

“PLOT TO KILL PAUL.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

July 31, 2022, 10:30 AM

Texts for the Sermon: Acts 23:12-35

Introduction

Notice the timing of all of this. When it was day the Jews made a plot, they conspired to kill Paul. But what happened just the night before? Jesus came and stood by Paul and told him, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome” (23:11).

Paul is told by Jesus he is going to Rome. What do you think the influence of Jesus’ words was on Paul the next day? This reminds me of the time Jesus told His 12 disciples, “Let’s get into a boat and go to the other side of the lake.” Then He went to sleep, a storm came up and the disciples forgot what Jesus had said. After he calmed the storm He said, “Where is your faith?” (Luke 8:22-25).

Luke shows us this event from the life of Paul to show how good and faithful God is and how necessary it was for Paul to have his faith and confidence renewed and strengthened, to remove all fear as Paul faced great danger. Paul had no fear that his life was over, for he knew what Jesus had said.

What Jesus does for Paul should give us some pause to consider how He comforts us and helps us in our need, and knows how to anticipate what we will need and when. Ponder this in your heart and take it to heart. This is a call to trust and a call to fearlessness.

What has Jesus said to you? Are you trusting His Word, His promises?

I will never leave you or forsake you.

Don’t be anxious, I will meet your needs.

Not a hair of your head will perish.

My yoke is easy, my burden is light, I will give you rest.

Acts 23:12-15, How the plot was devised.

The Jews made a plot against Paul and bound themselves with an oath. This vow was a kind of curse. “We swear to God and may God curse us if we fail to do this.”

This is your basic terrorist plot, not unlike modern religiously motivated terrorist plots. There is nothing new under the sun.

Such murderous intentions from so many, show they believed Paul was an enemy to God and their religion. They made a covenant with the devil to kill an innocent man.

But to understand why they hated Paul so much we have to remember it is because of Jesus. Satan drives all hatred and especially hatred of Jesus. Anyone who loves Jesus is a target for hate. The world hates Him and they will hate us because we have been with Jesus. “Christianity shows its greatness when it is hated by the world” (Ignatius of Antioch). If it wasn’t true, it wouldn’t be hated.

Luke’s Gospel and this book of Acts are his effort to show Christianity is true. Each book ends with a trial. Pilate said of Jesus, “I find no fault with him.” The Roman Tribune says he can find no fault with Paul. The attack on Christ and His followers is driven by hatred, lies and deception.

Worse yet the chief priests and elders, the spiritual leaders, join in the conspiracy. *Note to self*, never join in with someone else’s sin. Maybe your friends try to talk you into doing something wrong with them. They appeal to your sense of loyalty, friendship, they guilt you, don’t give in.

By murdering Paul, they think they were doing God a favor getting rid of an enemy of God and their religion, they had the blessing of God, indicated by the blessing of the Sanhedrin. Such is the hardness of the human heart.

Acts 23:16-22, How the plot was discovered.

You have to absolutely love what happens next. This is one of those great “But God” moments in Scripture and in history.

Notice how God pulled this all off:

- [1] The otherwise unknown nephew of an unknown sister just happened to overhear the plot.
- [2] He somehow entered the heavily guarded barracks to tell Paul.
- [3] A centurion was willing to listen to a prisoner and take the boy to the commander.
- [4] The busy commander listened to the young boy right away and believed him.
- [5] The commander ordered a small army to escort Paul out of town under cover of darkness.

God let’s men plot in vain, and devise their wicked plans, and scheme, but what does God do? God laughs in heaven. Nothing that happens on earth causes God even the slightest bit of fear or trembling. He laughs.

In two worship services Phama and I attended on vacation, in Bloomington, IN in June and in Moscow, ID in July they sang Psalm 2 and with great vigor I might add.

Psalm 2:1-4 Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed ...

4 He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.

Proverbs 21:30 No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the Lord.

Proverbs 21:1 The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

Some proverbs are general, as in generally true even if not always true. Some proverbs are absolutely true all the time. This one is one of those, the king's heart is always in the hand of God and He always turns it wherever He wills.

But its true not just of the kings heart, but the murderous Jews hearts, a young boys heart, the pagan Roman centurion and Tribune's hearts.

This is nothing short of the grace of God. A hardened veteran soldier in a foreign culture, shows kindness to the boy and to Paul. God has been doing this sort of things for centuries, softening iron hearts, taming obstinate souls, as He decides to use a worldly man for godly purposes.

These kinds of events in our lives are given to us by God to test us and try our faith and deepen our trust. God likes to use unexpected means, unfamiliar paths, uncommon and curious avenues, like a young nephew. This small piece of providence that looms over Paul's life, looms over all of history and over every detail of our lives as well.

Call on the Lord in prayer, and then don't despise the help when it is small, humble, common. Don't reject means sent by God.

There is a lesson here for all who are any position of authority or leadership or are an employer, take to heart how to treat those under you, be patient, listen, show consideration, consider what they have to say, don't be quickly dismissive. Don't be proud, don't refuse warnings that might come from those beneath you. When great men bend to the lowly, they do so to their honor.

Acts 23:23-35, How the plot was defeated.

I wonder if God was having a little fun with all of this. He summons at His bidding over half of the entire garrison assigned by the Roman empire to protect Jerusalem. 470 infantry, spearmen, and cavalry (10 times the number of murderous Jews) to escort Paul out of Jerusalem 60 miles to Caesarea at night.

"It was as if God wanted to exaggerate His faithfulness to Paul, and show him beyond any doubt that the promise of Jesus was true" (David Guzik).

The mighty power of the greatest empire on earth coming to the defense on one Jewish guy preaching a strange new message.

The tribune writes a favorable letter on behalf of Paul, to influence Governor Felix not be too influenced by the Jews against Paul. Treat him with the privileges of Roman citizenship. He basically absolves Paul. Why would a Roman tribune show such kindness, except that the God

of the universe ordained for him to be Paul's protector. God controls the words and actions of unbelievers and believers alike.

So begins Paul's two years of confinement in Caesarea followed by two years in Roman prison. God's providence is never in a hurry.

Conclusion and application.

Let me draw out a couple of applications by way of conclusion.

Acts of kindness.

Consider this letter written by a Roman Tribune on behalf of a Jewish prisoner. Do you know someone who is being bullied or mistreated, maybe even someone different from your or you don't like. Stand up for someone, go to bat for someone, for an underdog, someone less fortunate, a minority. Write a letter on someone's behalf, or send a personal note of encouragement.

Foolish or unholy vows.

Besides the vow these Jews make there is another famous unholy vows or oaths in the NT.

Matthew 14:6-9 When Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, 7 so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. 8 Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." 9 And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given.

There are times in life we may be tempted to make a vow to God. We hear of such vows made by soldiers in foxholes. "God, if you get me out of this alive, I promise to do this or that." "God if you do this for me, I will never ask another thing, I will never do ..."

Or in the midst of a bad situation or relationship we vow to ourselves, "I will never trust that person, or forgive that person, or talk to that person again."

Having been hurt by a close friend in the past, we decide will never let anyone get close again. We shut others out. We decide to never trust someone again, we decide we are going to be independent and not rely on anyone else or depend on anyone else. This is an unholy agreement, promise, oath. That is not how God intends for us to live.

If you have started a sentence with "I will never again" Or "I will from now on ..." this maybe a type of unholy vow, a vow of self-protection that keeps us from God's blessings for us, that keeps us from giving and receiving love, of being vulnerable, from obeying God by loving Him and loving our neighbor.

These kinds of unholy vows or commitments are us trying to protect ourself, to be our own savior, it doesn't work and it cuts us off from the only one who can protect and save us.

There is another kind of unholy agreement where we give our consent to something false or ungodly. A child or a spouse is repeatedly called “stupid” or “fat” or “ugly” or “bad” or “never good enough” eventually internalizes this and begins to believe those lies are true, entering into an unholy agreement, an inner vow. Then when someone says something good they don’t believe it.

Most all of us have made such a vow. We need to repent of all these kinds of vows and revoke them and replace these unholy self-promises with the promises of God. We need to forgive those who have caused our past hurt, guilt or shame and seek God’s forgiveness to be free.

Scripture is clear we must keep our promises, keep our vows, keep our commitments and for that reason we must be very careful in making them. Let your words be simple and few. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. We don’t have to add vows to our requests to God to try to twist His arm into answering.

Providence of God.

What can we learn and take away from this story from the life of Paul?

Does this kind of providence extend to our lives? Can we be confident of this kind of security? There is a phrase used in military and police circles, “I have your six” meaning “I have your six o’clock, I have your back.” God has our six.

God’s providence is real, strong, clear, present. His promise is true and unchanging, unshakable.

God’s servants are immortal until their work is done. None of God’s servants die a premature death. If God has work for me to do, I cannot die. Until the day established by God comes, every man is immortal. We cannot lengthen our days and we cannot shorten our days.

We may not know what God is doing, but we can see from history that God knows what God is doing and nothing hinders Him, nothing stops Him, nothing stands in His way. The most evil intentions of the most wicked men are nothing to God, they are laughable.

A firm faith in the absolute sovereignty of God is the answer to everyone of our fears and anxieties and problems.

God is sovereign over inflation and recessions, and the causes and influences behind them.

God is sovereign over the weather and heat waves and floods.

God is sovereign over berry harvests and milk prices and supply chains.

God is sovereign over elections, cancer, heart attacks, broken bones, and hair follicles.

A world without a sovereign God would be a miserable place to live, intolerable. But the Lord reigns, let the world be glad, let your heart be glad. God reigns and Christ’s cause will prevail.

Grasp as tight as you can this fundament truth about life and death. All of life and death are only, always and forever in the hands of our Father God. His merciful, good, perfect providence is our confidence and strength in this life while we live, and our hope when we die.

He watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.