

## ENJOY THE JOURNEY

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Acts 23:12-35  
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The month of June can be a month of great activity or a month of “all stop!” due to unpredictable weather or other unforeseen events that force us to cancel our plans. For most, it is probably a month filled with activities such as weddings, graduations, church evaluations, vacations, family reunions, serve GP, Church in the Park, camps for kids, much anticipated home projects, or even a major move.

Whether things for you are being stirred up or are standing still, where does Jesus fit in? What is Jesus doing in the midst of each of our June days? Are we living as practical atheists, as though Jesus never resurrected or doesn't exist?

Before we begin our study of God's Word this morning, let's consider two principles of life that are illustrated for us again and again through Scripture. We will surely see today that first, regardless of where we are in the midst of our journey with Jesus, the journey is often as significantly important as the destination. Whether we are talking about sermon preparation, working a vegetable garden, or working hard to save up enough money to buy a first car or pay for camp, the process by which we achieve our goals or end product is often lost sight of. All we can think of is the car we want to buy or the vacation we are planning to take. But we must realize that Jesus considers the daily process as important as the end goal. He not only wants you to enjoy the blessing in the end, but to enjoy Him en route.

Second, let's keep in mind what somebody has well said--that God is behind the scenes, and He moves all the scenes that He is behind. Whether we encounter a setback, are inconvenienced, or are surprised by a major turn of events, God is not. God is behind the scenes at work in our lives to bring honorable attention and mention of Himself, as well as to transform our lives for the good.

So, why do I choose for us to begin here this morning? Because, there are times in all of our lives, whether we feel busy or at a standstill, that we seem to either forget God or feel forgotten by Him. During those times, we find it difficult to pray. Sometimes the difficulty comes because we have overscheduled our days to the extent that we have no room to meet with Jesus, and we lose sight of Him. At other times, we grope in the darkness trying to understand Jesus' way with us. But God's Word tells us over and over that Jesus is always near at hand as well as actively

working for our best. Jesus is waiting to undertake for us, and He is watching over us, even when we are frantically busy or so weak and sick that we cannot remember His promises.

Yet being human, all of us tend to lose sight of and forget His presence with us. As a result, our lives feel rocky, out of sync, and out of balance. To find the solid rock of balance requires that we intentionally make time to stop and seek the face of Jesus and to listen for His voice.

This morning in our passage of Scripture, we find the apostle Paul in a very precarious situation in his life's journey. Yet through it all, Jesus is right there, moving with Paul as well as behind the scenes. Interestingly, our passage contains no exposition of biblical doctrine, no exhortations, and no commands. Rather, it illustrates for us the doctrine taught and illustrated elsewhere in Scripture, that of God's providence.

What is the doctrine of providence? God's providence is the means by which He carries out His sovereign plans. The word "providence" does not occur in the Bible, just as the words "trinity" and "rapture" do not. But these doctrines are illustrated as major themes throughout Scripture. This morning we will not do a thorough study of the doctrine of God's providence, but I will highlight some aspects of it we must keep in mind not only as we study our passage, but on a continual basis in order to maintain emotional, mental, and spiritual stability.

First, God's providence points to His preservation and maintenance of all of His creation. In **Hebrews 1:3** we read that Christ "**upholds all things by the word of His power.**" The Greek word translated "**uphold**" means to carry or bear. Dr. Wayne Grudem says that to uphold "does not mean simply 'sustain,' but has the sense of active, purposeful control over the thing being carried from one place to another." For instance, the apostle Paul writes in **Colossians 1:17** that "**all things hold together**" in Christ. In other words, if Jesus were to let go, the entire universe would instantly disintegrate! Thus God did not just design the laws of science and nature and step away from them. Rather, He actively maintains such laws.

Second, God's providence includes God's causing things to happen that we would think of as merely natural occurrences. For example, the Bible says that God causes the rain and snow to fall on earth, along with the wind to blow and the lightning to flash (**Job 37:6-13; Psalm 135:7**). God also gives food to the wild animals and birds (**Psalm 104:27-29; Matthew 6:26**).

Third, God governs what we might call random chance events, such as the casting of lots. We read in **Proverbs 16:33**, “**The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.**”

Fourth, God also governs all geo-political affairs. He determines the time, existence, and boundaries of the nations (**Acts 17:26**). He sets up rulers and takes them down again (**Daniel 4:34-35; Psalm 22:28**). He is even sovereign over evil, although He is not tainted in any way by it nor is He responsible for it (**Genesis 50:20; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; 1 John 1:5**). But He uses evil men and events to carry out His sovereign plan, even as He is doing in our story with this evil plot to kill Paul.

Imagine for a moment if we really believed that we were living in a world of random chance with no boundaries to the evil manipulations of the rich and powerful! It would truly be a scary place to live! You never would know what bad things might happen to you or your loved ones, and all you could do would be to hope for good luck. It is why so many today have become overrun and emotionally crippled by anxiety. The problem of anxiety has exploded in this country, as revealed by statistical studies of the increase in sales of prescription drugs specifically designed to arrest anxiety.

According to this *Reuters* article dated Friday, July 13, 2012, “In the Age of Anxiety, Are We All Mentally Ill?” since 1980 there has been a 1,200% increase in anti-anxiety prescriptions filled. In 1980, 2 to 4 percent of the United States population suffered from an anxiety disorder. By the year 2009, that number jumped to 49.5%. Do 117 million people make an epidemic?

I share this with you, not to make you feel guilty or ashamed if you are taking anti-anxiety medication, but to help us all see that grasping a working and practical understanding of God’s providence and being connected to the living God through a growing relationship with Jesus Christ is absolutely vital to your mental, emotional, and physical health.

We could say much more about the importance of understanding God’s providence, but we won’t. Instead, as we approach our passage, let’s just keep in mind one of our opening points: Our providential God is behind the scenes, and He moves all the scenes that He is behind.

To better understand our passage for this morning and to more clearly see God’s providential hand at work, let’s grasp the historical context. The Apostle Paul

awoke this day under house arrest inside the Tower of Antonia prison for his own protection against his fellow Jews who wanted to kill him. Shortly after waking up, he was in court before the Roman commander and the seventy men who made up the Council of the Jews, headed by a wicked, ungodly high priest named Ananias. The trial barely began before it turned into an uproar, in which the Pharisees temporarily sided with Paul, shielding him from the Sadducees who wanted to kill him. Ultimately, the Roman commander ordered his soldiers to rescue Paul and return him to prison, while Lysias considered what he would do next.

In **verse 11**, it is a night--we don't know exactly when, but we do know that it was dark. Paul was discouraged. Unexpectedly, Jesus showed up. He affectionately affirmed Paul. He let Paul know that the situation was not his fault, but that he, indeed, had faithfully proclaimed the gospel and had the Lord's full support. How the Jews responded to the Gospel had nothing to do with the success of the messenger but with the people themselves. Furthermore, Jesus assured Paul that he was not going to die there in jail, because He had a mission for him to fulfill in Rome. He was going to honor Paul's desire to go to Rome and to preach the gospel.

Meanwhile, beginning with **verse 12**, Luke tells us what was happening in the opponents' camp following the collapsed council meeting earlier that day before the Roman commander, Lysias. Follow along in your Bibles as I read.

**<sup>12</sup>When it was day, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. <sup>13</sup>There were more than forty who formed this plot. <sup>14</sup>They came to the chief priests and the elders and said, "We have bound ourselves under a solemn oath to taste nothing until we have killed Paul. <sup>15</sup>Now therefore, you and the Council notify the commander to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case by a more thorough investigation; and we for our part are ready to slay him before he comes near the place."**

**<sup>16</sup>But the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, and he came and entered the barracks and told Paul. <sup>17</sup>Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Lead this young man to the commander, for he has something to report to him."**

**<sup>18</sup>So he took him and led him to the commander and said, "Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to lead this young man to you since he has something to tell you."**

**<sup>19</sup>The commander took him by the hand and stepping aside, began to inquire of him privately, "What is it that you have to report to me?"**

**<sup>20</sup>And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down tomorrow to the Council, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more thoroughly about him. <sup>21</sup>So do not listen to them, for more than forty of them are lying in wait for him who have bound themselves under a curse not to eat or drink until they slay him; and now they are ready and waiting for the promise from you."**

**<sup>22</sup>So the commander let the young man go, instructing him, "Tell no one that you have notified me of these things." <sup>23</sup>And he called to him two of the centurions and said, "Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen." <sup>24</sup>They were also to provide mounts to put Paul on**

and bring him safely to Felix the governor.

<sup>25</sup>And he wrote a letter having this form: <sup>26</sup>“Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix, greetings. <sup>27</sup>When this man was arrested by the Jews and was about to be slain by them, I came up to them with the troops and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. <sup>28</sup>And wanting to ascertain the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their Council; <sup>29</sup>and I found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment. <sup>30</sup>When I was informed that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, also instructing his accusers to bring charges against him before you.”

<sup>31</sup>So the soldiers, in accordance with their orders, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. <sup>32</sup>But the next day, leaving the horsemen to go on with him, they returned to the barracks. <sup>33</sup>When these had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. <sup>34</sup>When he had read it, he asked from what province he was, and when he learned that he was from Cilicia, <sup>35</sup>he said, “I will give you a hearing after your accusers arrive also,” giving orders for him to be kept in Herod’s Praetorium.

Back in **verse 12** we read the expression, “**when it was day.**” Some understand that to mean the next day, twenty-four hours later. However, in the Jewish mindset, the

next day began when the sun went down. Hence, when we read about the events in this section, they begin the same day as the beginning of the chapter, the same day as the first failed trial of Paul before Lysias; except now, it is just after the sun went down.

This is Luke's explanation of what Paul's opponents were doing while he was sent back to house arrest. Paul's opponents in the Sanhedrin were busy. There had been a major breach in the Sanhedrin. The split had fallen along religious party lines. That is why Luke mentions that their numbers have gone from seventy to forty, in **verse 13**. The Pharisees had pulled away from the Sadducees, who were bent on killing Paul. The wording of **verse 14** is important: "**They came to the chief priests and elders.**" It supports the idea that these Jews were avoiding going to the Pharisee side of the counsel.

The ruling majority of the Sanhedrin, the Sadducees, headed up by their wicked High Priest Ananias, deplored the fact that Paul had eluded their control. When they came together later that morning, right after the failed trial, they wanted another meeting with Lysias so that they could assassinate Paul. Their thought was that the commander should understand that because of the turmoil on the preceding day, a proper inquiry was not really held. Therefore, another hearing would be advisable.

These radical Jews of the Sanhedrin took an oath not to eat or drink until Paul was assassinated. The sicarii were a particularly nationalistic and terrorist-like group of Jews who regularly assassinated Jews suspected of collaboration with the Romans. It would not be strange at all for these terrorists to be members of the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin hierarchy, led by the high priest Ananias, a Sadducee, agreed, and thereby entered into a murder conspiracy against Paul. In our passage, these men seem quite prepared to face the wrath of Rome. If caught murdering a Roman citizen, they would surely have been executed to a man. So great was their hatred of Paul and so enflamed their religious emotions, that they worried not at all about themselves.

In **verses 16-22**, Paul learned of the conspiracy to assassinate him. According to the customs of the day, prisoners were dependent on their relatives and friends for food and other necessities. Hence, for Paul to have been granted a visit from his nephew was not abnormal. In addition, because he was technically not a prisoner, Paul was treated with great respect as a Roman citizen. Through this providential visit to his uncle Paul, the nephew was able to share the news about the conspiracy. In turn, Paul was readily allowed to speak with the nearest Roman official to get

the boy to the Roman commander to warn him about the assassination plot.

By the way, I want to note that Luke uses various terms in Greek to describe Paul's nephew as a young boy, probably not even a teenager. The evidence for this is that no officer would take a teenager or an adult by the hand and lead him somewhere. But one would a child.

When we get to **verses 23-24**, it is important to understand the timing of the event. Luke relates that the Jews formed their assassination plot in the course of the morning and early afternoon, following the failed trial. Paul's nephew presumably heard about the plot in the late afternoon and rushed to the barracks to get word to Uncle Paul. Late that same afternoon or early evening, having found out about the plot, the Roman commander summoned two centurions and gave them the following instructions: "At nine o'clock this evening, under cover of darkness, take Paul to Caesarea."

What fascinates me is that after dark, and before 9 PM, Jesus had met with Paul, as recorded in **verse 11**, and told him that he would not die. Apparently, under a cloak of secrecy moments later, soldiers retrieved Paul, brought him under armed guard out of the prison, and escorted him out of Jerusalem and on to the road to Caesarea before the Jewish assassins knew what had happened. Talk about the providence of God!

By the way, did you catch the size of Paul's initial escort to Antipatris? Here is a list of the number of bodyguards for Paul's transport:

- 200 foot soldiers
- 200 spearman (javelin throwers)
- 70 horseman (cavalry)
- 2 centurions (1 per 100 foot soldiers)
- This makes a total of 472 bodyguards.

Some scholars scoff at this account, because they think it was overkill for the situation. But Lysias would take no more chances with Jewish anarchists. Though only forty may have been involved in the plot, he could well remember the hundreds or even thousands in the temple area. For all he knew, the windy road to Caesarea, ripe for ambushes, could have been loaded with thousands of them.

In addition, Caesarea would be a far more secure place than Jerusalem to hold another trial, due to the fact that it was not as subject to riots as was Jerusalem.

So why did the Roman Commander send Paul away? There were two reasons. His job was to keep the peace in Jerusalem; he couldn't do that with Paul there. Secondly, if Paul were found worthy of capital punishment, only governor Felix could give the order. Who was Felix? Felix was Pontius Pilate's successor. Pilate served as the Roman governor of Judea during the trials of Jesus. Because Caesar lost confidence in Pilate's leadership abilities, he had been replaced with Felix. But Felix was no improvement over Pilate. We will look more closely at Felix next time.

With the Roman commander's orders went a letter explaining what the situation was in Jerusalem and why Felix needed to make a decision concerning Paul. As we read these verses, we ought not to think that Luke had direct access to correspondence between a Roman commander and a governor. I presume that the essence of the letter was conveyed to Paul, who in turn informed Luke, who eventually spent time with Paul in Caesarea. For this reason, Luke prefaces his paraphrase with the words, "**He wrote a letter having this form.**"

The discerning reader who recalls the specific details of the previous two chapters smiles at the way Claudius Lysias conveniently omitted his almost disastrous blunder of preparing to flog Paul, a Roman citizen. He stated that first he learned of Paul's citizenship and then came and rescued him! Not quite the truth.

Escorted by the Roman commander's troops, Paul rode, not walked, from Jerusalem as far as Antipatris, thirty-five miles downhill to the northwest. Hence, the foot soldiers would have to march all night at a much faster pace than normal travelers to keep ahead of any possible ambushes. Antipatris, a city built by Herod the Great and named after his father, Antipater, was a natural stopping place for troops making the two-day journey to Caesarea. From this point to Caesarea, only the seventy horsemen continued with Paul. The rest of the troops returned to Jerusalem. The remaining twenty-eight miles to Caesarea lay over flatter terrain in an area that had a sparser Jewish population. Paul's party travelled this area in daylight.

Paul was kept prisoner in Herod's palace, which had been constructed by Herod the Great and was the governor's residence. On the basis of Paul's citizenship, Felix should have set him completely free. Instead, he kept Paul under house arrest while he waited for the Jews to arrive, which really wasn't a horrible condition. It would be like being held up in the Ritz Carlton in Maui, with an ocean view condominium!

Look at what happened to Paul in this chapter: He began by waking up in a Roman barracks in Jerusalem. Twenty-four hours later, he was spending the night in Antipatris under the protection of 472 soldiers. Eighteen hours after that, he bedded down in Caesarea, in an ocean suite overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, in the governor's palace! Who would have ever thought that in thirty-six hours life could see such a drastic change? God did! He had it planned before the beginning of time. He had been providentially working behind the scenes of what appeared to human eyes to be evil religious and political injustices to accomplish His perfect will for Paul's life and for God's glory, for the purposes of the Gospel. God's provision and protection was on display.

The journey is often as significantly important as the destination. In all this God was overruling. In all this he was having His own way. It is a wonderful thing to realize that, in spite of our mistakes and our blunders or the wrong doings of others, we have a blessed Savior, Jesus, who is working everything out for our good and His glory!

Sometimes without warning, you will be having a wonderful day, and then you step around a corner and come smack face to face with a major or minor inconvenience, fearful circumstance, or tragedy. You are stunned, hurt, broken, and filled with emotions like fear, abandonment, and confusion. What do you do then?

Stop! Take a deep cleansing breath of prayer. Cry out, "Help me Jesus!" Then reflect upon what we have learned this morning. Remember this true story of Paul and what it has taught us all: Jesus is never nearer to his people than when they cannot see his face; Jesus is never closer than when they do not hear his voice; Jesus has never undertaken for them more definitely than at the very times when his own name is not even mentioned.

We see behind the scenes Jesus is always at work with or without His name being mentioned. One little book, which is distinctly the record of God's providential care, the book of **Esther**, brings before us some of the most thrilling experiences in the history of the nation of Israel. Yet in that little book we don't have mentioned one time the name of God or any pronoun referring to Him; we do not have any direct reference to any Bible doctrine. Right in the middle of a distressful and hopeless situation, we do not even read anything of prayer by God's people. Yet God was still at work, providentially, for the deliverance of His people.

Paul relearned a lesson in the midst of those thirty-six hours. There are times in life when we all feel alone, rejected, and abandoned. We may be confused by our

circumstances. We may even question whether we are at fault for the situation we are in. Apparently, Paul wrestled with his emotions, because the first thing Jesus said to him in prison was “**Take courage.**”

You or someone you know may be in a similar state of disheartenment. If so, if you know Jesus as your personal Savior, be reminded of Christ’s words, “**Take courage. I will never leave you nor forsake you.**” Believe in Him. Although you may not see or sense His hand at work for you, He is at work. He never sleeps nor is He ever taken off guard. He will take the challenges you are facing and use them for your good and His glory.

If you have not entrusted your life to Jesus as your Savior, then you can’t claim Christ’s words for yourself. So, why not change your station in life. Why not step over to Jesus and join His beloved family? Why not put your life in the beloved Savior’s hands, who would like to forgive you for all of your rebellion against God and your stubborn ways and foolish decisions? Why not admit to Him you need His saving rescuing work and ask him to be your personal Savior? Why not submit your life to Him and allow him to do a work in you and through your circumstances so as to transform your life here and in the hereafter? There is really nothing to fear, despite what Satan may be whispering in your ear. Satan didn’t willfully die on the cross for your sin and rise from the dead. But Jesus did. All because He loves you. And His perfect love for you casts out fear. So, why not entrust your life and your present situation to Him?