good cheer, Paul."

Seven times in scripture we find the phrase "be of good cheer." Seven is the number that speaks to us of SPIRITUAL PERFECTION or SPIRITUAL COMPLETION. Thus the phrase "be of good cheer" speaks to us some things about SPIRITUAL PERFECTION or SPIRITUAL COMPLETION. Five times (GRACE) Jesus speaks this phrase "be of good cheer." MATTHEW chapter 9 is where we find the first recorded use of the phrase "be of good cheer."

MATTHEW 9:1 *And he entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into his own city. 2 And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. 3 And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This man blasphemeth. 4 And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? 5 For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk? 6 But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. 7 And he arose, and departed to his house. 8 But when the multitudes saw it, they marvelled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men.*

Do you think this man sick of the palsy was of good cheer because his sins were forgiven him? Or do you think this man sick of the palsy was of good cheer because the Lord healed him? Or both? I think this man left in good cheer because he was made whole both spiritually and physically, and I bet he felt better inwardly than he did outwardly.

MATTHEW 14:22-33, and MARK 6:45-56 both tell the story of Jesus walking on the water, and coming unto the disciples in a storm tossed ship. His disciples were troubled at seeing Jesus walking on the storm tossed sea, thinking He was a spirit. Once again Jesus cried out "Be of good cheer: it is I, be not afraid." {MARK 6:50.} And as He came unto the ship the wind ceased, showing us among many other things, that Jesus is in control no matter how stormy life's troubled sea may be. He can calm the storm, and relieve fear, if we will only trust Him, and believe that he can do such impossible things.

In JOHN 16:33 Jesus tells His disciples after the last supper: *In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.*

What we see in the above five scriptures (including ACTS 23:11) is that it takes faith beyond what we can see with our natural eyes to be of good cheer. Faith is not sight anyway, for faith is a firm conviction that God can do anything. HEBREWS 11:1 *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.* None of us have ever been translated, yet, but by faith the full overcomers of this church age will be translated before the innumerable multitude of REVELATION 7! Essentially Paul was saying "be of good cheer" when he wrote 1 THESSALONIANS 4:16-18: *For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: 17 Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. 18 Wherefore comfort one another with these words.*

Our text reads: ACTS 23:11 *And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.* We just looked at several instances in scripture where the phrase "be of good cheer" is used, and here in ACTS 23:11 Jesus appears unto our stressed out Apostle Paul, and tells him to ...*Be of good cheer, Paul.* But we already discussed the many reasons why Paul wasn't necessarily of good cheer here at this particular point in his life, and Jesus knew this, knowing Paul's heart better than even Paul knew his own heart. So we don't read here of Jesus just saying *Be of good cheer, Paul...* without giving him a reason to be of good cheer. Thus Jesus immediately continues: *...for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.* This statement gives Paul a reason to be of good cheer. This statement gives Paul immediate encouragement. This statement takes Paul from a low emotional dark valley, and sets him upon a high pinnacle where he can see things far distant in his own life! These words of Jesus give Paul his travel itinerary, for Paul now knows of a certainty that he is going to Rome! And going to Rome has been a long time desire of Paul's, as we have discussed before.

This one sentence Jesus spoke to Paul gave him specific directions to follow also, for Paul not only was to go to Rome, but was to ...*bear witness also at Rome.* Paul was to "bear witness" of Jesus at Rome also is what he is being told here. These specific instructions Jesus has just given unto Paul still agree with His original statement found in ACTS 26, where Paul recalls what Jesus told him on the road to Damascus. ACTS 26:16 *But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; 17 Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, 18 To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.* No doubt Paul once again while here a prisoner in Jerusalem must have recalled these words of Jesus also, and remembered how he had said He was going to deliver Paul from the people, meaning the Jews. Paul already knew that Jesus had made him a minister, and an Apostle unto the Gentiles; a calling Paul has gladly accepted, and followed whole heartedly, and was some what anxious to get to preach, and witness for Jesus at Rome also.

So we see that Paul was to ...*bear witness also at Rome.* The phrase "bear witness" is found fourteen times in scripture. This is significant to us because fourteen is the number that has to do with DELIVERANCE or SALVATION. We could state Jesus instructions here to Paul this way then: "Be of good courage Paul, do not loose heart, be

strong, for just as you have given a full account of me in Jerusalem, you must also bear witness of my DELIVERANCE and SALVATION in the same way in Rome.”

The spiritual uplift of this appearance unto Paul by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself is still being felt by us today, if you really stop and think about it. It will take the Lord about three years time to get Paul to Rome from our time frame of ACTS 23. After his arrival in Rome Paul will still be a prisoner of the Roman Empire, though with certain freedoms afforded a Roman citizen. While in Rome Paul will witness about Jesus, and write some of his deepest thoughts in a letter penned unto PHILEMON, and his epistles unto the COLOSSIANS, the EPHESIANS, and the PHILIPPIANS. In PHILIPPIANS 4:22 we find evidence of how far reaching Paul’s witness of Jesus was at Rome, for he writes: *All the saints salute you, chiefly they that are of Caesar’s household.* This statement indicates that Paul’s preaching at Rome reached unto the household of Caesar! No wonder then that he was being fought so hard while here at Jerusalem in ACTS 23. Furthermore consider in your mind the value of these four epistles of Paul mentioned above. It is hard for us to imagine here in ACTS 23:11, during this very low point in Paul’s Christian, the genesis of the joy book of the Bible, PHILIPPIANS, taken place. Now I am not saying that Paul came away from that darkest night of ACTS 23:11 with his epistle unto the PHILIPPIANS in tow. But I am noting that the experience that Paul was now going through here in Jerusalem, and his visit by the Lord Jesus Christ on this very dark and troublesome night of ACTS 23:11, gave him some more much needed background, and confidence to some years later write the joy book of the Bible, and EPHESIANS, which we know as a high water mark epistle of Paul’s writings! Would these books have been penned had not Paul gone through this tremendous dark experience he was now going through in Jerusalem, and the trying events that will take place in his getting to Rome? I doubt it. But the Lord, who knows the end from the beginning, knew that these experiences He was taking Paul through would be brought out further in Paul’s later epistles. The Lord knew how Paul would later write about the warfare of the believer in EPHESIANS 6. And that he would write about what it takes to press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus in PHILIPPIANS 3. And how Paul would explain the mystery of the Bride of Christ in EPHESIANS 5. We could go on and on about the deeper truths written in the above future epistles of the Apostle Paul, but suffice it for now to note that the Lord was bringing Paul into a more intimate relationship with Him through these yet future trials and experiences, to the end that Paul would write: *Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ...* PHILIPPIANS 3:8

May we also note as we move beyond this dark midnight experience of Paul’s in ACTS 23:11, that the Lord didn’t appear unto him and tell him: “You have done a great job up to now Paul, and since you are getting older, and weaker in the flesh, I am going to back off the pressure, and the trials that you will face in the future.” No, the Lord never said, or even indicated any such thing. Nor is that the way that the Lord does things. As we go on with the Lord, the experiences He brings us too may be darker, and deeper than anything we have experienced before. And He does it this way so we *...may grow up into him in all things...* EPHESIANS 4:15. Again ACTS 23:11 reads: *And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.* Between Jerusalem and Rome the Apostle Paul will experience some of the hardest trials in his life so far! Because of this the Apostle Paul will have many more rich experiences to tell the Romans of how it is to continue to walk with Jesus, and let Him lead and direct our individual lives. These enriching experiences, these manifold trials, becomes part of Paul’s bearing witness also at Rome, which he will also write about in EPHESIANS, PHILIPPIANS and COLOSSIANS, which we are still benefiting from.

Through the events that will take place in Paul’s life between Jerusalem and Rome comes the following “rich” statements. In EPHESIANS 1:7 Paul writes about Jesus, and the riches of His grace. In EPHESIANS 2:7 Paul writes this of God: *That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.* Paul writes in EPHESIANS 3:8 of *...the unsearchable riches of Christ.* And in EPHESIANS 3:16 Paul writes of *...the riches of his glory.* Part of Paul’s prayer for us in EPHESIANS 1:18 is that *...The eyes of your understanding being*

*enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints.* Continuing on that theme Paul pens in PHILIPPIANS 4:19 *...my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.* In COLOSSIANS 1:27 Paul writes: *To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.* And in COLOSSIANS 2:2 Paul writes that the Saints hearts might be comforted and knit together in love, *...and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding.*

Thus we have noted one of the darkest hours of Paul's life expressed here in ACTS 23:11. ACTS 23:11 *And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.* And we have also noted some of the many things that will come forth later in the life of Paul because of this night, and because of the direction, and encouragement that our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ gave Paul this dark night. We didn't see here Paul asking the Lord any further questions, nor do we see Paul doubting the word of the Lord either. As we noted above, Paul was told by Jesus to *...Be of good cheer...* even though he was currently going through one of the darkest hours of his life. Paul heeded these words, and even though the circumstances were dark and dreary, Paul became of good cheer, and later on encouraged those two hundred and seventy six souls on his doomed ship of ACTS 27 to "be of good cheer." And they really had nothing to cheer about, for their ship would be broken into pieces later that night, but since they all followed the words of Paul, none of the two hundred and seventy six of them lost their lives that night, and ACTS 27:36 tells us that they were all of good cheer! Had not the Apostle Paul already been through such a dark and fiery trial as he was facing here in ACTS 23:11, and been so encouraged with the words of the Lord Jesus to *...Be of good cheer...* I wonder if his message to the sailors of ACTS 27 would have meant as much.

Between ACTS 23:11 and ACTS 23:12 we have a period of time between the darkest hour of Paul's life, so far, and the dawning of a new day. As we noted above I think the appearance of the Lord unto Paul that dark night gave him a shot of spiritual adrenaline that didn't allow him any sleep the rest of the night either. Through his mind were now racing thoughts like... I wonder how I am going to get to Rome? When am I going to get there? When will I be set free? How many people will listen to me in Rome? And many other questions of a similar nature were now no doubt occupying Paul's mind. Perhaps Paul was also thinking about a verse he had not yet written down, found in HEBREWS 11:1 *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.* We have noted that Paul before this night had expressed his desire to go to Rome, and now Jesus had told him he was going to be a witness at Rome, but the details of how this was to come about hadn't been revealed unto him. This is where faith comes in. Again HEBREWS 11:1 *Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.* Paul had hoped to go to Rome, but as of this current point in time, Paul hadn't seen Rome. But by faith Paul knew he was going to see Rome, and even Jesus had now told him so. More importantly to us, by faith Paul was becoming a New Testament full overcomer, and an example of what it takes to win Christ as bridegroom! Paul left the who, what, where, when, and how his getting to Rome was to be in the hands of the Lord, and sat back in his rocking chair of faith, and let the Lord do His work. Paul believed that he was going to Rome, and he left the details of the travel plans in the hands of the Lord. In the end Paul's out of pocket expenses for this trip were zero, because the Roman Empire picked up the entire tab for Paul's trip to Rome! One again this show us that *...my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus...* PHILIPPIANS 4:19.

As we move beyond ACTS 23:11, let's review a quick time table of the events of ACTS 23. ACTS 23:1-10 occur the day after Paul gave his testimony unto the Jews gather at Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. ACTS 23:1-10 is where Paul appears before the Jewish Sanhedrin Council. That day ends, and the next day comes and goes with out any events recorded in the life of Paul, until that night, which we just studied about in ACTS 23:11, where the Lord came and stood by Paul. ACTS 23:12-31 occur on the next day, two days after Paul was initially brought before the Jewish Sanhedrin Council. Meanwhile, during this ensuing 48 hours, some of the Jews hatch a very serious plot to kill the Apostle Paul.