

The God of the Details

Acts 23:12-35

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Some of you read a lot of resumes as part of your job. Admittedly, I don't. In my 20 years here, we've only hired one person, and that was this year! In my previous job, I got to go to job fairs and collect resumes from people who were interested in working with us. I've talked to many others whose jobs do involve looking at lots of potential applicants. There are certain buzzwords that appear in lots of people's resumes. Probably one of the most common is that people describe themselves as "detail oriented." Theoretically, it means they pay attention to all the little things to make sure everything is done properly. If it's true, it is a good trait for an applicant to have.

The problem is, it's often not true. And in many cases, you don't even need to look past their resume to discover that! When you see typos, misspellings, or other errors in the document they are using to put their best foot forward, it quickly becomes apparent that detail oriented is just a phrase they use, but it doesn't really describe who they are.

This morning, we are going to see that our God is very detail oriented. He pays attention to the little things and often uses the little things, the things no one else would think about, to effect His purposes. Today we will see Paul finally leave Jerusalem. He won't be freed, but his life will be protected. And through all the little details that happen, we'll see the hand of God, which should remind us that He is working in the details of our lives as well.

An Evil Plot

Last week we saw Paul appear before the Jewish high council, the Sanhedrin. The Roman commander was trying to figure out what to do with Paul and thought the Sanhedrin could examine him and render a verdict, which would give him the insight and direction he needed. But, after Paul identified himself as a Pharisee and stated that he was on trial because of his belief in the resurrection of the dead, the council devolved into chaos, and the commander was once again forced to rescue Paul and take him back to the fortress. That is where we pick up the story today.

¹² The next morning a group of Jews got together and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. ¹³ There were more than forty of them in the conspiracy. ¹⁴ They went to the leading priests and elders and told them, "We have bound ourselves with an oath to eat nothing until we have killed Paul. ¹⁵ So you and the high council should ask the commander to bring Paul back to the council again. Pretend you want to examine his case more fully. We will kill him on the way."

Paul's opponents were rabid in their desire to get rid of him. They didn't just want him out of Jerusalem, they wanted him dead. Somehow, after all that had gone on in the last couple of days, word had reached some of the more radical Jews, and they had decided it was time for them to act. To be clear, it seems that these men were probably not part

of the Sanhedrin, but Jews who were dedicated to eradicating enemies of their faith and people. It's possible that they were part of the group known as the Zealots or Sicarii, men who were trained revolutionaries and assassins. They would often hide in the shadows and fight against enemies of Israel using guerrilla tactics. The text doesn't state this for sure, but it's a possibility.

There were more than 40 men committed to the cause of killing Paul, and they bound themselves with an oath not to eat until they had succeeded in their task. These men were serious.

And they had a plan. They asked the Sanhedrin to send a message to the Roman commander, requesting Paul be brought back to the council (which was a plausible request, since the council had not actually accomplished anything or examined Paul the day before). The plan of these assassins was to lie in wait for the caravan transporting Paul and ambush them, ensuring they killed Paul.

This was a good plan, but it was inherently dangerous. They would be attacking Roman soldiers, who were well-trained and would not hesitate to respond with deadly force. These assassins surely all recognized that some of them might be killed in the process, but they viewed Paul's death as worth the sacrifice.

It appears that the leading priests and the elders did not object to this plan. They may have seen this as an ideal solution. They might have wanted Paul dead as well but would have needed some political cover. They couldn't be seen as having killed Paul, but this would give them plausible deniability while also getting rid of someone who they saw as an existential threat to their position and power.

The Nephew

While this was a solid plan with committed soldiers, there was a wrinkle no one anticipated, or even knew about.

¹⁶ But Paul's nephew—his sister's son—heard of their plan and went to the fortress and told Paul. ¹⁷ Paul called for one of the Roman officers and said, "Take this young man to the commander. He has something important to tell him." ¹⁸ So the officer did, explaining, "Paul, the prisoner, called me over and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you."

¹⁹ The commander took his hand, led him aside, and asked, "What is it you want to tell me?" ²⁰ Paul's nephew told him, "Some Jews are going to ask you to bring Paul before the high council tomorrow, pretending they want to get some more information. ²¹ But don't do it! There are more than forty men hiding along the way ready to ambush him. They have vowed not to eat or drink anything until they have killed him. They are ready now, just waiting for your consent." ²² "Don't let anyone know you told me this," the commander warned the young man. (Acts 23:16-22, NLT)

There was a young man who heard about their plan, who just so happened to be related to Paul. We don't know a lot about Paul's family and background, but we get a few details in scripture.

- Paul's father was a Roman citizen, because Paul was born as one too. (Acts 23:25-28)
- Paul wasn't married. (1 Corinthians 7:8)
- He was from Tarsus but studied in Jerusalem under Gamaliel. (Acts 22:3)
- He had a sister, who had (at least) a son. (Acts 23:16)

Some have also suggested that the reason we don't hear much about Paul's family is that they disowned him when he became a believer. It's possible that Paul may not have had much (if any) contact with his family, including his sister and her family during this time. Of course, this is all speculation, but it is plausible.

Apparently, Paul's nephew was in Jerusalem and must have been in fairly close proximity to some of the leaders of the Sanhedrin. It seems he had access to some fairly sensitive information. Many assume that Paul's nephew was following a similar path that he himself had followed. He may have been an apprentice of a respected rabbi in Jerusalem, following him and learning from his example. That would explain how he was in a position to hear this conversation.

When he overheard the plot to kill Paul, he recognized it was evil and decided to go and tell his uncle. We don't know what kind of relationship they had, or even if Paul knew his nephew was in Jerusalem, but he showed up and informed Paul of the plot.

Paul knew there wasn't much he could do about it from inside his cell, so he asked his nephew to report the information to the Roman commander, Claudius Lysias. The soldier brought the boy to the commander to relay the message.

The language used here gives us the impression that Paul's nephew may have still been a boy. The fact that Claudius Lysias took him by the hand and pulled him aside all seems to describe how he would have handled a child, not a grown man. Regardless of whether he had spent much time with his uncle Paul, he seems to have been cut from the same cloth, because he showed great courage and conviction in speaking to the Roman commander. Even a child could recognize what was being planned was evil, while the most learned men in Israel were convinced of their righteousness.

I wonder how Paul responded to the news. I suspect he chuckled to himself as he thought about these men trying to kill him. He knew God had promised that he would preach the gospel in Rome, so likely had confidence that the Lord would deliver him. He may have laughed thinking about how the Lord chose to topple these hardened assassins with the word of a little boy!

Claudius Lysias, however, took the threat seriously. He knew the kind of men these were, and he didn't know that God had guaranteed Paul's safety. So, he took measures to get Paul out of town and ensure he did so safely.

God loves to work through unexpected means to accomplish His purposes. No one could have anticipated that this was where the story would lead...except the Lord! This should remind us that He anticipates and plans things in our lives that we would never have expected. We can find peace in turbulent times knowing that God is still in control.

Paul's Travels

Claudius Lysias had been looking for an excuse to get Paul off his hands, and now he had a legitimate reason to pass responsibility for Paul onto someone else. He was surely relieved, but wanted to ensure Paul's safety (which was how all this had started). So, he made plans for Paul to be transferred out of Jerusalem.

²³ Then the commander called two of his officers and ordered, "Get 200 soldiers ready to leave for Caesarea at nine o'clock tonight. Also take 200 spearmen and 70 mounted troops. ²⁴ Provide horses for Paul to ride, and get him safely to Governor Felix." ²⁵ Then he wrote this letter to the governor:

²⁶ "From Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency, Governor Felix: Greetings! ²⁷ "This man was seized by some Jews, and they were about to kill him when I arrived with the troops. When I learned that he was a Roman citizen, I removed him to safety. ²⁸ Then I took him to their high council to try to learn the basis of the accusations against him. ²⁹ I soon discovered the charge was something regarding their religious law—certainly nothing worthy of imprisonment or death. ³⁰ But when I was informed of a plot to kill him, I immediately sent him on to you. I have told his accusers to bring their charges before you."

³¹ So that night, as ordered, the soldiers took Paul as far as Antipatris. ³² They returned to the fortress the next morning, while the mounted troops took him on to Caesarea. (Acts 23:23-31, NLT)

The commander knew that the men planning to kill Paul were skilled, dedicated, and willing to die. He knew every one of them would fight to the death. This made them exceedingly dangerous. The only way to ensure Paul's safety (and the safety of his men) was to provide an overwhelming show of force that would deter the would-be assassins from even attempting an attack.

So, he ordered that Paul be moved under cover of darkness and in great secrecy. And he ordered that the entourage charged with ensuring his safety be made up of 200 regular foot soldiers, 200 spearmen, and 70 soldiers on horseback. Not only that, but they would put Paul on a horse as well, providing an extra layer of protection for him. Think about the size of this force. In today's terms, this would have been equivalent to an entire company or maybe even a battalion of troops assigned to a single purpose: ensuring Paul's safe passage to the governor. Paul had come into Jerusalem as an ordinary man at the end of a long journey. Apart from his chains, he was leaving with an entourage worthy of a king!

They traveled all night until they arrived at the city of Antipatris. This was far enough away that the danger to Paul was significantly diminished. Apparently near Antipatris

there was also a place that made for a good ambush point, so they wanted to ensure they passed that safely, in case word of their mission had gotten out. Once they reached Antipatris, the foot soldiers and spearmen returned to Jerusalem, while the cavalry continued with Paul to Caesarea.

The commander identified himself in his letter (this was why we know his name is Claudius Lysias) and gave a *mostly* true account of what had happened. Indeed, the commander had taken Paul into protective custody, had him tried by the Sanhedrin, and all he had been able to learn so far was that the dispute seemed to be religious in nature. The only part that fudged the truth a bit was when he painted himself as the hero by saying he rescued Paul from the crowd when he discovered he was a Roman citizen. Of course, he didn't know about Paul's citizenship when he took him into custody. In fact, he didn't discover it until Paul questioned his illegal order to have him flogged. His letter attempted to spin the story in a way that would cast him in a good light. Such is the nature of political correspondence.

Paul was taken to Governor Felix. Felix occupied the same seat of power that Pontius Pilate had held during the crucifixion of Jesus. His legacy was not a particularly good one. He was a slave who was then freed. He rose in power by marrying the right people and by force. Most people judged him as a man who used his power primarily for his own benefit. He was generally not interested in justice unless there was something in it for him. But, since Paul was a Roman citizen, he was entitled to a trial before him, and sadly, he was more likely to get a fair shake from Felix than he was from the Jews.

Luke records what happened after they arrived safely in Caesarea.

³³ When they arrived in Caesarea, they presented Paul and the letter to Governor Felix. ³⁴ He read it and then asked Paul what province he was from. "Cilicia," Paul answered. ³⁵ "I will hear your case myself when your accusers arrive," the governor told him. Then the governor ordered him kept in the prison at Herod's headquarters. (Acts 23:33-35, NLT)

Paul arrived safely in Caesarea but would remain a prisoner for the time being. Felix would hear Paul's case once the Jewish leaders arrived. They were likely just finding out that Paul had been moved during the night. I wonder if the men who had vowed not to eat allowed their hunger strike to continue. Paul would remain alive for (we think) at least 5 more years, so if they stuck to their foolish and evil vow, it would not end well for them!

Conclusion

This passage reminds us of God's providence and that nothing can thwart His plans. No matter how dedicated, how powerful, or anything else—no one can stop what God has decided to do. We see that truth on full display in this passage today. So, let's draw some concluding lessons.

First, we can trust God's promises. God has given us many promises in His word. Probably my favorite is that He works all things for good for those who are His followers.

Such promises are wonderful truths to hang on to, especially when we are faced with long odds. This does not mean things will always go the way we expect or even want, but it does mean God will use everything that happens for good in the end. No matter how much people try to stop Him, the Lord's will will be accomplished.

Second, this should embolden our obedience. If no one can thwart God's plans, it should give us the courage we need to stand firm and do what we know God commands. Many of God's instructions fly in the face of conventional wisdom today (like being gentle rather than harsh, being humble instead of prideful, living with God's ethics with regards to sex and morality, following His commands regarding our money), but that's because the world fails to take into account the fact that God is in control. If we believe He is in control, then we should find confidence to do things that the world says are crazy, because we believe God will honor our obedience. Like Paul, we should stand firm in following God's commands with the confidence that He keeps His promises!

Third, remember that God often does big things through little things. We often long to see massive, mountain-moving miracles. And sometimes God does those things. But in many cases, He chooses to move the mountains in our paths an inch at a time, through small things we often overlook. One of the things I loved about the mission trips we took was the emphasis on looking for "God-sightings" each day. The idea was simple, if we expect God to use us, we should be on the lookout for the ways we see Him at work. The point of this daily exercise was to remind us not to overlook the little things we see Him doing. When we feel like the mountains aren't moving like we expect or desire, we may be tempted to think God isn't working. Remember that He often chooses to work in the details. Make note of and thank God for the little things.

- The appointment time that "just so happened" to open up, allowing you to get into the doctor earlier than expected.
- The unexpected influx of funds that gives some breathing room.
- The phone call that came at just the right time.
- The kind person who sees you and genuinely cares when you need it most.
- Encountering exactly the person you need at exactly the right time.
- The friends who help you laugh and lift your spirits.

We can either choose to write these things off as coincidences...or to look at them with eyes of faith. God doesn't abandon His children. He keeps His promises. But He often does it through means we won't see unless we're looking for them.

Paul knew that what happened to Him was no coincidence. The Lord had clued Him in to the fact that he would be ok. He didn't know how it would work out, but He knew God would keep His promises. When his nephew (who may have been estranged before) showed up at the prison, Paul didn't see a coincidence—he saw God's hand. My hope is that we will look at the circumstances of our life through a similar lens—remembering we serve a God who truly is detail-oriented. Nothing escapes His notice or control.

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