

Paul's nephew

Acts 23:11-13

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.

23:12 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. **23:13** And they were more than forty which had made this conspiracy.

Was Paul's nephew important?

Paul's unnamed nephew helped save the apostle's life. But why did Luke report the incident in such great detail? It could have been a lot shorter, reading something like this: "There was a Jewish plot against Paul's life, but the chief captain found out about it and delivered him safely to Felix in Caesarea." Thus, the whole story could have been covered in one verse, and the nephew would not need to be mentioned at all. Instead we have 14 verses, and Paul's sister's son is mentioned in half of them.

Maybe the nephew is really important. Or maybe it was just Luke's style, since his account of the storm and the shipwreck in chapter 27 is even longer and more detailed. Then again, maybe it is something else all together. (*Regarding this see 23:11.*)

Acts 23:16-24

23:16 And when **Paul's sister's son** heard of their lying in wait [*to kill Paul*], he went and entered into the castle, and told Paul. **23:17** Then Paul called one of the centurions unto him, and said, Bring **this young man** unto the chief captain: for he hath a certain thing to tell him. **23:18** So he took him, and brought him to the chief captain, and said, Paul the prisoner called me unto him, and prayed me to bring **this young man** unto thee, who hath something to say unto thee. **23:19** Then the chief captain took him by the hand, and went with him aside privately, and asked him, What is that thou hast to tell me? **23:20** And he said, The Jews have agreed to desire thee that thou wouldest bring down Paul to morrow into the council, as though they would enquire somewhat of him more perfectly. **23:21** 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 thee.

23:22 So the chief captain then let **the young man** depart, and charged him, See thou tell no man that thou hast shewed these things to me. **23:23** And he called unto him two centurions, saying, Make ready two hundred soldiers to go to Caesarea, and horsemen threescore and ten, and spearmen two hundred, at the third hour of the night; **23:24** And provide them beasts, that they may set Paul on, and bring him safe unto Felix the governor.

negatives

How much can a small boy between eight and ten years old actually do? Paul's nephew was able to do something really important. However, the key thing to notice in this is that he did not do it by himself. Paul told him what to do and what to say. And the chief captain did so as well (23:22).

True, the nephew probably heard about the plot and went to tell Paul about it without anyone telling him to do so (23:16). But informing Paul also shows that the lad was unable to do much else by himself.

Mostly, the boy was a lowly messenger. He is not the main character in the passage by any means. Moreover, if Paul's nephew were really important, wouldn't we be told more about him and his connection with Paul? And wouldn't he have appeared again later somewhere else in the Bible?

Some believe that the nephew may be named later in Paul's greetings in Rom. 16:7, 11, or 21. But the individuals in these few verses may only have been fellow Jewish believers rather than relatives.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

A	() Paul's nephew is only in one chapter.
A-1	() He is not named.
A-2	() He is only found in Acts 23.
A-3	() We don't know what became of him.
B	() He was only a boy.
B-1	() He was led by the hand (23:19).
B-2	() We don't know how old he was.
B-3	() He had to be told what to do (23:16, 22).
B-4	() He could not go to the chief captain by himself.
C	() He was only a messenger.
C-1	() His message was not very long (23:20-21).
C-2	() He only said what he was told to say (23:16, 20-21).
C-3	() The chief captain feared that he might talk too much (23:22).

positives

Despite the various negative suggestions made on the previous page, there is no denying that Paul's nephew was used by God to help spare the apostle's life. And since Paul's ministry was very important, so too was what his much-younger nephew did, even though he was "just a child."

Speaking of children, a good way to appreciate Paul's nephew is to compare him with other children in the Bible. For instance, how was he like the girl who told Naaman's wife about Elisha in 2 Kings 5:1-4?

Better still, how was he like the unnamed boy who gave up his lunch so that Jesus could use it to feed over five thousand people in John 6:8-14? Sunday school children are often told the story of the lad in John chapter six, but far more is recorded about Paul's nephew than about the boy with the lunch.

Probably the most important question about Paul's nephew is, "Why is what he did reported in such detail?" As pointed out earlier, the basic story could have been summarized in a single verse.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

D	() Paul's nephew was in God's plan.
D-1	() He helped save Paul's life.
D-2	() He heard about the plot by chance (23:16).
D-3	() God delights in using the weak to defeat the strong.
E	() He was <i>probably</i> in God's family.
E-1	() He was trusted by Paul.
E-2	() He was Paul's sister's son.
E-3	() He was not one of the plotters.
E-4	() He acted like a believer would act.
F	() He is in God's Book.
F-1	() He is like the little girl in 2 Kings 5:1-4.
F-2	() He is like the boy who shared his lunch in John 6:9.
F-3	() He is in the Bible to help us appreciate God's protection.

conclusions

worksheet answers

Nearly all the lines are correct or partly correct. In fact, the only one that is obviously wrong is line D-2. Paul’s nephew did not hear about the plot by chance. Though superficially it may have appeared to have involved luck, we know that it was part of God’s plan from the beginning (D). We know this, thanks to verse eleven. It was God’s will for the apostle to testify for Jesus in Rome rather than to be assassinated in Jerusalem.

Along the same line, one of the most important worksheet lines is F-3 which correctly states that the nephew is in the Bible to help us appreciate God’s protection. The Lord used a centurion (23:17), the chief captain (23:18-24), and hundreds of other Roman soldiers (23:23) to protect Paul from the 40 plus would-be assassins. But the key person in it all was just a child who was probably less than 12 years old (B-2). God delights in using the weak to defeat the strong (D-3). (See 1 Cor. 1:27-29.)

Several lines, including B-2, B-3, C, C-2, F-1, and F-2, probably should be marked as partly correct.

So what?

Are we living in the will of God? If so—in light of Acts 23:11 and the rest of the passage that follows—we should be of good cheer even if we face intense opposition and many troubles.

The longer story of deliverance at sea in chapter 27 makes the same point. Notice the striking similarity between God’s message of encouragement to Paul in 23:11 and the one given to him (and others through him) during the great storm in 27:22-23. The Lord stood by the apostle on both occasions because he was in God’s will.

Though evil men such as King Herod are sometimes allowed to kill God’s servants (as in 12:1-4), God is still in charge. This is clearly seen by how Peter was delivered from Herod’s hands (12:5-11) and how Paul was delivered from the would-be assassins (23:11-24).

In chapter 12, God used an angel, but in chapter 23 he chose to use a child, one so young that the chief captain led him by the hand (23:19). So let us rejoice; God still protects and uses the lowly for his glory.

applications

Apply the points which you believe are most important or seem most needful.
