Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Providential Protection
Scripture: Acts 23:12-35
Code: 1790

1974

This morning, we are again drawn to the book of Acts for our study, looking again at the sequence of events in the life of the Apostle Paul, as he is now a prisoner. This section of Acts, and the section immediately following, I would say, are reminiscent to me of another man of God in the Bible, and that's David. Here, Paul is hunted, plotted against. There are some who desire to take his life. Oh, how that parallels the occasions of the life of David.

I was thinking of a psalm as I was preparing to talk about Paul, a psalm of David, Psalm 56. You know, as we had studied in Acts 23:11, Paul had just been through three riots, all directed at him. Really, he escaped death three times. Now, he sits alone in the barracks, and the Lord Jesus comes to him in person in verse 11, and it says, "The Lord said, 'Be of good cheer, Paul, for as you have testified of Me in Jerusalem, so must you bear witness also in Rome.'"

The Lord comes in the middle of the night to a lonely, forsaken, discouraged, despondent, sad apostle and cheers his heart. You see the apostle sitting there, and all the world, it seems, is plotting against him. The Gentile world, which was so antagonistic toward him just from a pagan standpoint, and the Jewish world, so very antagonistic because he preached the Messiah they rejected. All of it is pitted against him and now, all of it arrived in Jerusalem because it's feast time, and it all manifested itself in the three riots that had just occurred. There he is in loneliness, and I thought perhaps he felt a little bit like David, who, as he ran for so much of his life from those who would murder him, penned these words under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in Psalm 56. This is what he said and it could well have been the prayer of Paul.

"Be merciful unto me, O God: for man would swallow me up; the fighting daily oppresseth me. Mine enemies would daily swallow me up: for they be many that fight against me, O Thou most High. What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee. In God I will praise His word, in God I have put my trust; I will not fear what flesh can do unto me. Every day they wrest my words: all their thoughts are against me for evil. They gather themselves together, they hide themselves, they mark my steps, when they wait for my soul. Shall they escape by iniquity? In Thine anger cast down the people, O God. Thou tellest my wanderings: put Thou my tears into Thy bottle."

It was a custom in the East, when people mourned at a funeral, to catch their tears in a bottle and give them to the person they mourned for as a token of their affection and care. David says, "Catch my tears, God, as a reminder." Then he says, "Are they not in Thy book?" Are they not in the plan? Did You not know about them?

"When I cry unto Thee, then shall mine enemies turn back: this I know; for God is for me. In God will I praise His word: in the LORD will I praise His word. In God have I put my trust: I will not be afraid what man can do unto me. Thy vows are upon me, O God: I will render praises unto Thee. For Thou hast delivered my soul from death: wilt not Thou deliver my feet from falling, that I may walk before God in the light of the living?" In other words, he says, "God, You'll spare my life, I know You will." His confidence is in God.

This must have been the feeling of Paul, as the Lord had just said, "You're going to live, and you're going to go to Rome." He sat in the cell, and the plot was going on against his life, but his confidence was in God. Immediately, in verse 12, there is an incident that happens that allows Paul to know for sure that his confidence is well-placed in the God who will, in fact, deliver him.

Everything he has tried to do since he came to Jerusalem has ended in a riot. He tried to pacify the Jewish Christians and that ended in a riot. He tried to give his testimony of what God had done in his life to the Jewish crowd in the temple court and that ended in a riot. He tried to give testimony before the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin, and that ended in a riot. Now, he's a prisoner; his life is sought. Down in his heart, he doesn't feel it's time yet. He doesn't feel his course is done, he doesn't feel he's fought the good fight and it's over yet. That comes later. He still, in his heart, feels that he needs to go to Rome. He's expressed that to the Lord, and the Lord comes to him in the night and says, "So shall it be. You'll be in Rome."

So now he's cheered up, he's confident in God. Immediately an incident occurs that seals that confidence. It's two years from the time of the promise, in verse 11, to the time that he gets to Rome, two long years. That's a big block of time for a man with the kind of burning eagerness that this man had. But all through that two years, he never waivers. I think that's amazing. He never wavers, he never begins to doubt, he never begins to distrust God. God made a promise, he believed the promise, God immediately, in verses 12-35, sealed that promise with him. And from that promise and its seal, he had absolute confidence.

As I approached this text at the beginning of the week and began to read through it and tried to seek the mind of the Lord here, revealed in the text, as to what it is that we should talk about, I read the whole text and found the name of God wasn't mentioned. I found the name of Jesus wasn't mentioned. Nothing about the Lord is mentioned from verse 12 on. Nothing about the Holy Spirit, nothing about salvation, nothing about redemption, nothing about the Messiah, nothing about any Christian doctrine that is postulated anywhere else in Scripture. There is nothing about anything

practical for the Christian life, there is absolutely nothing here in terms of actual doctrinal instruction.

I read all the way through it, and I always look for the things that may be the keys of doctrine in order to teach, but there weren't any. Immediately, I was reminded of a tremendous Scripture, and it's II Timothy 3:16. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable." I thought, "Alright God, it's profitable. You just show me how. How is it profitable?" I began to read it, to see whether the mind of the Holy Spirit reveals in this the profitable thing that I should be able to recognize and how clearly it should be there. I studied and perused it, and you know what I came to? I came to the fact that this has got to be one of the greatest illustrations in the entire New Testament of the providence of God.

Then I was reminded of a book in the Old Testament that doesn't mention the name of God, the name of the Messiah, the name of the Spirit, has no Christian doctrine in it at all, has no doctrine in it period, has no commands, has no instructions to holiness, has no nothing. It is simply a historical incident with no theological references whatsoever. You know what it is? It's the book of Esther. God's name isn't even in the book. There's no mention of anything like that.

You say, "What in the world is it there for?" It's there because it's one of the most graphic and complete illustrations of the providential care of God anywhere in all the revelation. It shows how God cared and brought about what He wanted to bring about through the circumstances that were going on. It doesn't even have a miracle in it. Did you know that? Do you know that God does things two ways, through miracles and through providence, and they're different? Miracle is when God breaks the natural strain, when God breaks the natural process to invade it in a supernatural way. Providence is when God gets His will done not by changing the natural, but by using the natural circumstances to accomplish what He wants to.

How many times have you read in the Bible, "God came down and did this," and that's a miracle. How many other times have you read that, "So-and-so did this, so-and-so did this, so-and-so did this, then they did this, and all of a sudden, it all worked out the way God wanted it." That's the difference between a miracle and providence. A miracle is God violating the natural world to invade it supernaturally; providence is God supernaturally using the natural to accomplish His will.

What you have in Esther is not a whole lot of miracles. There is nothing like the Red Sea opening up and them walking across, or the walls of Jericho fall down, you don't have any of that. You just have all kinds of interwoven circumstances as God works His will. He can do it through miracle or through providence. I thought of that song that we sang in the quartet, "I believe in miracles." I do believe in miracles, but I believe in miracles in terms of Scripture. Today, I believe in the providence of God. I believe we are living in the day when God is doing things through His providence. I don't see great, sweeping, supernatural invasions, but I see God's providence accomplishing His will. This is providence.

So we come to Acts 23 and see exactly the same thing: the providence of God. It is no less God, and in its purest sense, it is no less supernatural. It is the use of the natural events rather than the cessation of the natural and the invasion of the unnatural. For example, it is the difference between the Apostle Paul being stoned at Lystra and the Lord raising him from the dead. The Apostle Paul going to jail and the Lord has a very localized earthquake that only knocks the whole jail down - that's a miracle. Here you don't have any of that. God's name isn't mentioned, but all of the circumstances weave together to accomplish God's purpose. No less the divine work of God.

In fact, Dr. Ironside said, "God is never nearer than when we cannot see His face. He is never closer than when we do not hear His voice. He is never undertaking for us more than at those times when His own name isn't mentioned." God doesn't need to get publicity to do what He does, do you understand that?

So we see here what is a beautiful illustration of the providence of God. Of course, I immediately thought of those times when we, if we don't see a miracle, have a very difficult time trusting providence, you know? There's a whole gamut today of people who always want a miracle. "Do a miracle! Do a miracle!" We don't need a miracle, because God can accomplish whatever He wants to accomplish through providence, through the ordering of things in the way that He desires to gain His ends.

That's why Philippians 4:6 says, "The Lord is at hand. Don't worry about anything!" It couldn't be simpler. Hebrews 13:6 says, "The Lord is my helper. I will not fear what man shall do to me," quoting the Psalm. I love this passage, and you know the passage where He says, "Why are you worrying? Don't you know that I take care of the birds and I take care of the lilies?" He goes through that whole thing in Luke 12.

What I love is Luke 12:30. He says, "For all these things do the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you have need of these things." The world runs around saying, "I've got to have it! I've got to have it!" "Get off that kick," He's saying, "God already knows you need those things. So quit worrying about it." That's terrific. I like that.

He says, "If I take care of the birds and the lilies, do you think you're worth more than birds and lilies? For all these things do the nations of the world seek after. Your Father knows you have need. So, you seek the Kingdom of God and all these things will be added to you." Now I love this. He says, "Fear not, little flock. It is your Father's delight to give you the Kingdom. What are you worried about?"

You know, we say, "Oh, God, my need. Please, my needs, oh, I need this!" God's up there saying, "That's My delight! Here, here, here, here." It is the Father's delight to give you those things. "Fear not, little flock. Sell what you have, give it all away, provide yourselves bags which grow not old, a

treasure in the Heavens that fails not, where no thief approaches neither moth corrupts, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Don't worry about stocking your stockpiles down here. God knows what you needed before you ever came up with the need. You say, "But He might not give it." It is the Father's delight to give you everything the Kingdom includes. Fear not, little flock. That's exciting, isn't it.

So what is he saying here in this reference to Paul? God is saying to Paul, "I'm going to take care of you. You're My sheep, I know your needs. You're sitting in a cell, you're upset, Jesus came, comforted you. There's a plot against your life, a murder plot. Leave it to Me, I'll take care of everything." That's exciting, as we see this murder plot unfold, to see the providence of God as He weaves together the circumstances to accomplish the protection of His child.

Let's look at it in four scenes: the plot formulated, found out, foiled, then the farewell. OK? First of all, the plot formulated. In verses 12-15, and we'll go to verse 35, the plan in the life of Paul is very much like the life of Jesus. Both were Jews, both were preachers of God, both were rejected by their own people, both had murder plots against them, both stood before a confused Sanhedrin, both were prisoners of Rome in Fort Antonia, and there are even other similarities. I thought back to Philippians 3:10, where Paul's prayer was, "That I may know Him, the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings." Paul knew the fellowship of the sufferings of Jesus like no man that ever lived. He almost went through the same sequence of events that Jesus did.

Verse 12. "And when it was day," that's the morning after the night in which Jesus appeared to Paul and the very day after he had given testimony to the Jewish Council, "Certain of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under a curse, saying they would neither eat or drink until they had killed Paul." Now here's the plot. Disappointed at having let Paul slip through their fingers, a group of these zealots determined that they were going to engineer a plot to kill him and he wouldn't get away this time. They were very serious about it; they were serious about it as indicated by the fact that it says, "They bound themselves under a curse."

The Greek is 'they anathematized themselves with an anathema'. They devoted themselves to destruction. This was not an uncommon thing. They placed themselves under a divine judgment, as it were, they invoked the vengeance of God. It would go something like this, if any of the other Jewish vows would be similar to this, this would be a typical one. "So may God do to us and more, if we eat or drink anything until Paul is dead."

Now they were serious; they wanted this man dead. The most stringent way they knew was to take this kind of a vow that bound them and sort of told everybody the seriousness of it. They invoked the vengeance of God if they didn't accomplish it. Of course, that's dumb, because God may or may not be involved in it. That's why Jesus said, "Swear not at all, don't do that. Don't say, 'God, strike me

dead if I don't do this,' or, 'God do this if I don't do that.' Let your conversation be 'yes and no' and forget that." Jesus said, "Swear not at all neither by Heaven or Earth." But they were doing that, and they wanted to drag God into it and appear very holy. "We'll kill him or God strike us dead," feeling they were really going to defend God. They wanted God in on the murder plot.

It's interesting, I think, to tell you that technically, they could have gotten out of the vow. The rabbis provided absolution for those who just couldn't come through with their vow, which is interesting. But as with the case of Christ's murder, as you think about this, what becomes very amazing is that these people could be so violent, so upset, and so blatant against someone who hadn't done anything to them. He'd never harmed them, stolen from them, broken their laws. All he did was preach love and salvation, announce that the Messiah, Jesus Christ, whom they had rejected, came alive from the dead and back again through Paul to tell them they could accept Him as their Messiah even after they had done that, and He would grant them eternal life. All he did was give them a message of peace and grace.

You say, "Why would they react to such a man like this? Why not just say, 'Oh, well. Let him go.' Why so hostile? Why so violent?" Because of this, folks. To simplify it, they were the dupes of Satan. That's the simplest way to look at it. They had been so subjected to the power of Satan, by this time, existing so long in a false system of religion based on ego and hypocrisy, that they were Satan's tools. Satan wanted Jesus and the Gospel done away.

That's nothing new, is it? The rebellion began in Heaven, it continued on earth in Eden, and even when God began the plan of redemption to bring the Messiah, Satan still fought against it. He tried to destroy the Messiah's line, he tried to have Herod kill all the babies, he tried by tempting Christ, by killing Christ, by sealing Christ in the tomb. He tries continually in the Bible by trying to silence the preachers of Christ. He tries today by corrupting the Christians so that they lose the format and foundation of the right to speak. He never stops, and here were some tools. The handle that Satan used to turn them the way he wanted them to go was the handle of their own spiritual egos. They couldn't stand anyone who propagated anything that they didn't believe or that contradicted them, because it made them look bad in the eyes of the people. They were dupes of Satan.

So here they are, plotting against Paul. Paul, who had given his life to give them a message of love and hope and peace and salvation. Verse 13 tells you more about it. "And there were more than 40 who made the conspiracy." 40-plus involved. You say, "Why so many?" Well, apparently, they felt that the Romans wouldn't bring about Paul's death, they couldn't procure the death at the hands of Rome. They realized that they didn't want Paul in front of the people making another speech or he might wind up persuading too many of them.

So they saw they had to get rid of him. But they didn't want any one individual to bear the brunt, so they realized if they had 40 or more (and that's maybe an arbitrary figure, they may have called

together all those who were interested) or if they had enough, no one person could be blamed for it. Plus, that many could accomplish it without Paul escaping. So they bound themselves by a blood oath, swearing to God that they would assassinate Paul or they would be willing to take the vengeance of God, knowing all the time that they could get out of it.

Verse 14. They weren't finished; they wanted more support. They came to the chief priest and elders. Now the chief priests of the Sanhedrin were the Sadducees. The Sadducees' party was the most antagonistic to Paul. Do you remember for what reason? Because Paul taught the resurrection and they were anti-resurrectionists. So these conspirators went to the leaders of the Sanhedrin, to the top guys, and said, "Look, we have bound ourselves under a great curse that we will not eat anything until we have slain Paul." Why would they bother to tell the Sadducees? Because they could get a hearing, someone to listen to them who would agree. They wanted to enlist the support of the Council.

It's interesting, I think, to just note the fact that the conspirators, the 40-plus, knew that the leadership of Israel was so morally rotten that they were willing to advertise a murder. Can you imagine taking a group of murderers up to the Supreme Court and telling them that you'd like their cooperation in a murder? Well, that's part of it. But they were not only the judicial heads of the country, they were the spiritual leaders. They were so corrupted that justice was corrupted and spiritual truth was corrupted to the place where they could be enlisted in a murderous assassination. They knew they'd get a hearing and had no fears that they would be prosecuted for such a thing as attempted murder or whatever.

No wonder, later on, when Paul is to be tried again, he appeals to be sent to Caesar rather than go back to the Sanhedrin. Verse 15. "Now, therefore, you with the council." What they did, they said to this segment of Sadducee leaders from the council, "You with the rest of the council, you signify to the chief captain."

This is a reference to the Roman tribune who was running the fort, and who had Paul as his prisoner. "You tell the chief captain that he bring him down unto you tomorrow as though you would inquire something more perfectly concerning him." That simply translates 'as though you would investigate more about the case.' They had had an investigation that ended in a riot, because the Sadducees and Pharisees started a fight. But he says, "You tell the chief captain that we want Paul brought down here.

Whoever the spokesman was tells this little group, "You get the Sanhedrin together to get the chief captain to bring the prisoner down and on the way down, before he comes near, we are ready to kill him." That's the end of verse 15. It was an ambush and the plot was formulated. You say, "Did the Sanhedrin agree?" According to verse 20, they did agree. The Jews have agreed.

You say, "I thought it said in verse 9 that some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party said that they found no fault in Paul?" Yes, but that, at the time, was for the sake of the argument, remember? They wanted Paul on their side in the debate with the Sadducees because he believed in resurrection and so did they. But apart from their struggle with the Sadducees, either they changed their minds or they were outvoted, because the Sanhedrin was run on the basis of a majority vote.

So the Sanhedren voted to cooperate and here's the plot. Forty men are going to assassinate Paul, the Sanhedrin is going to ask the Roman chiliarch tribune, the Roman leader of the 1000 men at Fort Antonia, to send Paul down to the Sanhedrin. On the way, he will be ambushed and murdered by those 40 men. But then we begin to see the wheels of providence move as the plot is secondly found out.

Verse 16. This is really a tantalizing verse, because it introduces to us something which we can't resolve, but which throws open all kinds of interesting things. "And when Paul's sister's son heard of their lying in wait," literally in the Greek, their ambush. "He went and entered the barracks and told Paul." Now isn't this interesting? Paul's nephew was in on the plot somehow.

Do you realize that the Bible says nothing at all about Paul's family? All we know is that his father was a Pharisee, because he made that statement earlier. We don't know anything else. We do know that in Philippians 3:8, he said that because of his faith in Christ, he had suffered, "The loss of all things." Most Bible teachers assume that 'the loss of all things' included being disinherited from his Jewish family, because from then on, you hear nothing at all about his family, nothing at all.

How, then, all of a sudden, does Paul's sister's son come to Paul's rescue? What is he doing in Jerusalem? Did he live there? Was he there studying to be a rabbi as Paul had been when he was a boy? Was Paul's sister really one who cared about Paul even though he had been disinherited? Had Paul's sister become a believer? Interesting to think about. I can't imagine the Apostle Paul not trying to convert his family, can you? I'm sure he gave it everything he had.

An interesting thing pops up in verse 16. "When Paul's sister's son heard of the ambush." The verb 'he went and entered the barracks', that arras participle there could be translated 'having been present'. It is possible that the boy was present when the plot took place. It is possible it means he was present at the prison, it is possible that it means he was present at the plot. It seems sensible to say he was present at the plot or he wouldn't have known the plot. Can you imagine how God worked the circumstances to have that little boy hanging around the conspirators to get the right message? Then he had the presence of mind to go and warn his uncle. That's what happened.

You can see that this is no less supernatural than if God had reached a big sky-hook out of Heaven and pulled Paul right up. I think it's interesting to add a point, and I'll take a minute to do that.

There is a word in Romans 16 that is translated in the English Authorized Version 'kinsman'. Sometimes, it means countryman, sometimes it means relative. It's an interesting thought, if you look at Romans 16:7, "Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen, who are in Christ before me." That's interesting. The possibility is there. Then he says in verse 11, "Greet Herodion, my kinsman who are in the Lord," with another individual. Verse 21, "Timothy my fellow worker, or work fellow, and Lucius, and Jason, and Sosipater, my kinsmen." It may have been that Paul did have some fruit in his own family. We don't know, but it's interesting to think about.

So the boy heard about the plot, and came to the barracks to tell Paul. Maybe the family was high class. You know, Paul had been a member of the Sanhedrin and his father was a Pharisee and a Roman citizen, the whole ball of wax, zealous for the law. It could have been that his father was a sharp guy, up there, and we don't know, it's possible that he could have been in the leadership of Israel. Whatever, the boy heard it, went, and told Paul about it. How exciting!

Can you imagine what Paul's heart must have started doing? Thump, thump, thump. Just a few hours before, the Lord had come and said, "You're going to Rome," and now, all of a sudden, the boy comes and tells about a murder plot against him. He begins to realize that God has warned him and that this is step one in the fulfillment of a promise. I can imagine he was so excited when that happened.

Verse 17. "Paul called one of the centurions, he called him over," one of the leaders of 100 men - that's what 'centurion' means. He said, "Bring this young man to the chief captain, for he has a certain thing to tell him. Take this boy to the chiliarch, to Claudius Lysias, the tribune, your commander and chief. He has something to tell him!" It's an important message.

Verse 18. "He took him, brought him to the chief captain, and said, 'Paul, the prisoner.'" Get used to that, that's what it will be from now until he dies, but the marvelous thing is that he always calls himself, "Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ." He never saw himself as a prisoner of any government, always of Christ. Paul, the prisoner, called me to him and asked me to bring this young man to you. He has something to say to you." He said, "I'm bringing this boy because Paul the prisoner told me to bring him to you."

Verse 19. I like this. "The chief captain took him by the hand." That's interesting. You say, "What's interesting about that?" Why would a chief captain take a little boy by the hand unless it was to calm him down? I mean, you can imagine a little fellow in the middle of the Roman fort, just sort of shaking. So to calm him down, to pacify him, he took him by the hand and went with him aside, privately. He asked him, "What is that you have to tell me? What do you want to tell me?"

Now by this time, this guy is so absolutely inundated with material about Paul, but he can't resolve anything, so anything that even relates to Paul interests him. "What have you got to tell me?" Verse 20. "He said, 'The Jews have agreed to desire of you that you would bring down Paul tomorrow into the council as though they would investigate him more careful. They want you to bring Paul down tomorrow.'"

The messengers haven't even gotten to the chiliarch yet, so you see how God's timing is perfect. It's perfect. "But," he says in verse 21, "Do not yield to them." Here is a little kid commanding the Roman commander! You can see how God is superintending this thing. "Do not yield to him, for they will lie in wait for him." There is an ambush of more than 40 men who have anathematized themselves with an anathema." In other words, they have devoted themselves to destruction. They will neither eat nor drink until they have killed him, and they are now ready. "The whole thing depends on the promise from you to deliver the prisoner."

So the whole plot was found out; the scheme is out. The chief captain then let the young man depart and charged him, "See that you tell no man that you have shown these things to me. Don't tell anybody." Why did he tell him that? I think for two reasons; they seem obvious to me. One, he told him not to say anything about it because if the plotters knew that the plot was out, they would come up with another plot, if they were that bound to killing, right? Secondly, I don't think that the commander wanted an argument with those Jews, and I don't think that he wanted them to know that he knew their plot, because if they knew he knew their plot, and he wouldn't let it come off, then you would begin to see potential revolution and sedition.

Jerusalem and Judea were volatile; it was only a few years after this that the whole place exploded in a revolution. He knew the past history of what the other commanders had run into in that place and he did not want to butt heads with them. I think he just figured that the simplest thing to do is, "Let nobody know I know and just get Paul out of town. They'll never suspect that I got him out of town because I knew the plot, that I was only following the necessary procedures that I thought best. They won't take it as a personal effrontery." He was wise. So we see that the plot is found out.

Thirdly it is foiled. That is a good Simon McGree term. You can see again the providence of God. This gets exciting.

Determined to outfox the assassins, Claudius Lysias feels the pressure of Roman justice, and doesn't want to have on his hands the responsibility for the assassination of a Roman citizen, which could cost him his job and his life. He doesn't want to get into a hassle with the Jewish people because the political pot is already boiling. He knows that he has a very important man on his hands or there wouldn't be such a hassle going on. He knows the only thing to do is get this guy out of town and push the case upstairs to the governor. 'Upstairs' was down, really, because it was down to Caesarea, but it was upstairs in terms of who had the authority.

This is kind of reminiscent, too, of how they treated Jesus. Remember? Jesus went to Pilate first and Pilate pushed Him up to Herod. Here, Claudius Lysias, the commander, doesn't want to side. He wants Paul out of town, to protect his life and Claudius' position; he wants to turn him over to Felix and let him deal with it.

Man, really, to get him over to Caesarea, over at the coast, was smart because Caesarea was a Gentile-dominated town and a Gentile-dominated territory. There was less likelihood of a real problem, or revolution, or assassination. So he calls his forces in verse 23.

"He called to him two centurions." Each of those, of course, would be commanding 100 men. "Make ready 200 soldiers to go to Caesarea." So each man would take the 100 troops that were under him, and this is the heavily armed infantry.

The Roman armies moved in three parts. First of all, the heavy-armed infantry. These would be the guys with the swords and shields who could set up the defense - the phalanx - where they would line up with shields and this would be the front-line kind of thing. This was really an armed group. "In addition to that, 70 horsemen." This is the cavalry. It was important in Roman armies that they had the cavalry. The third thing, 200 of what the Greek calls 'graspers by the right hand'. 200 graspers by the right hand. It's translated here 'spearmen', obviously it would be difficult to say, "OK, all you graspers by the right hand, fall out." What it means is 'javelin throwers', men who carried the javelin. These are the light-armed troops.

Very often, as the army moved, the cavalry might be reconnaissance or flank troops; the heavy-armed would be out front, and the spearmen in the back, throwing these javelins. So here are 470 soldiers armed to the gills to escort one apostle out of town. You know, when the providence of God goes into action and God takes care of His saints, they usually go first-class.

So all the Roman army is grouped to get him out of town, and they're going to do it at 9 p.m., "The third hour of the night," verse 23 says. Get him out of town at night. That's how he left Jerusalem. He must have been amazed at all the folderol going on just to get him out. It was a stormy province; the simmering heat, which, nine years later, erupted in the revolution that ended in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., was already starting. Thus, Claudius Lysias figured he needed a large force. He knew that the whole of the populous in the temple ground had riled against Paul; he knew that this was a big issue, and he was afraid. He knew that Paul would be safe in Caesarea if he could get him there.

Verse 25. "He also wrote a letter after this manner." He wanted a letter to go to Felix, the governor. Oh, verse 24 says that they had beasts, or horses. They put Paul on the horse and brought him safely to Felix, the governor. There was a letter accompanying, and the letter is very interesting. What

is interesting about it is this: Luke records for us this letter verbatim.

You say, "What is interesting about that?" Luke never read it. You know what I'm saying? This is a good illustration of divine inspiration. The Spirit of God told Luke, by the miracle of revelation, the words of that letter, and he wrote them down with his own hand. That's inspiration in the Bible. That's how the whole Bible has been written, by inspiration of God. Verbal inspiration. Incidentally, the letter was probably written in Latin, so the Spirit of God had to give it to Luke in Greek. But the Spirit does well at translation, believe me.

Verse 26. Here's the letter, and I want you to notice the letter. It's a very typical letter where the guy is writing to his superior and he pads his case.

"Claudius Lysias unto the Most Excellent Governor Felix [and we'll talk about Felix in our next study] sendeth greeting." Then he gets into it. Incidentally, we're not going to take a lot of time to study the letter, because all it is is a summary of the stuff we've studied for three weeks. He summarizes the events that have brought him to this place of sending Paul.

"This man was taken by the Jews." Remember, they took him when he was in the temple? He was worshiping there and they tried to kill him. "And should have been killed of them: then came I," isn't that terrific? Ah, Claudius to the rescue. "And should have been killed of them: then came I with an army, and rescued him, having understood that he was a Roman." Oops. Liar. No, he didn't know he was a Roman until he had already rescued him and strapped him on the frame to be scourged. Then he found out Paul was a Roman and panicked. He was going to torture Paul to get the truth out of him, and it wasn't until he had already begun the process of torture that he found out he was a Roman and called a quick halt. But, you see, when you write to your superior, you want to come off as class A stuff.

"So I came to the rescue with the army, having understood that he was a Roman," protecting his rights as a Roman. "And when I would have known the cause wherefore they accused him, I brought him forth into their council," I followed due procedure, I took him to the council. He did do that. He brought him to the Jewish Sanhedrin, and you remember the mess that occurred there: it all ended in a big fight.

Then he says in verse 29, "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." He gives a rather quick account of the interview with the Jewish Sanhedrin, from which he concluded this. "The whole issue is Jewish; it has nothing to do with Roman law. Nothing at all." And he was right. He is stating, in verse 29, the innocence of Paul. Again, do you see the parallel between this and Jesus? Five times, Pilate said, "I find no fault in Him." The same for Paul, he hadn't done anything.

You know what happens? If you go back in the history of Israel, you'll find that the leadership of Israel has been corrupted through the centuries. It has been corrupted so that, when Jesus arrived in Matthew 23:37, He said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets and stonest them that are sent unto you. How often I would have gathered you as a hen gathers her brood and you would not. Therefore your house shall be left to you desolate." The history of Israel was the history of lifting up evil men and murdering good ones. They did it all the time. They did it up to Messiah, they did it after Messiah with Stephen, and they're trying to do it again with Paul. Israel's history has been the history of killing those that God has sent to them with His message.

He says, "I have nothing to lay to his charge. There is no accusation, I haven't been able to get one." Here is a prisoner without an accusation, really. He's got to deal with this carefully. Verse 30 is how he deals with it. This was really the key; notice this. Paul would never have been able to go from Jerusalem to Caesarea unless there was a reason. The normal reason would be because there was an accusation against him. Since there was no accusation, Claudius says, "I'm sending him for protection," and that's legitimate. So that's important.

"When it was told me how that the Jews laid wait for the man, I sent straightway to thee, and gave commandment to his accusers also to say before thee what they had against him. Farewell." So Claudius says in his letter, "I moved the whole thing to you; I sent him to you because there was a plot to take his life. I told his accusers to go to Caesarea and they would have a chance to accuse him there. I'm moving the whole case to you." Boy, he washed his hands. It was a smart thing to do; he saved his neck and his reputation, with both the Romans and the Jews, by acting wisely and cautiously.

So that's the letter. Paul, then, is taken to be brought before the governor, to be accused by the Jews, to be tried. That brings us to the last scene, the farewell.

Verse 31. "Then the soldiers, as it was commanded them, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris." That's about 35 miles. The distance from Jerusalem to Caesarea is almost exactly 60 miles, and it was downhill for the first 35 and at the foot of the Judean hillsides was a little village of Antipatris. It was named for Antipater, the Roman.

So they came to this little village, and at that little village, verse 32, "They left the horseman to go with Paul and returned to the barracks." The 400 soldiers only worried about getting him down the hill. Once they got him to Antipatris, they were in Gentile territory pretty much. They felt that the 70 horsemen could handle him, so the other 400 came back to Jerusalem. That was wise, too, because he had to have his forces where they needed to be, back in the city. Plus, the fact that they hurried back would tend to cover up a little bit some of the caution that perhaps he may have taken.

So the soldiers, as it was commanded, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. The next day, they left the horsemen to go on with him to Caesarea and the rest returned to the barracks. Incidentally, I might mention, it must have been a tremendous march. They must have pushed and pushed to get there in the morning. They say an army, at best, when moving at its fastest, moves about 3.5 miles an hour. To crank those 35 miles out in that one night, they would have had to push to their limits all through the night. Then, of course, the next day, they had to hurry and return.

Verse 33. "When they came to Caesarea and delivered the epistle [that is, the letter] to the governor, presented Paul also before him." So the 70 cavalrymen deposited Paul along with the letter explaining the case. "And when the governor had read the letter, he asked of what province he was. And when he understood that he was of Cilicia; 'I will hear thee,' said he, 'When thine accusers are also come.'" We'll stop there for a minute.

Now, he had to determine where Paul was from, because he had to determine who had jurisdiction. The Romans had divided their conquered world into various provinces over which there were procurators, or governors. Cilicia and Judea were considered to be in the domain of Felix, and that's what he wanted to determine so that he would know that he had jurisdiction. When Paul replied that he was from Cilicia, which is just north of the Judea area, he agreed that that was his jurisdiction. He says, "I will try the case when your accusers arrive."

In our next study, we'll see what happens when they do arrive: how the case is tried, and the most amazing responses of Felix. Let me show you the end of verse 35, it's really interesting. "And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's judgment hall." Now, in the authorized version, that sounds very foreboding. The word in the Greek is 'praitorion'. It means the residence of the governor. He said, "Keep him in my house."

You say, "What's interesting about that?" This: do you know what the praitorion was in Caesarea? It was the palace of Herod. Herod had built a magnificent palace there, and of course, Herod wasn't really able to enjoy it to its fullest since he declared a day in which he was going to honor himself and God struck him and worms ate him because he didn't give glory to God. That's in Acts 12. So his palace was taken over by the Romans and turned into the house of the governor. You talk about first class, he had been escorted by 470 soldiers and now, he was going to room in the palace. God is taking care of him.

You can just imagine that Paul is there in the palace just praising the Lord for a promise given only the night before, and fulfilled already. It is the care of the Lord for His children. Do you see a miracle in the passage? Did you see a miracle anywhere? No miracle. No signs, no wonders, and no mighty deeds. Did you see God at work in His providence, ordering the circumstances, ordering the lives of the people, moving all the scenes and characters on the stage to accomplish His will?

Beloved, this passage tells me things about God even though God isn't mentioned. One, it tells me God is faithful. He keeps His word. Do you believe that? Peter said this in II Peter 3:9, "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise." I see a faithful God. He makes a promise in verse 11, and right in the morning He carries out the fulfillment of it. Paul is 60 miles closer to the promised destination in the first day. God confirmed that promise in his heart. God is faithful.

Second, God is caring. Did you see the care of God? Did you see how He takes care of His servant? He knows how much Paul can handle. He knew that it wasn't time yet for Paul to sneak out of town or to be dragged out of town or to be hustled through the Judean hillsides between the robbers and all the people that were lurking there and seditionists by two or three men, sort of scared and in the corner. He knew how much Paul had endured, and He knew it was time for Paul to go first class. So that's how he went.

People always think God wants everybody to be poor, destitute, and barely scrape by. No, God knows when you need first class. I remember coming home from a meeting one time, to give you a really silly illustration. I was so tired; I had never been as sick as I was. I got sick during the entire meeting. In fact, the church wouldn't let me come back to preach. I was flying from Chicago to Portland, and I was at the end of my tether. I had stayed all week in Chicago in a place that was not air-conditioned. It was 100 degrees every day with about 95% humidity, and I had the flu, and had to speak two or three times a day in an auditorium without air conditioning. By the time the week was over, I was wiped out.

I'll never forget, I just didn't think I could hack it. I knew I was going to get on that airplane, get squished in that preachers' economy section, next to a guy with a black cigar, you know? I mean, I had it all figured out. I got on there and the girl said to me, "I'm sorry, sir, there are no more seats left. We'll have to put you in first class." I said, "Lord, You know. You know." So I went in there, and they started feeding me, and they fed me from Chicago to Portland.

The Lord knows those things. It is His delight; fear not, little flock. I Samuel 30:6 says, "David was greatly distressed, but David encouraged his heart in the Lord his God." Amen. Let's pray.

We thank You, Father, for what You have accomplished in the life of Paul through Your providence as well as through miracles. We thank You for what we see in our own lives as the providence that You design guides us to the accomplishment of Your will. Thank You for the time we've shared together today. Teach us to trust You, to remember that You care. We remember the words of Peter, "Casting all your care on Him, for He cares for you," and to fear not, to be anxious for nothing. To know it's Your delight to give us all that the Kingdom involves. We thank You in Jesus' name, Amen.

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