

“Tilting at Windmills”

- Acts 22 & 23 -

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Chapter 22: 1 "Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now." 2 And when they heard that he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, they kept all the more silent. Then he said: 3 "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today. 4 "I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, 5 "as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished. 6 "Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me. 7 "And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' 8 "So I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.' 9 "And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me. 10 "So I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do.' 11 "And since I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of those who were with me, I came into Damascus. 12 "Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there, 13 "came to me; and he stood and said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that same hour I looked up at him. 14 "Then he said, 'The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. 15 'For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. 16 'And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.' 17 "Now it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance 18 "and saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.' 19 "So I said, 'Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. 20 'And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.' 21 "Then He said to me, 'Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.'" 22 And they listened to him until this word, and then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!" 23 Then, as they cried out and tore off their clothes and threw dust into the air, 24 the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him. 25 And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?" 26 When the centurion heard that, he went and told the commander, saying, "Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman." 27 Then the commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" He said, "Yes." 28 The commander answered, "With a large sum I obtained this citizenship." And Paul said, "But I was born a citizen." 29 Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him. 30 The next day, because he wanted to know for certain why he was accused by the Jews, he released him from his bonds, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down and set him before them. **Chapter 23:** 1 Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until 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 will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?" 4 And those who stood by said, "Do you revile God's high priest?" 5 Then Paul said, "I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'" 6 But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!" 7 And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. 8 For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection—and no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both. 9 Then there arose a loud outcry. And the scribes of the Pharisees' party arose and protested, saying, "We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God." 10 Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks. 11 But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome." 12 And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. 13 Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy. 14 They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, "We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul. 15 "Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near." 16 So when Paul's sister's son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. 17 Then Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to tell him." 18 So he took him and brought him to the commander and said, "Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to bring this young man to you. He has something to say to you." 19 Then the commander took him by the hand, went aside and asked privately, "What is it that you have to tell me?" 20 And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask that you bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more fully about him. 21 "But do not yield to them, for more than forty of them lie in wait for him, men who have bound themselves by an oath that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him; and now they are ready, waiting for the promise from you." 22 So the commander let the young man depart, and commanded him, "Tell no one that you have revealed these things to me." 23 And he called for two centurions, saying, "Prepare two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at the third hour of the night; 24 "and provide mounts to set Paul on, and bring him safely to Felix the governor." 25 He wrote a letter in the following manner: 26 Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix: Greetings. 27 This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them. Coming with the troops I rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. 28 And when I wanted to know the reason they accused him, I brought him before their council. 29 I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but had nothing charged against him deserving of death or chains. 30 And when it was told me that the Jews lay in wait for the man, I sent him immediately to you, and also commanded his accusers to state before you the charges against him. Farewell. 31 Then the soldiers, as they were commanded, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. 32 The next day they left the horsemen to go on with him, and returned to the barracks. 33 When they came to Caesarea and had delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. 34 And when the governor had read it, he asked what province he was from. And when he understood that he was from Cilicia, 35 he said, "I will hear you when your accusers also have come." And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium.

“Tilting at windmills” is an English idiom which essentially means “attacking imaginary enemies.” It originates from the 17th century novel “Don Quixote” and from the romantic, ill-thought-out actions of the story's hero of the same name. In the story, Don Quixote imagines himself engaging and of course triumphing in daring conflict with imagined opponents. Today the idiom presents a modern picture of the pursuit of vain and out-of-reach goals. The wasting away of time fighting enemies or trying to resolve issues that are imaginary, not as important, or impossible to overcome.

After effectively 13 chapters of Paul the Apostle...the beatings, the crazy missions trips, the near death experiences and the mixed bag of success and failures...the years have now passed. And now imprisoned and living under the threat of assassination, one can only wonder “*Was it all worth it Paul?*” (*heavy sigh here...*) *What was it all about? Did it play out as you imagined? Or are you now... like Don Quixote, spending your time “tilting at windmills?”* What about us? Perhaps maybe you too wonder at times, as a Christian, if maybe you have spent your life just “tilting at windmills.”

2 Corinthians 4: 8-9 says “we are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.” Hmmm...*not crushed, or in despair? Not abandoned...not destroyed? Really?*

There seemed to be an awful lot of “tilting at windmills” in these chapters. Firstly, and most importantly, there is Paul: After charging headlong into Jerusalem and being mobbed and beaten by an angry crowd, it seems that Paul finally has what he wanted. The stage is set, and Paul now has an opportunity to share his story with the Jewish masses. Perhaps this was essentially the motivation for all it. Maybe this was the moment that Paul had dreamed of; his “day in court” had come.

Here on the same Roman stairway where Pilate had condemned Christ to death some 26 years before, Paul begins to speak. The crowd calms and quiets as they hear him speak in Hebrew. He begins by laying out a list of his credentials. His blood was pure, his education was impeccable, his Jewish history without blemish. He was unarguably a “Jew of Jews.”

Then he “goes deep” as he moves through his account. Harkening back to his days when he worked for the “other side”... to those days so long ago when he persecuted those who followed Christ. Bearing his soul herein, he admits openly that he had been responsible for the death of many of these followers of “the Way.” It was a fact that no doubt haunted Paul in those quiet moments and in the stillness of the middle of the night.

Continuing on with his story, Paul finds his way to the crescendo of his personal opera, that life-altering event on the Damascus road that changed the direction of his life! I’m sure this verbal account of his autobiography was well rehearsed. He had likely told the story a thousand times, around a thousand kitchen tables, over a thousand cups of tea. I’m sure he had pondered every detail of the account as he lay in bed at night, and in quiet moments retraced his every step on that fateful day! Oh yes, he *remembered!* But now where was that story leading? Where was this road going? How is the movie going to end? Will I see significant victory in my life? Much like Peter in Matthew 19...having watched the whole exchange with the rich young ruler and its sad end, he then asks Jesus “*We’ve given up everything to follow you. What will we get?*”

In verses 17-21 we have Paul telling of an account when previously God or one of His emissaries had told him to “*get out of Jerusalem.*” To ‘*stop preaching there and move on.*’ It’s funny how we within the greater church think that *every* opportunity to witness is somehow “ordained of God.” Every good idea is a God idea. There are always those who think that every opportunity to “open our mouths for the Kingdom’s sake” should be availed.

Little consideration is given to *timing* or *calling*. Certainly however, the reverse is a much greater problem. Most of us *fail* to open our mouths at the Spirit's leading! But that doesn't negate the rare but often *greater* damaging practice of "sticking our foot in our mouth" by talking when we should have been quiet.

It is crucial that the Spirit of discernment is in play when we find ourselves in such situations! Discernment is often hampered by our lack of maturity and prideful attitudes. Or as it was in Paul's case, we can reject such spiritual guidance out of a personal passion or emotion we might be experiencing. One that may very well have nothing to do with God's plan for us at that moment! Yet as the years of ministry and faithful living pass like water under the bridge, one can easily act out of a sort of panic. A "midlife" spiritual crisis. In a hyper-ventilated state we can suddenly and inexplicably break from the troop and make a run for it. Sometimes away from the goal and sometimes towards it...but toward it 'all by ourselves' with no regard to any peripheral issues like organization, a clear calling from God, trust in His timing and maybe an actual plan. We just *push*. Make it all happen. Force the victory. Afterall, you have been patient...*so patient*. God isn't moving fast enough or grand enough so I need to take matters into my own hands and step out in my bravery to slay dragons. Or maybe just windmills...

Paul was like many of us. While he certainly was a profound tool at times in the hands of the Holy Spirit, his zeal no doubt often got the better of him. This passage, as well as Acts 9:15-16, reiterates God's specific direction to Paul: *to go to the Gentiles*. And according to verse 21, specifically Gentiles that were "*far from Jerusalem*." Then of course we have the whole bull-headed account in Acts 21. He had been directed repeatedly *away* from Jerusalem and yet, here he is in Jerusalem.

(22:22-23) In Paul's speech, everything was going along fine until he used *that word*... "*Gentiles*." Suddenly chaos! "God" and "Gentiles" were two issues that were not going to mix. The Jews weren't ready. Oh, there would come a time, and there would come a man. But it wasn't going to be *now*, and his name wasn't going to be *Paul*. His name was going to be *Peter*! God indeed had a plan. And that plan involved timing, location, and the right individuals. And the plan of God often comes with "no's" and comes with closed doors. And it will be those times where will we be tested as to our trusting faith in the sovereign control of our redeemer.

God had told Paul what he did and did not want him to do, and he repeatedly confirmed his words. Yet Paul was out trying to slay dragons, but...*they were just windmills*. Was Paul's ministry finished? Thankfully, no, but it had definitely changed! God would go on to use Paul to a degree despite the situation that he found him in in these chapters. But we can only wonder what the future of Paul's ministry would have looked like had things been different. If he had trusted God even in the quiet times. If he had indeed "stood still and knew that 'He' was God..."

We need to note that while there indeed may be very real consequences for our failure to follow the Lord's direction to the letter, God has a history of guarding and caring for us, *even in our errors* when our hearts are for Him! Even if our actions are in error, God recognizes our hearts. I say that not as a free pass or even a long leash. It is imperative to grasp the fact that everything we do...every action, every decision we make has consequences to ourselves as well as those in our life. But it is also just as important to understand that God is gracious, patient, and loving. And he will forever use a person to the greatest of their potential and situation, whether they be "footloose and fancy free" or 'incarcerated' as Paul would now be.

As chapter 23 opens we see Paul beginning to make his defense by telling those present that his conscious was clear. He felt he had done his best to walk according to the righteous path of God. Others on "both sides of the fence" may have felt differently, but Paul believed himself to have been obedient to God and His direction.

The high priest, however, was one of those who believed differently. He's our next Don Quixote. For him, and *his* boys, for one to have left the holy and chosen position of Judaism, the "spit and polish" with white robes and gold cups, in exchange for some "rag tag" group of uneducated followers of a Galilean carpenter's son...well, that was below contempt, and it had to be stopped at any price. So this 'Don Quixote' strikes Paul in the face. His actions of course were personal, not judicial, and certainly not God centered! He was furious at the trouble that Paul had stirred up. He was indignant. He was offended! All because Paul had followed this Jesus, and because no matter how hard he tried to end this movement, it just kept on...taking on a life of its own. So again...***just force it***. Just push. Fight the imaginary dragons and destroy the fanciful enemies of God. Except even with the best of intentions, the high priest was still wrong. He was out there alone. Tilting at windmills. The king had left the house, but the high priest didn't know it...

(23:6-8) It was obvious to Paul from the beginning that there would be no justice on this day for him. Thankfully, his sense of discernment was in the "on" position and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he began a brilliant, albeit unconventional, defense strategy. You see, Paul was aware that there was a fundamental and crucial defining difference between the beliefs of a Sadducee and a Pharisee, both of whom were present as his judges. A Sadducee believes there is no such thing as resurrection from the dead, nor really anything in the realm of the "supernatural." The Pharisee on the other hand, believes in both. Paul was pitting the two sides against each other.

The two sides, of course, quickly went at it. The group split down the middle, right along "party lines" and the argument appears to have gotten nasty in a hurry. The fact that the commander had to pull Paul out of the ruckus (once again!) gives us the idea that the fray apparently came to blows. The Pharisees were thereafter willing to let Paul be, but the Sadducees had other plans. The dissention gave opportunity to basically declare a "mistrial," and Paul was taken back to the commander's barracks.

Verse 11 tells us how Jesus Himself appeared to Paul to encourage him. We should find great comfort in the fact that though the world still debates the righteousness of Paul's actions in traveling to Jerusalem, what is not open to debate was the fact that God was still working through and with him, no matter if he had erred or not. As I have already stated, if Paul was wrong, there would be earthly consequences, but the *relationship* that he had with his God was not based upon such things. It was based upon the heart, the motives, and the *intentions*. In that, Paul was still "in the game."

Now the enemies of Christ are a determined bunch and have never been easily deterred. Quickly Paul's foes reorganized and together they vowed to not eat or drink until Paul was dead. And here we have the third attempt to kill the imaginary dragons...to "tilt at windmills." These guys didn't need anyone, and not even God. They were just going to make this thing happen. They are going to push "God's judgement and will" forward no matter if they starve to death doing it. Hmm...I can't help but wonder how long they held out? Because they never got to Paul. They didn't because it simply wasn't the will of a sovereign God, and it didn't matter what these boys thought about that or how passionate they were about their mission. Despite their overt blindness to the fact, God had Paul's back and was furthering the spread of Christianity. There would be no victory here for these assassins. They would not stop Christianity. They thought themselves dragon slayers. But they too were just "tilting at windmills."

In verses 16 through 22, we have another opportunity to see the direct involvement of the Father, and the proof that he needs none of us to see his will and plan come to pass. How often we today seek after the 'Hollywood' ending. The grandiose and the spectacular. Our dashing into a phone booth and stepping out as a super-hero to save the day. We want the likes of the "parting of the Red Sea" or the "raising of a Lazarus." And because of our hunger for the dazzling, we often miss God's quiet, yet profound handiwork.

God worked through this young boy, Paul's nephew, to "run defense" in the protection of His servant. What the details were in this boy's discovery of the plot against Paul, we do not know. But what is stated is sufficient to clearly see God's hand of protection, a *grand and supernatural feat*, manifested in quite a natural way.

For sure, God still "parts the Red Sea." He *daily* weaves a miraculous display of His active participation in our world and personal lives in natural, yet profound ways. But we are so apt to miss such if we do not take the time to stop...the time for focus and effort to see His hands all around us!

One of the strongest and fundamental aspects of my own faith is that of God's sovereignty. We have folks lining up to the left that would like all remnants of Christianity swept away if not its adherents beheaded on the public square. We have folks lining up to the right that diligently work to take back America for Jesus and establish a slice of heaven here on earth. Whether it be Paul forcing his way to Jerusalem to save the Jews, or the Jewish 'powers-that-be' that scheme to end Christianity and maybe "end" a few Christians along the way. Or even the "Rambo apostles" of our day or the militant atheist, they are all "tilting at windmills." Hebrews 11:6 reminds us that "...it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him."

Such a simply principle and yet ignoring it can bring the roof down upon our heads. God is fully and absolutely in charge and in control. He doesn't require your assistance in any matter, although he does welcome your participation. Nothing happens without His express permission, and yes that also means the stuff that really drives you crazy. I'm not saying that every worldly occurrence has got God's hand moving the pieces, but we can rest assured that nothing is an accident...nothing is unknown or beyond God. He tells us that "not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it." (Matt 10:29) Why do we insist on helping God to the extent of circumnavigating his express will and timing? We take matters into our own hands. We push. We insist. We make things happen. We "tilt at windmills." Often of course to our own hurt.

If you are a child of the king, then God is with you today. In the quiet moments when you feel alone, and in the chaos of the loud times, when it's hard to hear Him over the clamor. God has a plan. Even when we don't see it, and even when we don't understand it. He has a plan. And he will see His plan through to the end, no matter what we do to try to help Him and no matter what we try to do to stop Him. He is in control. And any attempt on our part to change that plan...well, we are just quite simply "tilting at windmills."

2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

Psalm 37:7 Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices

Luke 21:19 By your endurance you will gain your lives