



The Plot Within the Plot

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

We last left the Apostle Paul as he lay on his bunk in the middle of the night, having been taken into custody by a Roman commander. He was discouraged because things hadn't gone as he had hoped when he appeared before the Jewish leaders the day before. But that night the risen Lord Jesus stood by his side and said, **"Take courage, for as you have solemnly witnessed for my cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also."** This had to be one of those moments Paul would never forget. It would be a mistake for us to think that this was the kind of thing that happened all the time to Paul. Rather we should think of this as something that happened only a handful of times in the course of a ministry that extended for 35 years.

The fact is Paul was about to enter a period of time when he might have wondered if the Lord had just decided to take a vacation. It's not that he hadn't already experienced many difficulties. He'd been beaten and stoned; he'd been shipwrecked and spent a day and a night in the deep; he'd suffered hunger and thirst, cold and exposure. He'd been through it all. But, despite all of that, at least he was free to go where he wanted to go and do what he wanted to do. Now he embarks on a period of time when he's not free. He doesn't have the liberty to travel. For the next five years he'll be incarcerated, first in Jerusalem, then in Caesarea, and finally in Rome. At times, he must have wondered, "Where are you, Lord? Have you forgotten me?"

You see, there are days in our lives when God seems far away; when we wonder if he really cares about what is happening to us; when the memory of his clear presence seems blurry and faint. Has God forgotten us in those times? Of course not. In his study of Acts, Harry Ironside says quite accurately, "God is never closer to his people than when they cannot see his face."

This morning we come to a story in Acts 23:12-35 where we can observe how true this is. It's a story where, although Paul may not have seen it at the time, God's fingerprints are all over the place. This is really the start of Paul's epic journey to Rome, which will occupy us for the rest of our time in Acts. Though it may have seemed like everything was out of control, God was moving to fulfill his promise to Paul.

We can divide this story up into four parts...

I. Intense Opposition.

"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. There were more than forty who formed this plot. 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. 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.'"

Paul is in Roman custody so these Jews have to find a way to get at him. You can see how serious they are. Luke reminds us twice that 40 of them had bound themselves to an oath not to eat or drink until Paul was dead. These are not your run of the mill Jews; they're terrorists, part of a radical group called the Zealots. These guys got together and hatched a plot whereby Paul would be brought to the Council for further questioning. While he was being moved through the streets of Jerusalem they would ambush them and kill Paul. Make no mistake: this was a dangerous and risky move. Paul was under guard. They would have to deal with serious retaliation, but that's how serious these guys were.

II. Surprising Intervention.

Remember that Paul knows nothing about this. Paul is really trapped, unarmed and totally vulnerable between two powers: Jerusalem and Rome. As J. Stott says, he's like "a butterfly before a steamroller." But this is where God comes in. Let's read v.16. **"But the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, and he came and entered the barracks and told Paul."**

We have here one of those tantalizing bits of information about Paul which makes us want to know more. Paul had a sister? And why was her son, Paul's nephew, in Jerusalem? How did he find out about this plot to kill his Uncle Paul? Was he a Christian, or was he just a caring relative? We don't know the answers, but we do know that God is using this young man. It's no mistake that he's in the right place at the right time and willing to do something about it. Somehow he gets access to Paul's barracks and tells Paul the whole thing. Look at vv.17-22.

"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.' 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.' 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?' 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. 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.' So the commander let the young man go, instructing him, 'Tell no one that you have notified me of these things.'"

Paul calls one of the centurions who was guarding him to bring the boy to the commander. We wonder if the commander will have time for a boy with some wild story about Jewish terrorists trying to kill his uncle, but the commander takes the boy aside and hears him out. And then he sends him on his way with instructions to tell no one. I can see the boy walking through the alleyways of the city saying, "I know nothing!"

III. Overwhelming Protection.

The next thing you know the commander is making plans of his own to get Paul out of town where he'll be safe. Look at vv.23-24. **"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.' They were also to provide mounts to put Paul on and bring him safely to Felix the governor."** Two hundred soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen; that's 470 armed men to protect one Christian. That's a small army, and no band of Jewish zealots is going to attack a force like that. First, God uses a young man, Paul's nephew, to help him. But now he uses a Roman commander and a rather impressive army of men and horses to move Paul safely to Caesarea.

Notice also the preparation for Paul's appearance before the governor, again part of the protection of the Lord, which is provided by a letter that the commander wrote.

"And he wrote a letter having this form: 'Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix, greetings. 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. And wanting to ascertain the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their Council; and I found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment. 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'" (vv.25-30).

You've got to love this guy! He's been good to Paul, but here he writes a letter that would make himself look as good as possible in the eyes of the governor. He handles the truth rather loosely. He says that he rescued Paul when he learned Paul was a Roman citizen. This would certainly look good on his record. But actually, if you look back at ch. 21 you can see he left a few details out. Indeed, he rescued Paul, but then he intended to beat him to see what he could get out of him. It was only after Paul claimed he was a Roman citizen that he held off. He just happened to leave that detail out of the letter!

But this is also a letter of acquittal for any serious charge against Paul. The commander records in black and white that Paul had done nothing worthy of death or imprisonment. And so he prepares the way for Paul to appear before the governor. Again, Paul knew of none of this. But this is evidence of that marvelous hand of God, which can work through anyone, even someone who isn't telling the whole truth, to accomplish his will without them even being aware of it.

IV. Strategic Presentation.

In vv.31-35 Paul is first taken 35 miles to Antipatris. The next morning the 70 horsemen brought Paul the remaining 20 miles to the governor's palace in Caesarea. Felix was a successor to Pilate as governor of Judea. He'd been in office several years by now. He's ruthless and immoral. He reads the letter and decides to hear the case, but he'll put off the trial until Paul's accusers arrive from Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Paul will stay in the palace built by Herod. It seems kind of funny to me, this little bald headed, bowlegged, beaten down apostle staying in the palace built by Herod the Great. Who says God doesn't have a sense of humor!

So let's go back to our original premise. What's true of Paul is true of us: When it seems like everything is out of control, God is moving to fulfill his promises and accomplish his purposes in our life. I'd like to make three observations from this story that will help us see God's fingerprints in our own lives when it seems things are out of control.

V. The light of God's promises will often be followed by the darkness of contradictory circumstances.

Paul has this wonderful visitation from the Lord telling him to take courage, promising him that he'd be his witness in Rome, but the next day he's plunged into a time of darkness which started with a plot against his life. He must have wondered, "Lord, you didn't say anything about this."

But Paul wasn't the first person who had to endure these kinds of contradictions. God said to Abraham, "You'll be the father of a new nation with people more numerous than the stars in the sky. All the families of the earth will be blessed through your offspring." But then Abraham and Sarah are plunged into years of darkness and infertility until the idea of bearing children became laughable.

The prophet Samuel visits a young shepherd boy named David. In front of his father and brothers Samuel pours the oil on David's head to show that he would be Israel's next king. But in a matter of months David is plunged into a decade long period of waiting where he's at the top of King Saul's Ten Most Wanted list.

Jesus himself kneels in the garden of Gethsemane, knowing that the day would come when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord. But now he's in agony, sweating drops of blood, begging the Father if it be his will to let this cup of suffering pass.

And it's so often true of us. Most of our life is lived in-between the bright moments of promise and their fulfillment. What do we do in those long stretches of time

where we plod along day after day and wonder what in the world God is up to? What do we do when we feel more like a target for the enemy than the apple of God's eye? You live by the words you received from him earlier. You don't doubt in the darkness what God revealed to you in the light. You walk by faith, not by sight...trust him.

VI. God will fulfill his promises but it may not look like what we thought.

The second observation follows from the first: God promised that Paul would be his witness in Rome. When Paul was converted in Acts 9 God had also promised he would testify before Kings. Now he'll have an opportunity to do that several times on his way to Rome and when he's there he'll testify before the Emperor. God will fulfill his promise, but I don't think Paul expected it would look quite like this. I don't think Paul expected the entire time he would be bound in chains.

This can apply to so many areas of our life and so many stages of our life. Seldom does life look like we thought it would. Seldom does our career, our marriage, our friendships or even our spiritual growth look like we expected it to look. I was thinking about this as it relates to being in the second half of life. I heard a statistic that said 20% of Americans are now over 50 years old. I really feel sorry for all of you (Ha!). Well, what kind of expectations do we carry with us about the kind of life we'll have as we get older?

One couple I heard about had realistic expectations. They were an elderly couple who decided to get married. George was 92 and Jane was 89. They went for a stroll to discuss wedding plans, and on the way they passed a drugstore. They went into the store and George asked to speak to the owner.

"We're getting married," George said. "Do you sell heart medicine?"

"Of course we do," the owner replied.

"What about medicine for rheumatism, osteoporosis, and arthritis?"

"All kinds," says the owner.

"How about waterproof furniture covers and Depends?"

"Yes, sir."

George asks, "Hearing aids, denture supplies, and reading glasses?"

"Got 'em."

"Do you sell wheelchairs, walkers, and canes?"

"Sure," the owner replied. "But why all these questions?"

George smiled proudly and announced, "We'd like to use your store as our bridal registry."

On a more serious note, as we get older sometimes God's plan is different than our own. How many of us will need to work longer than we thought? How many of us will lose a spouse earlier than we ever thought possible? How many of us will need to raise a grandchild? How many of us will be called into the most significant ministry years of our life when we thought we were supposed to be slowing down? You see, whatever we expect it to look like, we'd better hold

it loosely. God will fulfill his promises but it won't look like what we thought.

VII. God will often use ordinary means to fulfill his promises.

When Peter was in prison God sent an angel and an earthquake to release him! Why doesn't God do that for Paul? Notice in this story how God first uses an ordinary young man, a relative, one who very well may not even be a believer. When he came to Paul with news of the plot, Paul might have said to him, "Oh, thank you very much for your help. But you need to know that God is watching out for me and I really don't need your help. The fact is, I'm waiting for a miracle." Wouldn't that be a really spiritual thing to say? But, instead, Paul says, "Hey man, I'm sure glad you've got your nose to the ground. Now go and tell the commander." Paul believed his nephew was God's instrument to save him.

It reminds me of the old story we've all heard about a big flood and a guy caught sitting on top of his roof. He starts panicking, knowing he can't swim but decides that God will save him because he's been faithful. A lifeboat comes along asking him if he wants any help. He says, "No, God will save me." A helicopter comes asking him if he wants help. He says, "No, God will save me." A cruise liner comes along asking him if he wants help. He says, "No, God will save me." The flood waters continue to rise and soon the guy drowns. He goes up to heaven and asks God, "Why didn't you save me?" God answers, "I sent you a lifeboat, a helicopter and a cruise liner! What more do you want?!"

Paul understood that God uses ordinary people. He also uses ordinary institutions. In this story he uses a Roman commander; a company of 470 Roman soldiers; and an evil ruler named Felix. Again, Paul could have said, "I don't need all of this. God is protecting me. I don't need a whole cavalry to guard me on my way to Caesarea. I don't need your letter to defend my innocence. God is my defender. He'll protect me. He'll take care of me." But he seemed to understand that God could use even the Roman system of justice to serve his purposes.

He uses ordinary people and institutions, but he also uses ordinary circumstances. Think about how his nephew just happened to be in Jerusalem, and just happened to be in the right place at the right time. God is master of seemingly insignificant details.

I was thinking about this as it relates to how we found our three young pastors. In each case, I marvel at how God is master of the details. First, there is Justin. I learned about Justin from my wife. She went to a birthday party of a friend and met Justin there. She came home and said, "I met this great young guy who would be a perfect fit for our staff. You have to meet him." It took two years, but we finally met. We kept meeting off and on and when we saw the need for a 20's pastor we hired him.

Then there is Jerome. We went on a national search for a new worship pastor. Meanwhile we decided to start a Sunday night service and needed someone to lead worship. We brought in this young guy who was local and whose father had led worship for us back in the 90's. The more we got to know him and see his heart for God and his skill in

leading worship we realized he was our guy. We were on a national search looking for a miracle but God had the guy right in our backyard!

And then there is Rob. It all started when my oldest daughter and her husband moved to Las Vegas because he had a job there. And then they started going to this church and my daughter got hired there as an admin. She started calling and telling me about this awesome young pastor who was a little frustrating to work for because you never knew what he was going to do next, but he'd be great for our church. After he left the church in Vegas we met and the rest is history.

But what if Justin or my wife didn't go to that birthday party? And what if we had never started a Saturday night service? And what if my daughter and son-in-law had never moved to Las Vegas? You see, God is the master of ordinary, seemingly insignificant circumstances. You say, "God can't deal with my circumstances; they're too complicated and difficult." I tell you that God is master of all your circumstances. You say, "God is too big to care about the smallest details of my life. He has bigger fish to fry." God is big enough to use the smallest details for his glory.

CONCLUSION

"God is never closer to his people than when they can't see his face." Though it seems like everything is out of control, God is moving to fulfill his promises to you. It may not look like what you thought it would. He may use ordinary people, circumstances and institutions but you can trust him. Recall the words of the old hymn by William Cowper:

*God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
and rides upon the storm.*

*Deep in unfathomable mines
of never-failing skill,
He treasures up His bright designs,
and works His sovereign will.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
the clouds ye so much dread,
Are big with mercy, and shall break
in blessings on your head.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
but trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence,
He hides a smiling face.*

*His purposes will ripen fast,
unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
but sweet will be the flower.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err,
and scan his work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
and He will make it plain.*