

# Homily 49 on the Acts of the Apostles

by St. John Chrysostom

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*St. John Chrysostom's Homily 49 emphasizes the interplay of faith and divine providence in the life of Paul amidst adversity.*

**Scripture:** Acts 23:6-14

**Topics:** "Faith And Perseverance", "Gods Sovereignty"

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## Description

John Chrysostom preaches on Acts 23:6-8, highlighting Paul's wisdom in using his Pharisee background to create division among the council, showcasing the conflict between the Pharisees and Sadducees regarding the hope of resurrection. Despite facing danger and threats on his life, Paul remains steadfast in his faith and is comforted by the Lord's assurance of bearing witness in Rome. The sermon emphasizes how God turns evil intentions for good, drawing parallels from the stories of Joseph and Jacob to illustrate how adversities can lead to unexpected blessings and divine interventions.

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## Transcript

Acts XXIII. 6-8

But when Paul perceived that the 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: of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question. And when he had so said, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees: and the multitude was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both.

Again he discourses simply as man, and he does not on all occasions alike enjoy the benefit of supernatural aid. I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee: both in this, and in what comes after it, he wished to divide the multitude, which had an evil unanimity against him. And he does not speak a falsehood here either: for he was a Pharisee by descent from his ancestors. Of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question. For since they would not say for what reason they arraigned him, he is compelled therefore to declare it himself.

But the Pharisees, it says, confess both. And yet there are three things: how then does he say both? Spirit and Angel is put as one. When he is on their side, then they plead for him. And there arose a great cry: and the scribes that were of the Pharisees' part arose, and strove, saying, We find no evil in this man: but (what) if a spirit has spoken to him, or an angel? Acts 23:9 Why did they not plead for him before this? Do

you observe, how, when the passions give way, the truth is discovered?

Where is the crime, say they, if an angel has spoken to him, or a spirit? Paul gives them no handle against him. And when there arose a great dissension, the tribune, fearing lest Paul should have been pulled in pieces of them, commanded the soldiers to go down, and to take him by force from among them, and to bring him into the castle. Acts 23:10 The tribune is afraid of his being pulled in pieces, now that he has said that he is a Roman: and the matter was not without danger.

Do you observe that Paul had a right to profess himself a Roman? Else, neither would (the tribune) have been afraid now. So it remains that the soldiers must bear him off by force. But when the wretches saw all to be without avail, they take the whole matter into their own hands, as they would fain have done before, but were prevented: and their wickedness stops nowhere, though it received so many checks: and yet how many things were providentially ordered, on purpose that they might settle down from their rage, and learn those things through which they might possibly recover themselves!

But none the less do they set upon him. Sufficient for proof of his innocence was even this, that the man was saved when at the point to be pulled in pieces, and that with these so great dangers about him, he escaped them all. And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as you have testified of Me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome. And when it was day, certain of the Jews banded together, and bound themselves under a curse, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul.

And they were more than forty which had made this conspiracy. Acts 23:11-13 They bound themselves under a curse, it says. See how vehement and revengeful they are in their malice! What means, bound under a curse? Why then those men are accused forever, seeing they did not kill Paul. And forty together. For such is the nature of that nation: when there needs concerting together for a good object, not even two concur with each other: but when it is for an evil object, the entire people does it.

And they admit the rulers also as accomplices. And they came to the chief priests and elders, and said, We have bound ourselves under a great curse that we will eat nothing until we have slain Paul. Now therefore ye with the council signify to the tribune that he bring him down unto you tomorrow, as though ye would enquire something more perfectly concerning him: and we, or ever he come near, are ready to kill him. And when Paul's sister's son heard of their lying in wait, he went and entered into the castle, and told Paul.

Then Paul called one of the centurions unto him, and said, Bring this young man unto the tribune: For he has a certain thing to tell him. So he took him, and brought him to the tribune, and said, Paul the prisoner called me unto him, and prayed me to bring this young man unto you, who has something to say unto you. Then the tribune took him by the hand, and went with him aside privately, and asked him, What is that you have to tell me? And he said, the Jews have agreed to desire you that you would bring down Paul tomorrow into the council, as though they would enquire somewhat of him more perfectly.

But do not thou yield unto them for there lie in wait for him of them more than forty men, which have bound themselves with an oath, that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him: and now are they ready, looking for a promise from you. So the tribune then let the young man depart, and charged him, See thou tell no man that you have showed these things to me. Acts 23:14-22. Again he is saved by man's forethought. And observe: Paul lets no man learn this, not even the centurion, that the matter might not become known.

And the centurion having come, reported to the tribune. And it is well done of the tribune also, that he bids him keep it secret, that it might not become known: moreover he gives his orders to the centurions only, at the time when the thing was to be done: and so Paul is sent into Cæsarea, that there too he might discourse in a greater theatre and before a more splendid audience: that so the Jews may not be able to say, If we had seen Paul, we would have believed-- if we had heard him teaching.

Therefore this excuse too is cut off from them. And the Lord, it said, stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer: for as you have testified of Me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome. (Yet) even after He has appeared to him, He again suffers him to be saved by man's means. And one may well be astonished at Paul; he was not taken aback, neither said, Why, what is this? Have I then been deceived by Christ? but he believed: yet, because he believed, he did not therefore sleep: no; what was in his own power by means of human wisdom, he did not abandon.

Bound themselves by a curse: it was a kind of necessity that those men fastened on themselves by the curse. That they would neither eat nor drink. Behold fasting the mother of murder! Just as Herod imposed on himself that necessity by his oath, so also do these. For such are the devil's (ways): under the pretext forsooth of piety he sets his traps. And they came to the chief priests, etc. And yet they ought to have come (to the tribune), ought to have laid a charge, and assembled a court of justice: for these are not the doings for priests, but for captains of banditti, these are not the doings for rulers, but for ruffians.

They endeavor also to corrupt the ruler: but it was providentially ordered, to the intent that he also should learn of their plot. For not (only) by their having nothing to say, but also by their secret attempt, they convicted themselves that they were naught. It is likely too that after (Paul had gone) the chief priests came to (the tribune) making their request, and were put to shame. For of course he would not have liked either to deny or to grant their request. How came he to believe (the young man's tale)?

He did so in consequence of what had already taken place; because it was likely they would do this also. And observe their wickedness: they as good as laid a necessity on the chief priests also: for if they undertook so great a thing themselves, and engaged themselves in the whole risk, much more ought those to do thus much. Do you observe, how Paul is held innocent by those that are without, as was also Christ by Pilate? See their malice brought to naught: they delivered him up, to kill and condemn him: but the result is just the contrary; he is both saved, and held innocent.

For had it not been so, he would have been pulled in pieces: had it not been so, he would have perished, he would have been condemned. And not only does (the tribune) rescue him from the rush (made upon him), but also from much other (violence): see how he becomes a minister to him, insomuch that without risk he is carried off safe with so large a force. And he called unto him two centurions, saying, Make ready two hundred soldiers to go to Cæsarea, and horsemen threescore and ten, and spearmen two hundred, at the third hour of the night; and provide them beasts, that they may set Paul on, and bring him safe unto Felix the governor.

And he wrote a letter after this manner: Claudius Lysias unto the most excellent governor Felix sends greeting. This man was taken of the Jews, and should have been killed of them: then came I with an army, and rescued him, having understood that he was a Roman. And when I would have known the cause wherefore they accused him, I brought him forth into their council: whom I perceived to be accused of questions of their law, but to have nothing laid to his charge worthy of death or of bonds.

And when it was told me how that the Jews laid wait for the man, I sent straightway to you, and gave commandment to his accusers also to say before you what they had against him. Fare well. Acts 23:23-30. See how the letter speaks for him as a defense -- for it says, I found nothing worthy of death, but as accusation against them (rather) than against him. About to have been killed of them: so set upon his death were they. First, I came with the army, and rescued him: then also I brought him down unto them: and not even so did they find anything to lay to his charge: and when they ought to have been stricken with fear and shame for the former act, they again attempt to kill him, insomuch that again his cause became all the more clear. And his accusers, he says, I have sent unto you: that at the tribunal where these things are more strictly examined, he may be proved guiltless.

(Recapitulation.) Let us look then to what has been said above. I, he says, am a Pharisee: then, that he may not seem to pay court, he adds, Of the hope and resurrection of the dead it is, that I am called in question. Acts 23:6 From this charge and calumny he commends himself. For the Sadducees indeed, etc. The Sadducees have no knowledge of anything incorporeal, perhaps not even God; so gross (παχέ■ς) are they: whence neither do they choose to believe that there is a Resurrection. And the scribes, etc. Look; the tribune also hears that the Pharisees have acquitted him of the charges, and have given sentence (manuscripts and Edd. ■ ψηφ■σατο, he gave sentence) in his favor, and with greater confidence carries him off by force. Moreover all that was spoken (by Paul) was full of right-mindedness (φιλοσοφ■ας). And the night following the Lord stood by him, etc. See what strong consolation! First he praises him, As you have testified to My cause in Jerusalem; then He does not leave him to be afraid for the uncertain issue of his journey to Rome: for there also, He says, you shall not depart alone (μ■νος, Cat. and Edd. μ■νον), but you shall also have all this boldness of speech. Hereby it was made manifest, not (only) that he should be saved, but that (he should be so) in order to great crowns in the great city. But why did He not appear to him before he fell into the danger? Because it is evermore in the afflictions that God comforts us; for He appears more wished-for, while even in the dangers He exercises and trains us. Besides, he was then at ease, when free from bonds; but now great perils were awaiting him. We have bound ourselves, they say, under a curse, that we will not eat nor drink. Acts 23:14 What is all this zeal? That he may bring him down, it says, unto you, as though ye would enquire into his case more perfectly. Acts 23:15 Has he not twice made a speech unto you? Has he not said that he is a Pharisee? What (would you have) over and above this? So reckless were they and afraid of nothing, not tribunals, not laws: such their hardihood which shrunk from nothing. They both declare their purpose, and announce the way of carrying it into effect. Paul's sister's son heard of it. Acts 23:16 This was of God's providence, their not perceiving that it would be heard. What then did Paul? He was not alarmed, but perceived that this was God's doing: and casting all upon Him, so he acquits himself (from further concern about it:) having called one of the centurions, etc. Acts 23:17 He told of the plot, he was believed; he is saved. If he was acquitted of the charge, why did (the tribune) send the accusers? That the enquiry might be more strict: that the man might be the more entirely cleared.

Such are God's ways of ordering: the very things by which we are hurt, by these same are we benefited. Thus it was with Joseph: his mistress sought to ruin him: and she seemed indeed to be contriving his ruin, but by her contriving she placed him in a state of safety: for the house where that wild beast (of a woman) was kept was a den in comparison with which the prison was gentle. Genesis 39:1-20 For while he was there, although he was looked up to and courted, he was in constant fear, lest his mistress should set upon him, and worse than any prison was the fear that lay upon him: but after the accusation he was in security and peace, well rid of that beast, of her lewdness and her machinations for his destruction: for it was better for him to keep company with human creatures in miserable plight, than with a maddened

mistress.

Here he comforted himself, that for chastity's sake he had fallen into it: there he had been in dread, lest he should receive a death-blow to his soul: for nothing in the world is more annoying than a woman in love can be to a young man who will not (meet her advances): nothing more detestable (than a woman in such case), nothing more fell: all the bonds in the world are light to this. So that the fact was not that he got into prison, but that he got out of prison. She made his master his foe, but she made God his friend: brought him into closer relation to Him Who is indeed the true Master; she cast him out of his stewardship in the family, but made him a familiar friend to that Master.

Again, his brethren sold him Genesis 37:18; but they freed him from having enemies dwelling in the same house with him, from envy and much ill will, and from daily machinations for his ruin: they placed him far aloof from them that hated him. For what can be worse than this, to be compelled to dwell in the same house with brethren that envy one; to be an object of suspicion, to be a mark for evil designs? So that while they and she were severally seeking to compass their own ends, far other were the mighty consequences working out by the Providence of God for that just man.

When he was in honor, then was he in danger; when he was in dishonor, then was he in safety. The eunuchs did not remember him, and right well it was that they did not, that the occasion of his deliverance might be more glorious: that the whole might be ascribed, not to man's favor, but to God's Providence Genesis 40:23: that at the right moment, Pharaoh, reduced to need, might bring him out; that not as conferring but as receiving a benefit, the king might release him from the prison.

Genesis 41:40 It behooved to be no servile gift, but that the king should be reduced to a necessity of doing this: it behooved that it should be made manifest what wisdom was in him. Therefore it is that the eunuch forgets him, that Egypt might not forget him, that the king might not be ignorant of him. Had he been delivered at that time, it is likely he would have desired to depart to his own country: therefore he is kept back by numberless constraints, first by subjection to a master, secondly by being in prison, thirdly by being over the kingdom, to the end that all this might be brought about by the Providence of God.

Like a spirited steed that is eager to bound off to his fellows, did God keep him back there, for causes full of glory. For that he longed to see his father, and free him from his distress, is evident from his calling him there. Genesis 45:9

Shall we look at other instances of evil designing, how they turn out to our good, not only by having their reward, but also by their working at the very time precisely what is for our good? This (Joseph's) uncle (Esau) had ill designs against his father (Jacob), and drove him out of his native land: what then? Genesis 27:41 He too set him (thereby) aloof from the danger; for he too got (thereby) to be in safety. He made him a wiser and a better man (φιλοσοφότερον); he was the means of his having that dream Genesis 28:12 But, you will say, he was a slave in a foreign land?

Yes, but he arrives among his own kindred, and receives a bride, and appears worthy to his father-in-law. Genesis 29:23 But he too cheated him? Yes, but this also turned out to his good, that he might be the father of many children. But it was in his mind to design evil against him? True, but even this was for his good, that he might thereupon return to his own country; for if he had been in good circumstances, he would not have so longed for home. But he defrauded him of his hire?

Aye, but he got more by the means. Genesis 31:7 Thus, in every point of these men's history, the more people designed their hurt, the more their affairs flourished. If (Jacob) had not received the elder daughter, he would not soon have been the father of so many children; he would have dragged out a long period in childlessness, he would have mourned as his wife did. For she indeed had reason to mourn, as not having become a mother (ib. 30:1, 2.); but he had his consolation: whence also he gives her a repulse.

Again, had not (Laban) defrauded him of his hire, he would not have longed to see his own country; the higher points (φιλοσοφία) of the man's character would not have come to light, (his wives) would not have become more closely attached to him. For see what they say: With devouring has he devoured us and our money. Genesis 31:15 So that this became the means of riveting their love to him. After this he had in them not merely wives, but (devoted) slaves; he was beloved by them: a thing that no possession can equal: for nothing, nothing whatever, is more precious than to be thus loved by a wife and to love her.

And a wife, Scripture says, that agrees with her husband. Sirach 25:1 A man and a wife that agree together. E.V.) One thing this, as the Wise Man puts it, of the things for which a man is to be counted happy; for where this is, there all wealth, all prosperity abounds: as also, where it is not, there all besides profits nothing, but all goes wrong, all is mere unpleasantness and confusion. Then let us seek this before all things. He that seeks money, seeks not this. Let us seek those things which can remain fixed.

Let us not seek a wife from among the rich, lest the excess of wealth on her side produce arrogance, lest that arrogance be the means of marring all. See you not what God did? How He put the woman in subjection? Genesis 3:16 Why are you ungrateful, why without perception? The very benefit God has given you by nature, do not thou mar the help it was meant to be. So that it is not for her wealth that we ought to seek a wife: it is that we may receive a partner of our life, for the appointed order of the procreation of children.

It was not that she should bring money, that God gave the woman; it was that she might be an helpmate. But she that brings money, becomes, instead of a wife, a setter up of her own will (πυβουλος), a mistress -- it may be a wild beast instead of a wife -- while she thinks she has a right to give herself airs upon her wealth. Nothing more shameful than a man who lays himself out to get riches in this way. If wealth itself is full of temptations, what shall we say to wealth so gotten?

For you must not look to this, that one or another as a rare and unusual case, and contrary to the reason of the thing, has succeeded: as neither ought we in other matters to fix our regards upon the good which people may enjoy, or their chance successes, out of the common course: but let us look to the reason of the thing as it is in itself, and see whether this thing be not fraught with endless annoyance. Not only you bring yourself into a disreputable position; you also disgrace your children by leaving them poor, if it chance that you depart this life before the wife: and you give her incomparably more occasions for connecting herself with a second bridegroom.

Or do you not see that many women make this the excuse for a second marriage -- that they may not be despised; that they want to have some man to take the management of their property? Then let us not bring about so great evils for the sake of money; but let us dismiss all (such aims), and seek a beautiful soul, that we may also succeed in obtaining love. This is the exceeding wealth, this the great treasure, this the endless good things: whereunto may we all attain by the grace and loving kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom to the Father and the Holy Ghost together be glory, dominion, honor, now and ever, world without end. Amen.

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