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FROM THE EDITOR



Andy McLean

Editor

*The Gospel Project
for Students*

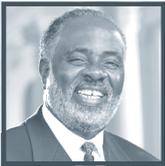
After nearly three years of going through the storyline of Scripture, we now arrive at the final volume of our study: Come, Lord Jesus. We have seen how God's Story on earth began with a place He prepared for His people, and now we will see how that Story on earth will conclude. God will bring about a new creation and a new city for His people—one that He and His people will forever live in together.

Our last volume will cover some of the remaining New Testament letters and trace some of the apostle Paul's last steps before he was martyred in Rome. We will see a more complete picture of this persecutor turned apostle: how he not only suffered for his faith, but how he also stood courageously before his persecutors. We read about the struggles the first-century church faced from both inside and outside sources, and how they were instructed to stand firm in the truth of the gospel and not to waver in the face of false teaching. Then, we will discuss the apostle John's vision in the Book of Revelation, how it foretells the way the Story as we know it will come to completion with the return of our Savior and King—Jesus.

As we close out this three-year journey through the storyline of Scripture, as always, my prayer is that you would not only see more of God in the unfolding events and circumstances and in the lives of those we study, but that you would also see Him more in your own life and circumstances. As we have said from the beginning, God's Story connects with our story. We are all participants on this world stage in this grand narrative of redemption. And as participants, our greatest joy and calling comes from looking to Jesus—the One who will one day make all things right and new.

AUTHORS

UNIT 2



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01

SESSION ONE

The Plot Against Paul

SESSION SUMMARY

This session traces Paul's experience in Jerusalem—being judged for his resurrection hope, strengthened by Christ's presence in prison, and preserved through a plot twist. Even in prison, God was faithful to provide for Paul and led His servant to be used where and how God desired. We will be encouraged to mimic the apostle's boldness, courage, and conviction as we ask God to give us the same faith and strength to surrender our lives for the One who surrendered His life for us. Like Paul, we will see that resurrection hope gives God's people confidence to share the gospel no matter what the consequence.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 23:1-24

THE POINT

God calls us to courageously stand for the gospel no matter what.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

Some of history's most enduring works of literature were penned from a surprising place—prison. John Bunyan wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress* from a prison in Bedford, England. Miguel de Cervantes was in a prison in Seville Spain when he wrote *Don Quixote*. The *Memoirs of Napoleon Bonaparte* were dictated while the leader was imprisoned on St. Helena Island. Martin Luther translated the New Testament into the language of the people—German—while in hiding in the virtual prison of the Wartburg Castle in Eisenach, Germany. And Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, of course, from a jail cell in that Alabama city.

God's people are no strangers to prison either. Think of Joseph in the Egyptian jail, Daniel in a den of lions, John the Baptist in Herod's palace, the apostle John on the Isle of Patmos, and the persecuted church throughout history, even up to today. Following God often leads to prison.

Add Paul to the list of believers who have spent time in prison. As his third missionary journey ended, Paul's friends warned him not to return to Jerusalem. Despite these warnings, Paul traveled to Jerusalem, unafraid of the potential consequences.

- **What good, if any, could possibly come from God's people being in prison?**

Option 2

As a group, play a game called *What Would You Do?* For this game, you will need to present to students different situations where they will have to make a choice between two options. Make the decisions progressively more difficult. Here are some examples:

- You're out of cereal. Would you eat breakfast at school or leave earlier and buy a biscuit at a local restaurant?
- You have twenty dollars. Do you see a movie and go to dinner with your friends or buy a cupcake and gift for your younger sibling's birthday?
- You forgot to do your homework. Do you quickly copy a friend's or tell the teacher you forgot about the assignment?

- **Why are some decisions more difficult than others?**

Sometimes, it's difficult to make the right decision, especially when you're faced with two equally important decisions—like where to go to college. And sometimes, it may be easier to *see* the right decision than it is to *make* the right choice. There may come a day when the decision is to stand up for the gospel and face difficult consequences or to deny your faith. We know God calls us to stand for the gospel no matter what. The question is: Will we?

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

God calls us to courageously stand for the gospel no matter what.

CHARACTERS

- **Paul:** former persecutor who became a Christ-follower and apostle to the Gentiles
- **Pharisees and Sadducees:** religious leaders in first-century Israel

PLOT

Our story begins by retracing some of Paul's experiences in the later parts of the Book of Acts and elsewhere. This session picks up with Paul facing quite the dilemma with the Jews in Jerusalem.

TIMELINE

THE PLOT AGAINST PAUL

Jews organized a conspiracy to kill Paul.

PAUL BEFORE EARTHLY KINGS

Paul testifies before earthly rulers.

SHIPWRECKED

Paul courageously faces the storm.

PAUL WAS ARRESTED AND BROUGHT BEFORE COURT

Upon arriving to the city of Jerusalem, a riot erupted in the temple and Paul was arrested. In fact, the crowd was so volatile, the guards had to carry the missionary through it to save his life. The Roman authorities ordered Paul to stand before the Jewish Sanhedrin to answer for the crime he was accused of—a theological transgression, not a civil offense. Paul believed in the resurrection of the dead—an issue that separated the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Tensions were high as Paul stood before the seventy Pharisees, Sadducees, and elders who made up the Sanhedrin, the ruling council for the Jews. At one time, Paul had been one of them—a Jerusalem-trained Pharisee who studied under the famous teacher Gamaliel. Paul had even supported their cause of suppressing the growth of Jesus’ followers. In fact, it was Paul who had approved of Stephen’s martyrdom and watched as he was stoned to death (Acts 7:54–8:3).

But the tables had been turned. Paul was no longer persecuting the church for preaching Christ; he was the one being persecuted. He stood on trial before the Jewish leaders. Would they condemn him? Bring false testimonies against him? Convince the Roman authorities to execute him? What would be the outcome?

¹ And looking intently at the council, Paul said, “Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.” ² And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. ³ Then Paul said to him, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?” ⁴ Those who stood by said, “Would you revile God’s high priest?” ⁵ And Paul said, “I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, “You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.” ⁶ Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial.” ⁷ And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. ⁸ For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. ⁹ Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees’ party stood up and contended sharply, “We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?” ¹⁰ And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks. (Acts 23:1-10)

While it may have seemed as if the Sanhedrin held all the power that day, Paul had a secret weapon. As he stood there staring down a gathering of Sadducees and Pharisees—two opposing religious and political parties who had many more reasons to disagree with each other than to agree—he knew that the concept of resurrection was especially explosive. The Pharisees believed in resurrection, but the Sadducees denied it (Matt. 22:23; Acts 4:1-2). In a brilliant move, Paul implemented an age-old military maneuver: divide and conquer. Paul clearly communicated the core reason for his arrest and trial—hope in the resurrection—and appealed to the Pharisees, reminding them he was a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee.

And with that, a wedge was driven into the assembly, separating Pharisee from Sadducee, and a dispute erupted. In defending resurrection, the Pharisees found themselves arguing that there was no reason to condemn Paul. The gathering became violent, and Paul was whisked away to the barracks for safety. When Paul's trial fell apart in that moment, the Romans were prevented from accusing him of a real crime that could lead to his execution.

- **Do you think Paul made a wise decision in using the Sanhedrin's different beliefs to divide them? Why or why not?** (*p. 10, PSG*)

JESUS ENCOURAGED PAUL

After the division took place at the courts and Paul was released to the barracks, a surprise visitor came to offer some much needed encouragement.

11 The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome." (Acts 23:11)

Jesus knew exactly what Paul was experiencing, because He had also stood before the Sanhedrin and was accused, beaten, and condemned by them (Matt. 26:57-67). So when Jesus visited Paul in prison that night, He encouraged His apostle as One who understood his suffering.

Nothing could have encouraged Paul more in that prison cell than the resurrected Christ. Earlier that day, Paul had *stood up for* Jesus. The promised presence of Jesus had given him the hope and confidence he needed as he stood before the Sanhedrin. Paul experienced that presence in a powerful way as Jesus *stood by* him.

- **How has Jesus' presence comforted and encouraged you in difficult seasons of your life?** (*p. 11, PSG*)

Notice the proximity. Jesus didn't appear above Paul's head in the sky as He had in Acts 9:3. And Jesus didn't catch Paul up to a third heaven as we read in 2 Corinthians 12:2. No, Christ came down and "stood by him" in prison. The Son of God's presence was near. It was real and inescapable—even in a prison cell. The same Christ Paul had seen above the Damascus road comforted him up close and personally and promised to protect him all the way to Rome.

Jesus doesn't always save us from prison. Even though we might think that would be best, He does something better: He gives us Himself in the midst of our suffering.

God used Paul's prison time to prepare him for what was ahead. Paul's Jerusalem prison prepared him for his Roman prison, where some of his best writing would take place. Because of Paul's suffering, countless Christians throughout the ages have been comforted, edified, and strengthened to endure their own afflictions for the sake of Jesus Christ. But Christ did not leave Paul in those prison cells alone, He was right there with him each step of the way.

PAUL WAS PRESERVED THROUGH SURPRISING CIRCUMSTANCES

However, this situation with the Jews wasn't over yet. In fact, it seemed to escalate quite quickly as we witness them come together with a plot to kill the apostle.

¹² When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. ¹³ There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. ¹⁴ They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul. ¹⁵ Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. And we are ready to kill him before he comes near." (Acts 23:12-15)

More than forty Jews made a pact to kill Paul. In fact, they were so dedicated to this task that they put themselves under a curse saying they would not eat anything until the deed was done.

Paul may not have been able to get himself out of this desperate situation, but Jesus could. Look at how God caused this seemingly foolproof plan against Paul to unravel at the seams.

¹⁶ Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. ¹⁷ Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him." ¹⁸ So he took him and brought him to the tribune and said, "Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you." ¹⁹ The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, "What is it that you have to tell me?" ²⁰ And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more closely about him. ²¹ But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in ambush for him, who have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they have killed him. And now they are ready, waiting for your consent." ²² So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, "Tell no one that you have informed me of these things." (Acts 23:16-22)

TIMELINE

JOY IN PRISON

The gospel advances in difficult circumstances.

CHRIST IS PREEMINENT

Paul magnifies Christ in prison.

GOSPEL RECONCILIATION

The gospel restores broken relationships.

Who was Paul's nephew? Luke didn't tell us. It's possible Paul had a sister living in Jerusalem whose son was studying to be a Jewish leader. But we don't know the nephew's name, his social rank, or even how he discovered the plot to kill his uncle.

What we do know is that God often uses unlikely characters to change the course of history. Think of Moses who was a murderer and could not speak well. Or the boy-shepherd David who would become an adulterer and murderer. Or foul-mouthed Isaiah and youthful Jeremiah. Think of Rahab, Ruth, and Esther.

Paul himself was an unlikely character—a religious fanatic turned evangelical missionary. God loves using misfits, outcasts, and anonymous people—like Paul's nephew—to accomplish extraordinary tasks for His glory. And in the same way, He delights in using us.

- **Why should it encourage us to know that God can use anyone—even people who have previously made mistakes—in meaningful ways?**
(p. 11, PSG)

23 Then he called two of the centurions and said, “Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night.

24 Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor.” (Acts 23:23-24)

After Paul's nephew foiled the plot to kill his uncle, the commander ordered a military entourage to transport Paul to the coastal city of Caesarea—about seventy-five miles from Jerusalem. The convoy departed after dark, at nine o'clock at night. Two centurions—each commanding one hundred foot soldiers—set out with their cavalry. While once a threatened prisoner, Paul became precious cargo.

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

God Is Faithful (p. 12, PSG)

God's faithfulness means He keeps His word and always fulfills His promises (1 Cor. 1:9; 2 Tim. 2:13; 1 Pet. 4:19). God's faithfulness is demonstrated in His fulfillment of the promises He made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The apostle Paul linked the attribute of faithful to God coming through on His word: “He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it” (1 Thess. 5:24). We reflect God by keeping the promises we make to Him and to others.

CHRIST CONNECTION

Jesus' visit and encouragement to the apostle Paul is what God has done since the beginning—draw near to His people. We saw God do this in the Garden of Eden with our first parents; we saw Him draw near to His people with the tabernacle and temple; and most visibly and personally, we saw Him draw near to His people in the incarnation of Jesus. And in taking up residency among us, as one of us, Jesus became the true High Priest who can identify with our sufferings.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **How does the fact that the Holy Spirit is always with us make a difference during difficult times?** *The Holy Spirit living within us is our direct connection to the God we worship. The fact that the Holy Spirit is with us means that God is with us and has not abandoned us no matter how we may feel in the moment. Jesus Himself promised that He would be with us, and the presence of the Holy Spirit is proof of that promise.*
- **How does knowing that God can accomplish amazing things during difficult times encourage you? Are there any examples in your own life where God brought about something wonderful in the midst of pain or suffering?**
Answers will vary.
- **What kinds of people has God used to change the course of your life? A Sunday school teacher or small group leader? A parent, pastor, coach, or teacher?**
Answers will vary.
- **In what ways is God using you or might He be able to use you to influence others?** *Maybe He is calling you to be more of a leader in your group, point a friend to the Scriptures, disciple someone new in the faith, or to start a Bible study in your home.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION

10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

The core issue of Paul's trial was the resurrection of the dead, but it wasn't a theoretical doctrine for Paul. The reason Paul was arrested and stood on trial was for his firm belief—his unwavering hope—that Christ was resurrected and that Paul and all others who trust in Him would also one day be resurrected. It was this resurrection hope that fueled Paul's confidence in Jesus and gave him strength to face persecution, beatings, shipwreck, starvation, and opposition (2 Cor. 11:25). And it was this resurrection that removed the sting of death (1 Cor. 15:55) and freed Paul from the pressure of preserving his own life.

- **Why do you think the doctrine of the resurrection has carried Christians through difficult times throughout the centuries?** *Christians have paid the ultimate sacrifice for their faith—their very earthly lives. However, knowing that Jesus will one day reunite the body and the soul at the resurrection gives the future hope we need to face such difficult circumstances.*
- **How can the reality of the resurrection help us during our own struggles today?** *It can help us put our own mortality into perspective. We will all die, and while that is sad, we do not lose heart because we will one day be raised with Him.*



HEART

The fast-paced scene in Acts 23 not only shows us what was happening *to* Paul, but also what was happening *in* Paul. During this difficult and trying time, we see the type of person Paul was becoming due to the grace of God in his life. The man who once attacked Jesus and supported putting His followers to death stood before the Sanhedrin and boldly proclaimed Jesus, even at risk of his own life. Instead of living a life that resisted Jesus, Paul rested in Jesus.

- **How does Paul's story of becoming the type of person who lives boldly while resting in Christ encourage you?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Look at Acts 23:1-6. What characteristics did Paul display in these verses? Where do we need to show these characteristics in our lives today?** *For starters, we see Paul was honest (v. 1), prophetic (v. 3), respectful of Scripture (v. 5), strategic (v. 6a), and confessional (v.6b). Answers to the second question will vary.*



HANDS

Like Paul taking a bold stand for the gospel against his accusers, we are also called to live each day with the same courage and boldness that inspired the apostle Paul. Of course, Paul didn't make himself that way—He became that way. These are characteristics Jesus cultivated in Paul as he rested in Jesus. And they are the same traits and characteristics Jesus can form and cultivate within us.

- **Share about a time where you displayed gospel courage.** *Answers will vary, but examples include sharing the gospel with someone, standing up for your faith against a critic, and so on.*
- **Why is it important to emphasize our relationship with Jesus when talking about our need for courage?** *We can't build courage for ourselves. Genuine courage comes from a heart captivated by Jesus.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack item #4, which contains a quote poster related to the session.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPSUM18REV)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at

GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit

MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject