

## Man Proposes; God Disposes      Acts 23:12-35

### Scripture Reading: 1Kings 19:1-18

#### Introduction

When my girls were younger they enjoyed a book titled, Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day

The book begins:

I went to sleep with gum in my mouth and now there's gum in my hair and when I got out of bed this morning I tripped on the skateboard and by mistake I dropped my sweater in the sink while the water was running and I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

Unfortunately, Alexander's day didn't get any better after that either

I think it's safe to say we've all had days that started out something like Alexander's when we felt like crawling right back into bed, pulling the covers up over our head, and trying again tomorrow

Last week we talked about how badly Paul's visit to Jerusalem had gone and how, at the end of the day, he found himself in a type of protective custody mired in the Roman justice system

And we saw in **Acts 23:11** how it was at this time when Paul was likely feeling very low that Jesus came to stand over him in his jail cell and encourage him with the news that he "must" also to and testify about the Lord in Rome

We saw how that word "must" meant that it was necessary, how it had to be, and how Paul would have been encouraged by the assurance that he would be going to Rome as he had long sought to do

Of course, the Lord didn't reveal **how** Paul was going to get to Rome – at least it's not recorded for us that he did

And I would have to expect that what transpired is nothing like how Paul imagined it would go

As we turn to our passage we are going to see that some of the Jews were conspiring to see to it that Paul would experience a "terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day" of his own

Our passage is Acts 23:12-35 and as we look at these verses we're going to find no direct commands to obey and no stated promises to embrace

In fact, no member of the Godhead is even mentioned at all in these 24 verses

And yet this passage is crucial to our understanding of who God is and how he interacts with the world we live in

My sermon title this morning comes from a passage in Thomas a Kempis' book The Imitation of Christ which goes:

*For the resolutions of the just depend rather on the grace of God than on their own wisdom; and in him they always put their trust, whatever they take in hand. For man proposes but God disposes; neither is the way of man in his own hands.*

We're going to see that **God is not a distant, uninterested deity** who is just sitting by watching what goes on in the world

We'll see that **God isn't impotent in the face of evil or powerless to intervene in the face of man's free will**

Rather we are going to see that **God directs the affairs of his creation and that his plans will be fulfilled in spite of opposition**

We'll see that **God determines not only the outcome that he desires but also the means of obtaining that outcome**

We're going to see that God can use people in spite of their ignorance, their apathy, or even their opposition in the furtherance of what he has determined to do

And we will see how **none of this negates our responsibility to act in an appropriate manner**

Please join me in Acts 23 as we begin and follow along as I read our passage in its entirety (**Acts 23:12-35**)

**12**When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul.

**13**There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. **14**They 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. **15**Now 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.”

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

**23**Then 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. **24**Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor.” **25**And he wrote a letter to this effect:

**26**“Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings. **27**This 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. **28**And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council. **29**I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. **30**And 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.”

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

The Lord visited Paul in his cell during the night and assured him that he would be going to Rome to testify about him

But he never said anything about when he would go or how he would get there

And the first thing we need to recognize and accept is that – **God’s path is not always smooth**

## **I. God’s path is not always direct**

That kind of goes against the grain of our thinking doesn’t it?

We all have the tendency to think that if we are in the center of God’s will and doing what God would have us do that smooth, flat, and devoid of any detours so that we can complete our journey without any hassle

And when we experience difficulty we begin to believe that perhaps we’re on the wrong path or we might even question why God would treat us in such a shabby way when we are seeking to do his will

But as we see from our passage God’s methods of achieving his will aren’t always as we would expect

### ***The plot***

Paul had to be feeling pretty good the next morning as he woke up

The Lord had paid him a personal visit in the night just to encourage him and to reveal to him that he would be going to Rome after all just as he had long desired to do

But around 40 of the Jews – most likely the same Jews from Asia who were responsible for the previous trouble – rose that morning and hatched a plan to kill Paul

They were so zealous in their desire to eliminate Paul and so sure of their success that they *“bound themselves by an oath to neither eat nor drink till they had killed [him]”*

The literal Greek phrase is that they “cursed themselves with a curse” as they acted like Jezebel did in **1Kings 19:2** when she put her life on the line and invited the gods to kill her if she didn’t kill Elijah

The conspirators went to the *“chief priests and elders”* and shared their plan and instructed the temple leaders to call for Paul to be brought back before the council for further evaluation

And they would make sure that Paul never made it as they would ambush him and kill him along the way

No doubt they figured the crowded streets would make it possible for them to lie in wait and spring upon Paul with daggers and take him out

They had to know that many of them wouldn’t survive this attack as Paul would be guarded by a contingent of Roman soldiers

But these men were akin to modern-day terrorists in that they were willing to go on a suicide mission if necessary to get Paul – by their own design some of them would likely be killed by the soldiers or they would all starve to death

Since we have read the entire account and know that they were unsuccessful in their plan to kill Paul we might assume that these 40-plus men all did indeed starve to death but that’s highly unlikely

It seems there were loopholes in most everything and the ancient rabbis made allowances for vows to be broken

Among them was that a vow could be broken if it couldn’t be fulfilled because circumstances had changed

So when their plan was short-circuited by it being revealed the conspirators likely didn’t miss a meal unless it was simply because they were too upset to eat

### ***The troubling dichotomy***

In their actions we see a troubling dichotomy

The conspirators saw themselves as God’s champions who were zealously defending his honor from this man who they accused of defiling the temple

But they were willing to violate the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment and lie to the Roman tribune in order to carry out their plan

They may have thought of themselves as the ones who were truly **devoted** to God but they were also **deceivers** who were willing to break God’s own commands and those two identities cannot rightly coexist

And what should we think about the temple leaders who were obviously willing to go along with this plot of deception and murder?

Clearly the temple leaders showed themselves to be morally corrupt as they were also willing to go against God

Not only was the true nature of the character of the religious leaders revealed but also the empty nature of their case against Paul

They knew they would never prevail in a legitimate court of law so they sought to take care of Paul by illicit means

Sadly, this action becomes the latest act of rebellion against the gospel as they slam the door on it just as they slammed the temple doors against Paul

And as committed as Paul was to share the gospel with his countrymen, when he leaves Jerusalem this time he will not return

**Satan delights in taking down the religious leaders because he know that as leadership goes, so goes the church – Pray for your leaders!**

### ***Two-year delay***

The Lord assured Paul that he would be travelling to Rome to be a witness for him but he didn’t say how Paul would get there or how long it might take

And if we look ahead to the end of chapter 24 (**Acts 24:27**) we see that Paul experiences a significant and unexpected delay in his journey to Rome as he remains in Caesarea for over two years

God sees fit to reveal only as much of his will as he pleases but we can take confidence that what he reveals will come to pass because

**God's path is may not always be direct but God's plan cannot be defeated**

## **II. God's plan cannot be defeated**

The Jewish conspirators hatched their plan and may even have made the request of the Roman tribune when Paul's nephew came to visit Paul and revealed the plot to him

Unfortunately, this section raises a number of intriguing questions that Luke leaves unanswered

For instance, we learn in a very offhand way that Paul had a sister and a nephew and they aren't mentioned again in the pages of Scripture

We really know nothing about them; such as why the nephew was in Jerusalem at this time or how he learned of the plot

Bible scholars suppose that Paul was estranged from his family because he had been disowned by them when he became a Christ-follower as they take that to be the implicit meaning of **Philippians 3:8** where he writes: "*I count all things as loss...*"

Perhaps family loyalty even for the "black sheep" overruled animus as by some unrevealed means, Paul's nephew is privy to the plot and he comes and shares the details of it with Paul who calls for a centurion and commands the centurion to take the young man to the tribune

As a Roman citizen and uncharged with any crime, Paul would have been afforded a great deal of respect by his guards and we see the centurion do exactly as Paul said

### ***Not coincidence but providence***

Many people would likely describe this as a wonderful coincidence or a fortunate occurrence or even a stroke of good luck and we might be tempted to label it as such ourselves

But that really isn't appropriate language for a believer as we should know that God is in control of all things and there is no such thing as "good luck"

**Proverbs 16:33** tells us that even games of chance aren't left to chance

*The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.*

### **It wasn't luck or coincidence that caused Paul's nephew to know and reveal the plot it was providence**

God was working behind the scenes to make certain that his plan would go forward as he directed

And God caused the tribune to act as he did by showing **kindness** to Paul's nephew in taking him by the hand and **discretion** as he led him to a place where they would not be overheard and then warning the young man to keep their conversation quiet

Now in his own mind the tribune may have done these things as a matter of political expediency as he would not have wanted to be seen as acting against the Jews

But God's providence and sovereignty were clearly on display as he worked behind the scenes and used people's personalities, tendencies, and self-interest to further his ends

God uses all manner of people to move his plan along and we often only connect the dots long after the events have transpired

Just think of how often we look back over a series of events and only in hindsight do we see how the Lord's hand was directing us to the right people at the right time

People who then, likely unknowingly, helped us on our way as we journeyed on the Lord's path and we marvel with a sense of adoration toward God how he sent us "angels unawares" just when we most needed them

### ***Divine overkill***

Next we see that the tribune didn't just humor Paul's nephew he took what he revealed seriously and acted with what could well be deemed a case of divine overkill

He ordered the centurions to ready **two hundred soldiers who would be considered the heavy infantry** of the day along with **seventy cavalymen**, and another **two hundred "spearmen" or light-armed troops** and to **put Paul on horseback** for the journey to the governor in the coastal city of Caesarea – an overland journey of about 60 miles to the northeast

And even with this overwhelming escort he saw fit to exercise further caution as he ordered them to set **out at 9pm** when the streets would likely be empty and the assassins would have no crowds to cover their approach

As an aside, I wondered a bit about why they would put Paul on horseback and then it occurred to me that it would be very hard for a covert assassin to attack a man on horseback with a dagger – Paul's lower legs might be in danger but it would be virtually impossible to deliver a death blow

No Roman commander or soldier ever wanted to be guilty of losing a prisoner so the tribune acted with what could well be described as an overabundance of caution

But we know that it was God who provided Paul with such a measure of protection that he had to see God working on his behalf and Paul no doubt made the journey in complete serenity

### ***The tribune's letter***

We see God's hand in the letter that the tribune, who we now learn was named Claudius Lysias, wrote to Felix the governor

The letter was mostly accurate as it contained a good deal of fact but it was also a bit self-serving as it had a good bit of added "flavor" mixed in with the facts

I suppose we shouldn't be surprised that Claudius Lysias sought to portray himself in the best possible light

In **verse 27** he really rearranges history as he writes that he rescued Paul having discovered that he was a Roman citizen when we know that he only discovered Paul's citizenship as he was about to illegally scourge him

And we see that he conveniently neglects to mention that part of the account at all

But where we see God's direction is in the fact that the tribune adds his voice to that of Gallio back in **Acts 18:14-15** who found nothing in Paul's conduct worthy of his interest as he saw the fight to only be a religious debate about minor matters that he refused to get involved in

The town clerk in Ephesus also in **Acts 19:40** made the argument that the Christians were innocent of any wrongdoing that would justify the riot that was taking place

So now we have three times that Roman officials have declared openly and even officially that the followers of Jesus were not guilty of breaking Roman law – a claim that will soon be repeated again by King Agrippa and Festus

### ***Arrival in Caesarea***

As the account continues we see that the entire contingent of 470 troops accompanied Paul through the Judean hills to the city of Antipatris which was roughly 35 miles from Jerusalem

From here on there would be fewer opportunities for difficulty so the soldiers turned back as they cavalry escorted Paul the remaining 25 miles or so to Caesarea

Upon their arrival Felix read the letter from Claudius Lysias and conducted a preliminary investigation to determine whether he had jurisdiction to hear Paul's case

When Paul declared that he was a native of Cilicia, which was under Felix's jurisdiction, he agreed to hear Paul's case and ordered him to be kept in Herod's praetorium while they waited for his accusers to arrive

Herod's praetorium was originally a palace that Herod had constructed for himself that was now the governor's residence

Remember, Paul was a Roman citizen of an important city who still was not charged with any crime at this point – in fact, his innocence had been repeatedly declared by Roman authorities

So not only was he not treated as a common prisoner, it seems that he was afforded a great deal of respect and housed in a palace while he awaited trial

This turned out to be another blessing from God that palace turned out to be Paul's home for the next two years

### **III. God's sovereignty doesn't diminish your role**

This account is very reminiscent of the book of Esther which also contains a great account of God's sovereignty as it shows how God intervenes in the affairs of the earth without ever mentioning God's name

There is a danger when we read an account like this one before us today or the one found in the book of Esther as we can fall into the trap of thinking that God's plans will be done no matter what we do so we don't have to do anything

But **God's sovereignty doesn't diminish your role** in it

When we speak of God's sovereignty what we are recognizing who God is and that he exercises absolute power and authority over his creation as the absolute sovereign, or king, of all and we know that his sovereign will must be done

However, we also know that our actions have very real consequences that affect and change the course of events and that God has ordained that certain events will come about as a result of our actions causing them

So we can't lapse into a posture of passivity and do nothing just trusting that because God's plan can't be defeated we don't have any part in seeing it come to fruition

This is a difficult concept to get a grasp on so let me give you an example that might help

School has already started for some and will start very soon for others

If a student knows that they are going to have a test tomorrow we know that their grade is affected by the amount of work they put into studying in preparation for the test

That's not to say that their grade isn't in God's control or that God will be surprised by the grade received or even that God hasn't ordained what the grade will be

But that doesn't mean that the grade isn't affected by the amount of study the student puts in

If he or she is diligent in completing their work in preparation for the test they will receive a better grade than if they do not

I remember when I took my first Bible class through Trinity's extension program and our first test came along the professor prayed for us before issuing the test and he prayed that we would each get the grade we deserved commensurate with the effort we had put into our study

I didn't like that much and would have preferred that he had prayed for us each to get an A!

But his understanding of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility was correct and if we wanted a good grade God expected us to study

We see a really good example of this truth in **2Samuel 10:12** where King David's army was going up against the forces of the Ammonites and the Syrians

David's commander, Joab, said, "Be of good courage, and let us be courageous for our people, and for the cities of our God, and may the Lord do what seems good to him."

Joab knew that if the Lord was going to give them victory in battle they would need to take the field and by doing their part they gave God the opportunity to do what he would according to his will

**It would be the height of laziness to expect God to act on our behalf if we aren't willing to do our part**

And God expects us to **make use of the helps he sends our way** and we would be foolish to ignore the warnings and remedies he provides and to just saunter or rush into danger with the thought that God will see us through

Notice, when Paul's nephew came to tell him of the plot against him Paul didn't rock back in his chair and say, "Aw kid, don't worry about it. The Lord told me I was going to Rome so there's no need to get excited."

No, he took the report seriously and saw that it was passed on to the Roman tribune and he gratefully rode along with his armed escort of 470 soldiers until he was out of danger

We must fight the tendency for the fact of God's sovereignty to lead us into a fatalistic mindset where we passively sit by because God's plans will be carried out somehow because God has determined it

Rather, God has a plan and we are a part of that plan – in other words, God has not only determined **what** will happen but **how** it will happen

And as we've seen today God uses **people** and their **personalities** and their **proclivities** in the fulfillment of his plan –

God even uses people in the fulfillment of his plans when they don't know they are furthering God's plan as we see today in the actions of the conspirators and the Roman tribune and soldiers

None of them knew the role they were really playing as their natural inclinations caused them to act in ways that provided Paul with an armed escort to ensure his safe travel and a mount to ride on to spare his feet as God started him on his journey toward Rome

Paul likely didn't make the complete connection in the moment either and was simply acting wisely to the danger presented and in so doing God's plan was fulfilled

## Conclusion

Our study in Acts has been titled “The Mission Continues” and throughout its entirety I have been stressing the fact that God has given us the task of continuing the mission that Jesus began

And to that end he has given us the commission of being witnesses of Jesus Christ and making disciples of those around us and around the world

We know that God’s will is for people to hear the gospel so that they can accept it and be reconciled to him and then that those believers will continue to be trained in righteousness until they are able to make even more disciples

This morning we have seen how whether we are faithful in completing the task put before us affects how God’s will is realized

We can’t fall into the trap of fatalism that says if God wants a person to be saved they will be whether I am the one who witnesses to them or not

What we do matters and we are responsible for our actions, or our inactions, which result in real and eternally significant consequences

I want to encourage you this morning to have a proper view of God’s sovereignty and your part in seeing his will done in this world

We each have a role to play in reaching the lost around us for Jesus Christ

So let’s make certain we don’t just view God’s *will* as sovereign but also that we are viewing God as *our* Sovereign as we commit to doing what he would have us do

Let’s pray