

MBC – 10/4/2020 – Pastor Doug Thompson
“Paul’s Providential Protection”
 Acts 23

We’re going to cover the entire 23rd chapter of Acts this morning, so turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 23. I want to begin by jumping down to in v.11. If you have a red letter Bible, this is one of the few places outside the Gospels that you will find words in red, but these are the words of the Lord Jesus to Paul—

- Acts 23:11 ¹¹The 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.”

Let’s pray—(. . . Grow in our love for You, in our devotion to Christ, in our sensitivity to the Holy Spirit in our lives. To surrender all of our plans and dreams to You. . .)

Jesus had promised that Paul *would* bear witness of Him in Jerusalem, and it happened. Paul’s friends tried to stop him, it still happened. Now Jesus tells Him that He *will* bear witness of Him in Rome, and it *will* happen. It *must* happen. There is no possibility in the universe that it will not happen because *the Lord* of the universe said so!

- Now just think about this: How could Jesus promise that Paul would surely make it from Jerusalem to Rome – 1,434 miles by boat, safely, and then bear witness of Him there? The only answer is that He is sovereign God who controls every detail of this universe to accomplish His will! He is Lord over the weather, the wind and the waves. He controls rulers, authorities, and politics. He controls the health, and heart, and will of every person on this planet. That’s how Jesus can make a promise like this and guarantee that it will come to pass. Beloved, He is *sovereign – absolute Master over all His creation*: Nothing can thwart His will. Nothing can stop Him or even slow Him down. Jesus got Paul to Jerusalem, and He would get him to Rome. And then later, he would just as surely get him to heaven!

You and I can’t even guarantee a shopping trip to Santa Rosa – because, we’re not sovereign! “Oh no: car won’t start, roads are closed, you come down with COVID-19, bank put a stop on your credit cards, plague of locusts. . .you get the point. Our plans fail because we are not in control of our circumstances, but our heavenly Father is, and this is why everything He wills happens—

- Psalm 115:3 ³Our God is in the heavens; He *does* all that he pleases.
- Daniel 4:35 He *does* according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?”

- Eph.1:11, Paul calls God *“Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will!”*
- Psalm 33:10–11 ¹⁰The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. ¹¹The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.

We make our plans, and we should, but it’s God’s plans that will actually happen, right?

- Proverbs 16:9 ⁹The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps.
- Lamentations 3:37 ³⁷Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it?

God sovereignly controls and orders all natural circumstances to bring about His will. We call this the *Providence of God*, and I want you to look in your bulletin for as good a description of God’s providence as you will find – from The Heidelberg Catechism, questions 27&28:

27. Q: What do you understand by the Providence of God?

A: The almighty everywhere present power of God, whereby, as it were by His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth, with all creatures; and so governs them, that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, all things, come not by chance, but by His fatherly hand.

- All things: the test that comes back negative, and the test that comes back positive. The fire that consumes, and the fire that passes by. My pastor friend, Lloyd Johnson knows that however his cancer surgery turns out tomorrow, it will be determined by God’s fatherly hand in the life of His child.

28. Q: What does it profit us to know that God has created, and by His providence still upholds all things?

A: That we may be patient in adversity; thankful in prosperity; and for what is future, have good confidence in our faithful God and Father, that no creature shall separate us from His love; since all creatures are so in His hand, that without His will they cannot so much as move.

That was written in 1563! And what a comfort this is! After Janice and I found out that our President and first lady both have the COVID, she said, “What else can happen this year?” It *feels* like the whole world is spinning out of control and God is just up in heaven watching it all go down. That’s what unbelievers believe. No wonder in so many hospitals, the number of patients who have attempted suicide far exceeds the number of COVID patients

But for God's children, this is the greatest comfort in the world: the world is going exactly according to His plan, and we know that's God plan for His children is to work all things together for good! All things – every detail, every circumstance. What *feels* good and what *feels* bad – is *all* because God is for us in Christ, to will and to work for His good pleasure. And no circumstance, no natural disaster, no person, no disease can thwart God's good plan for us – in Christ!

- *This week Janice and I made some plans, and God said no, and because we have been talking about God's providence, we were just as thankful that He nixed our plans as if He had brought them to pass – because we know that what happens is always His good plan for us!

Jesus is going to get Paul to Rome just as He got him to Jerusalem, to proclaim the Gospel of Christ. And God is going to get you and I where He wants us to go for the sake of the Gospel – and nothing will stop Him.

- So in ch.22, Paul has just infuriated a Jewish mob by saying that Messiah Jesus told him to take the Gospel to Gentiles! Claudius Lysias, the commander of the Roman fortress rescues Paul – again – and calls the Sanhedrin to sort out Paul's story. But this isn't going to be a sympathetic audience: some of them were part of that crowd who wanted to kill Paul. And many in the Sanhedrin knew Paul personally: remember, he was a Pharisee – he had been a part of that council, and some of them had been fellow persecutors of Christians. But now he is *one of them*. That made him a traitor to their religion. Let's look at how Paul begins—

I. Smashmouth and Backtalk (vv.1-5).

- ¹And looking intently at the council, Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day."

"I have a clear conscience before God!" Yes, but these men understood the implications of what Paul was saying: If he was right about Jesus, then they were wrong – and they had murdered their Messiah. If he was obedient to God, then they were fighting against God. That explains what happens next—

- ²And the high priest *Ananias* commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.

They didn't slap his cheek, the word means to beat. They punched Paul in the face with their fists. Why did Ananias order this? He was furious that Paul would claim to be a good Jew and also be a follower of Jesus Christ. Josephus tells us about the kind of man Ananias was—

- He was the worst high priest ever. He was godless, greedy, cruel, and corrupt. He would rob the common priests of the tithes and offerings given to them, and he would retaliate

against any of them who resisted. He was hated by the Jews because he kissed up to Rome. And when the Jewish revolt against Rome broke out in 66 A.D., Ananias was murdered by some Jewish rebels.

- ³Then 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?”

There’s no excuse for what Paul does here. He just lost it. Luke has been drawing parallels between Jesus and Paul on their way to Jerusalem, hasn’t he? Well, this is where he draws the *contrast*: Paul isn’t Jesus! When they punched Jesus, and spat in His face, and pulled out His beard, how did He respond?

- Isaiah 53:7 . . . like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.
- 1 Peter 2:23 ²³When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

And Peter said that we are to follow Jesus’ example – even if we are in a debate . . . Now what Paul said was true, he hadn’t yet been charged with a crime, so it wasn’t legal to punch him in the face, but to lash out at the high priest was disrespecting God-instituted authority. And to Paul’s credit, he owned up to it—

- ⁴Those who stood by said, “Would you revile God’s high priest?” ⁵And 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.’”

Why didn’t Paul know? Some say Paul had bad eyesight and didn’t recognize the high priest; or that he was being sarcastic: “I didn’t think a high priest would do something like that!” But this was an informal meeting of the Sanhedrin. Ananias probably wasn’t wearing his high priestly robes – so maybe Paul really didn’t recognize him.

But we have to see that Paul respects the *office* even if he can’t respect the *man*. We need to hear that, don’t we? Don’t I? Yes. So after getting punched in the face, Paul realized the deck was stacked against him, and he needed to do some quick thinking on his feet to find a way to get *some* support in this group—

II. Division in the Sanhedrin (vv.6-9).

- ⁶Now 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.” ⁷And when he had said

this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. (The Sadducees were the majority, by the way.) ⁸For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. ⁹Then 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?"

Wow! Paul drops this bomb and just watches it explode! There's immediate uproar. Chris Wallace wouldn't even get them to calm down. There was a deep division between these two parties and it didn't take much to start a fight—Think about what was happening here: the Pharisees resented the Sadducee's even more than they did Paul!

*The Pharisees were religious conservatives, to the point of being prideful legalists. The Sadducees were theological liberals. They were very much like deists: God isn't personally involved in this world. And they were anti-supernatural: *⁸For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.* Once when the Sadducees challenged Jesus on the resurrection—

- Matthew 22:29 . . . Jesus answered them, "You are *wrong*, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God.

And the Sadducees were also the wealthy elite, and they were the party of the priests and high priests – *Ananias was a Sadducee*. So here is Paul, very much like a sheep in the middle of a pack of wolves, but maybe his old Pharisee friends would side with him against the Sadducees – and this is why he brought up the resurrection. But it's also a way to bring up the Lord Jesus. And it worked!—

- Acts 23:9 ⁹Then a great clamor arose, (literally, a great outcry – they were yelling) 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?"

I wonder if later they looked at each other and said, "Did we really defend Paul, the Christian to the Sanhedrin?"

- Remember what we said last week: "shrewd as a serpent?" That was Paul. And it was also Jesus, sovereignly leading and guiding everything that happens here, to get Paul to Rome. Let's keep reading—

III. Rescue and revelation (vv.10-11).

- ¹⁰And 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.

This is the third time now that Claudius Lysias has rescued Paul, and he's going to do it again. He took Paul to Fort Antonias in Jerusalem to protect him. By now, most of the town wants Paul dead. And he must have been exhausted and discouraged. He got to Jerusalem like Jesus said, but it's looking like this will be his last stop – until we read this—

- ¹¹The following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Take courage, (or ‘take heart’ – it’s the same word Jesus used in Jn.16:33 when He said, “*In this world you shall have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world!*”) Take courage Paul, for as you have testified to the facts about Me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”

That is a prophecy! It will happen. In the next chapters, Paul will be in constant danger, he will plots, shipwrecks and snakebites – but he had the personal promise of Jesus that nothing would stop him from getting to Rome to preach the Gospel. What a comfort that must have been to Paul as the rest of this journey to Rome unfolds! He memorized these words and hid them in his heart. And when he was in doubt or in danger – or in the middle of that violent storm in ch.27, he recited this promise, over and over: “*You must testify also in Rome.*”

*Beloved, your faith and your courage to face each day will be as strong as your grasp of Jesus’ promises to you. Do you know what Jesus has promised to you?

- Heb.13.5 “I will never desert you, nor will I forsake you.”
- John 6:37–39 ³⁷All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.
- Matthew 11:28–29 ²⁸Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.
- John 16:33 ³³I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”
- John 14:1–3 ¹“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. ²In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”

And because Jesus is sovereign Lord, if you belong to Him, He will do this. You will be with Him.

So remember as we work our way through to the end of this book: every detail is in the providential plan of God – even the plot we read about next—

IV. The plot to kill Paul—

A. Formulated (vv.12-15).

- ¹²When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. ¹³There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. ¹⁴They 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. ¹⁵Now 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.”

These are probably the same Jews from Ephesus who wanted to kill Paul back in ch.21 for bringing a Gentile into the Temple – which he didn’t do. This is how much they hated Paul. They were obsessed with getting rid of him. Notice that they went to the “*chief priests and elders*” –Ananias and his Sadducee buddies who also hated Paul. They persuaded the Sanhedrin to go tell Claudius that they wanted to meet with Paul again – but they didn’t tell the Pharisees what their real plan was, because it was illegal.

Now, it didn’t work, obviously, since Jesus promised Paul he would get to Rome. So you can’t help but read this and think: “What ever happened to those 40 very hungry and thirsty Jews? Did they really die??” According to the Jewish Talmud, it was at this exact time in history that a new law entered into the Jewish law books concerning vows. Listen to this coincidence:

- “If a man makes a vow to abstain from food, woe to him if he eats, and woe to him if he eats not! For if he eats, he sins against his vow; if he eats now, he sins against his life. What must he do? Let him go before the council and they will absolve him from his vow.”

Pays to have a good Jewish lawyer, huh? What went wrong with their plan? It wasn’t God’s plan! And God used a little kid to spoil it—

B. Found out (vv.16-22).

- ¹⁶Now the son of Paul’s sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. ¹⁷Paul called one of the centurions and said, “Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him.” ¹⁸So he took him and brought him to the tribune (Claudius Lysias) 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.” ¹⁹The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, “What is it that you have to tell me?” ²⁰And 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. ²¹But 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.” ²²So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, “Tell no one that you have informed me of these things.”

Claudius is a pretty good guy as Roman soldiers go. And he was very tender with Paul’s nephew, wasn’t he? You hope that God had mercy on him and saved him.

And here we learn that Paul had a sister, and she had a son. And they lived in Jerusalem. You wonder if she ever became a believer. She’s never mentioned as a part of the church in Jerusalem. You would think that if she was, Paul would have stayed with her when he arrived in Jerusalem, but he didn’t: ch.23:16 says that he stayed with a disciple named Mnason from Cyprus. We don’t read that she ever came to Paul’s aid. But Paul did say in—

- Philippians 3:8 ⁸Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

Paul probably suffered the loss of his family when he gained Christ. How many of you are cut off from some of your family because they can’t accept you as a Christian? But Jesus gave us this promise—

- Mark 10:29–30 ²⁹Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, ³⁰who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.

Jesus meant that when your physical family turns their backs on you because of Him, you gain even more in your spiritual family, the church. Along with persecutions!

But – listen – even if Paul’s sister and her family weren’t Christians, they still didn’t want to see him murdered. Somehow, in God’s providence, his young nephew heard about this plot – and he was bold enough to go visit Paul – Paul wasn’t a prisoner, he was just being kept in protective custody and Claudius has a solemn duty to protect this Roman citizen from any harm. Claudius hears the plot and comes up with a plan – which is really God’s plan!—

C. Frustrated (vv.23-35).

- ²³Then 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. ²⁴Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor.”

470 soldiers is almost half of his troops in Jerusalem. This is overkill, just to make sure nothing goes wrong in getting Paul the 65 miles to Caesarea which was the Roman capital of the province of Judea. And that’s where Felix, the governor of Judea had his palace. They were going to leave at 9:00 at night, after it was dark. Claudius wrote a letter explaining this situation—

- ²⁵And he wrote a letter to this effect: ²⁶“Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings. ²⁷This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen.

Now we have to smile when we read this! Claudius is a politician painting himself in the best light – he didn’t give Paul special treatment because he was a Roman citizen – he almost scourged him because he didn’t bother to find out until Paul told him. He goes on—

- ²⁸And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council. ²⁹I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. ³⁰And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him.” (end of letter) ³¹So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris.

Antipatris was halfway to Caesarea on the coast. They stopped there for the night—

- ³²And on the next day they returned to the barracks, letting the horsemen go on with him. (So half the soldiers returned to Jerusalem) ³³When they had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor (Felix), they presented Paul also before him. ³⁴On reading the letter, he asked what province he was from. And when he learned that he was from Cilicia, ³⁵he said, “I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive.” And he commanded him to be guarded in Herod’s praetorium.

This wasn’t a jail because Paul wasn’t a prisoner – he was staying in the governor’s mansion – probably the nicest place he would stay for a long time! Nice to know that God’s providence includes some comfort once in awhile!

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I want you to look again at—

- Acts 23:11 ¹¹The 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.”

Now turn over and look with me at—

- Ephesians 2:10 ¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus (the same Christ Jesus who came and stood beside Paul) for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Child of God, before time began, God decided, out of His own mercy and love, to choose you to be His own. And along with this election of love came a plan for your life: This plan has to do with taking the Gospel to every people, nation, tribe, and tongue. We know that because it's God's plan for the rest of history until Jesus returns. Jesus had a plan to use Paul for the Gospel until the day he died – and Jesus has a plan to use you for the Gospel until the day He calls you home.

Your job is to surrender yourself completely to that plan, to put your life and everything you own at the disposal of Jesus, for the sake of the Gospel. And you have His promise that until the day He calls you home, in His sovereign providence, He will cause all things to work together for good!