Acts: “Does Everything Happen for a Purpose?”
Acts 23:11-35

As we return to our journey through Acts, I will remind you of where we are. If you recall, we left Paul in a prison cell in Jerusalem where he encounters the risen Lord in the early part of Acts 23. Jesus speaks to Paul in Acts 23:11 saying, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.” Paul now knows his fate. He has testified to the facts about Jesus in the capital city of Israel, and now God has charged Paul to be a witness for the Gospel in the capital city of the Western world...Rome. From this point in chapter 23 through to the end of the book of Acts, we will travel with Paul from one place of incarceration to the next, across the dangerous seas, onto the island of Malta following a horrible shipwreck, and eventually all the way to Rome.

As we wrap up this series over the next few months, I invite you to consider the amazing, mysterious, and always present sovereignty of God amidst all the crazy, unexpected twists and turns of Paul’s adventures. Paul will get to Rome, but I guarantee he could have never imagined how we would get to Rome! As we look at this story this morning, I want you to be thinking about God’s sovereignty, and as we get to the end of this message, I will address the question that is the title of my message, “Does everything happen for a purpose?” First, let’s pray, and then we’ll jump into our story in Acts 23.

As we return to the prison cell in Jerusalem, let’s pick up the story where we left off in Acts 23:12: 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. There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. 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. 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.”

Now church, what we have just read is a perfect example of zealous religious people getting things wrong at a level that is embarrassingly NOT obvious to them, but pretty obvious to everyone else. Think about it. These Jews are furious because they are convinced that Paul has somehow defiled the Temple of God by bringing Greeks into the temple...which is not true, but that’s why they are in an uproar. So, in order to “honor God” and protect the sanctity of the Temple, they have decided to deceive the Tribune by having the chief priests lie, so that they all might commit murder.

You do see the irony here, right? It’s pretty rich! This group of zealous Jews is determined to break two of the Ten Commandments by lying and committing murder, in order to defend the law and the sanctity of the Temple. How crazy is that? And here’s what’s even more crazy: Paul is already in jail. Paul is already under arrest. He’s off the streets, he’s already in custody, he’s alone in a cell with no access to the temple or to people for that matter. But that’s not enough for this crowd. They don’t trust the law of the land. So this mob will literally have to break Paul out of jail in order to kill him!
This is a classic example of people feeling justified to take matters into their own hands. They are terribly offended, they don’t trust the justice system; they don’t trust God. Can you see how they have already played the role of judge and jury, and now they are ready to serve as executioners.

Now I know that none of us would ever behave this way, right? I mean, none of us would ever take justice into our own hands in order to defend God’s honor, right? I’m sure none of us would ever say something like, “I swear I’m going to get that guy if it’s the last thing I do!” “I swear I will never speak to that person again!” “I swear if that pastor runs long again I’m going to__________ (fill in the blank!).”

You do realize that every time you say, “I swear…” that you are literally making an oath to God, not unlike the oath of these 40 men. You do realize that when we swear to get even, when we swear to make people pay for what they’ve done, it’s quite likely that we come across just like these 40 dudes in Jerusalem. What if God hears all of those oaths that we make? What if God takes our promises seriously? What if we actually sound as foolish and as misguided as these guys when we get riled up and try to take matters into our own hands?

You know, there’s a reason that Jesus taught us to pray for our enemies; to love our enemies; to demonstrate kindness and care for our enemies. There’s a reason that Jesus taught us not to retaliate, but to trust God in the area of justice and retribution. Look at the behavior of these men and the reason becomes extremely obvious: when we take matters into our own hands, we typically sin in our efforts to punish those who have wronged us. In fact, we are incredibly capable of exaggerating the sin of another while ignoring the plank in our own eye. We regularly fail to hold ourselves to the same standard by which we are judging somebody else. But what did Jesus say in Matthew 7:2? “For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.” Think about that. What if God judged us by the same standard that we judge everybody else? That’s a scary thought, right?

Listen church…in our fervor to protect God’s honor, or to protect the sanctity of life, or to defend the truth of the scriptures, or to defend traditional marriage…whatever it is that we feel so passionate about…be careful not to justify your sinful behavior in the process. No matter how right we are, we are never justified to sin against God in order to make our point.

Now notice…the Lord has already communicated His purpose: He purposes that Paul will make bear witness in Rome, so the Lord foils the plot of the angry Jews by ensuring that Paul’s nephew just happens to hear about this plot. Let’s pick up the story beginning with vs. 16: Now the son of Paul’s sister heard of this ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. Paul called one of the centurions and said, “Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him.” 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.” The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, “What is it that you have to tell me?” 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. 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.” So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, “Tell no one that you have informed me of these things.”

Just a few notes here. First, the Greek word used to describe the “young man” would suggest that Paul’s nephew was either a teenager or even a man in his early 20’s. However, given that the tribune “takes him by the hand” and treats him with particular care, we might assume that the boy was younger…perhaps 11 or 12 years old. I think the boy was young enough to not even realize how dangerous it would be to blow the whistle on the murder conspiracy. Whatever his age, this young man demonstrates tremendous courage by going into the prison to share what he knows with his Uncle Paul. Paul wisely redirects his nephew to approach Claudius Lysias himself, and the tribune immediately responds to what he hears from the boy.

Let’s pick up the story in vs. 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. Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor.”

Note the large force that Claudius Lysias arranges for Paul’s escort…literally 470 men. I’m sure some of you might be wondering about that. What you need to remember is the historical context of this period in ancient Israel. We learn from Josephus and other first century historians that the Zealots…a group of Jewish rebels…were regularly attacking the Roman convoys on the roads throughout Israel during the years when these events took place. The gorilla-like attacks had increased in frequency ever since Felix had become the provincial governor, largely due to the ruthlessness of Felix in the way that he treated the Jewish people. Claudius Lysias knows that this group of 40 assassins could quickly turn into a mob of 200 men, so he sends half of a garrison to accompany Paul and ensure his safety.

Claudius also sends a letter to the governor, explaining why Paul is being sent to him. Let’s take a look at his letter as we pick up the story in vs. 25, “And he [Claudius Lysias] wrote a letter to this effect: Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings. 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. And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council. I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. 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.”

In the Roman world, this letter from Claudius to Felix would have been called a litterae dimissoriae, which was essentially a letter sent in the case of an appeal. In other words, since the Tribune has not been able to figure out what took place that led to a massive disturbance in his jurisdiction, he is sending Paul on to a higher court so that his case can be heard by the governor. Claudius Lysias states clearly that Paul has “been charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment,” even if what the Jewish council says is true.

The letter is pretty straightforward, but note how Claudius places himself into the story as the “savior” of Paul, “as a result of learning about Paul’s citizenship.” That’s not actually accurate,
right? It is true that Claudius rescued Paul from the mob, but Claudius was seconds away from
having Paul flogged before he learned about Paul’s citizenship…so Claudius is painting the story
the way he wants Felix to see it, making sure that he leaves out the part where he almost flogged
a Roman citizen!

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

OK, let’s pull up our trusty map and we’ll take a look at this overnight journey to Antipatris and
then to Caesarea (show map) https://frankboulet.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/map-to-caesarea-
copy.jpg

As you can see, it was a bit of haul to come down the mountain from Jerusalem and then north to
Antipatris. Antipatris was 37 miles from Jerusalem, so that would have been a long night for those
soldiers. Remember that Claudius ordered them to set out at the third hour of the night, which
would have been around 9 p.m. So, we should assume they marched throughout the night and
arrived later in the morning into Antipatris. Having successfully moved Paul well out of the way
of the assassination plot, the 400 foot soldiers return to Jerusalem, and Paul enjoys a nice 25 mile
ride to Caesarea with a military escort of 70 mounted soldiers.

When Paul finally arrives in Caesarea, he is brought before the governor, who was a man named
Felix. History remembers Felix as a favored freed slave, appointed the role of governor by the
Roman emperor Claudius. Felix’s rule began in AD 52 and likely ended in AD 60, when he was
recalled for his failure to deal well with the Jewish violence. During this time that Paul was with
Felix, the governor was married to his third wife whose name was Drusilla, who just happened to
be the daughter of Herod Agrippa I, and Felix’s first wife was the grand-daughter of Antony and
Cleopatra…all of that information is for free, in case you were wondering! According to ancient
historians, Felix’s rule was famously violent and chaotic, as the Zealots began to emerge during
his time. In defense of Roman authority, Felix ruthlessly tried to put down the insurrectionists,
which only intensified their efforts.

Now, when Felix meets Paul, he immediately inquires to Paul’s hometown. There is a reason for
this inquiry. Felix has the option of sending Paul to his home province to be heard, or he can choose
to hear the case in Caesarea. Since Paul’s home province is quite a distance away, Felix decides to
hear Paul’s case in Caesarea, which is why he states, “I will give you a hearing when your accusers
arrive.” The emphasis is on the word “I” as opposed to sending Paul away to Cilicia where his
case would have been heard by the provincial governor there.

Note here at the end of our passage that Paul is being held in Herod’s praetorium. (show pic)
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If you look at the picture of the ancient ruin of Herod’s palace, the palace itself was surrounded by water, but further back, away from the water, was where Paul would have been held in the praetorium. Right next to the praetorium was the hippodrome where they would have had the chariot races, gladiators, and so on, so Paul spent two years listening to all of the crowds of people come and go from the games as he sat alone, awaiting either a trial or an opportunity to continue his journey to Rome.

Alrighty then…we have covered a lot of verses with some very interesting history. Paul is on his way to Rome, though he will spend quite a bit of time here in Caesarea as we will see in the next few weeks.

So…what can we take away from this text here in Acts 23 as we seek to live our lives and bear witness to the world as the Light of Christ in this hurting culture?

First of all, remember what Paul wrote a year earlier to the church in Rome. In Romans 8:28 Paul writes, “We know that for those who love God, all things work together for the good, for those who are called according to His purpose.”

Think about Paul’s life. So many twists and turns…so many trials and tribulations…so many miracles and encounters with the Holy Spirit…and yet, Paul states what is so absolutely true: All things work together for the good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose. Think about our story today. Paul was stuck in limbo in a Jerusalem jail cell. The tribune, Claudius Lysias, had no idea what to do with Paul. He didn’t have any reason to keep Paul in custody, but if he let Paul go, there would be another riot, and that would get Claudius in trouble. So, when a group of 40 men threaten to ambush Paul, Claudius Lysias has the perfect excuse to send Paul to Felix, and that is literally the only way that Paul was able to get out Jerusalem alive! God used an intended assassination attempt from evil men to arrange an escort out of town for Paul…and it was a God-sized escort…470 men! In any other world, Paul would have had to walk all the way to Caesarea on his way to Rome and risk the terrors of the open road. Instead, Paul was able to ride to Caesarea on a Roman horse with a massive entourage of armed men to ensure that he had a safe trip! God is good, amen!

Church, one of the hardest things for us to believe is that God is sovereign. In fact, I think a lot of us feel like we need to protect God from that claim. Here’s what I mean by that. When I was a young college student, I regularly tried to defend God from being “sovereign” because I thought that meant that we were attributing every evil thing that happened to “God’s plan” for our lives. So…if a child died and God was sovereign, we would have to conclude that the death of that child was God’s plan. If a tornado wiped out a couple of hundred people, that was “God’s plan.” If the Germans wipe out 6 million people, that was “God’s plan.”

It took me many years to understand that I had an incomplete and inaccurate understanding of God’s sovereignty. The 8th chapter of Romans was crucial in helping me better develop my understanding of God’s sovereignty. If you look closely at Romans 8:28, it’s important to note that for those who love God, GOD works all things together for the good of those who have been called according to His purpose. In other words, all things are going to happen to the believer…good and
bad things. As Jesus says in Matthew 5:45, “For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”

However, for those who love God and are called according to His purpose, the promise here is that God will work in all of those things that happen…and He will accomplish His purpose…which is the ultimate GOOD that can come from our lives.

Now, that’s different than saying that God has planned every painful, awful thing that happens to us in our lives. I still do not believe it is theologically accurate to say that God plans evil things to happen…that would be completely contrary to God’s nature as revealed in scripture. However, God is not rendered powerless or ineffective when evil things happen. Instead, because God is sovereign, God uses all of it…the good and the bad…to accomplish His purpose in our lives.

So, in light of our story this morning, I don’t think that God somehow mobilized 40 men to plot an assassination attempt against Paul’s life, but I do think that God made sure that Paul’s nephew caught wind of it, and I do think that God used that assassination attempt to mobilize an armed escort for Paul to get out of town and on his way to Rome.

Listen carefully: God is sovereign, which means that God uses everything that happens to accomplish His purpose for those who love Him. That’s different than saying that “everything happens for a purpose.” And I want to speak to that for a minute. If you are a Christian, please do not say that ‘everything happens for a purpose.’ Since God is the source of PURPOSE, when we say that “all things happen for a purpose” we are inevitably saying that God is responsible for all things that happen, since God is the source of PURPOSE. Where else would “purpose” come from if not from God? Right? You see the problem, right? The reason that people misquote this verse can actually be traced back to the Greek sentence structure. In the Greek, the word for “all things” (panta) comes first in the sentence, so people have often translated “All things” as the agent that is at work: thus “all things work together for the good”. However, in koinenia Greek, the subject of the sentence is often placed at the end of a sentence. Based upon that understanding and the way that God is referred to in the Greek, it is actually GOD who is the active agent who works out all things for the good. All things don’t magically have a power to work themselves out for the good…God has to do that, amen?

Such is why when we say “everything happens for a purpose,” we are actually placing our hope in fate. In fact, the saying that ‘everything happens for a purpose’ is a fatalistic statement…it is not a Christian statement. To say that “everything happens for a purpose” is to deny free will…such that whatever will happen is destined by fate (or worse, God) to happen, and there’s nothing we can do about it. That’s rubbish.

As human beings, we are all morally free, accountable human beings…we are free to choose, and we are accountable for our choices. Such is why evil often does happen in the world. Morally free humans are quite capable of doing terrible, evil things. We punish people who do evil precisely because we know and believe that they were free NOT to do those things. Such is why we all know that God is not responsible for the evil choices of people, nor is God responsible for the poor choices made by people that lead to horrible accidents and tragedies.
When Christians say, “all things happen for a purpose,” they are horribly misquoting Romans 8:28 which clearly says, “And we know that God works in all things for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.” These two statements are completely different.

Listen: All things do not happen for a purpose…in fact, some things happen that are absolutely contrary to the purposes that God has ordained in His Word. God does not purpose for us to lie…He purposes for us to tell the truth. God does not purpose for us to destroy an innocent human life…God purposes for us to protect innocent human lives. God does not purpose for us to destroy and exploit the planet…God purposed for us to be good managers and stewards of His creation. Clearly…not everything that happens is according to the purpose that God intended when He created the earth and when He created people.

But here is the good news that we find in scripture: “For those who love God, God works in all things for the good of those who are called according to His purpose.” In God’s perfect sovereignty, God takes all that happens…the good and the bad…those things that please Him and even those things that don’t…and He works them together for the good of those who LOVE GOD and are called according to His purpose. Those who LOVE GOD enjoy the comfort of this promise. Those who do not LOVE GOD should not think that the events of their lives are being redeemed with God’s purpose. That promise is reserved for those who LOVE GOD and are called according to His purpose.

Paul was one of those people…He loved God, he was called according to God’s purpose. God made Paul’s purpose clear: you are to testify to the facts about Jesus in Rome. So when a bunch of thugs try to kill him, God uses their sinful intent to arrange a nice ride for Paul to Rome! Evil cannot outflank God…He will win that chess game every time! Amen!

Church, quote God’s word correctly, and believe correctly what has been written for our benefit: “God works all things together for the good of those who love Him and have been called according to His purpose.” That is good news.

Let’s pray.