



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Acts 23: 1-35

Acts

"The God of Circumstances"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] We are in Acts 23. We're going through the Book of Acts, if you're visiting, and Paul has gone up to Jerusalem. He's completed his journeys, and he went to the temple at the recommendation of James and the other leaders of the Jerusalem church. While he was there, some Jews from Asia, particularly, we would assume from the city of Ephesus where Paul had a very significant ministry, recognized him. They called to the others to come help them. They apprehended Paul. Riot ensued. Paul was almost killed in it, but the Romans came and rescued him. Paul was then able to give a speech in defense of himself, standing on the steps leading into the Roman barracks. And that, as he mentioned, came to a certain point in his speech, set the Jewish people, and Paul was taken back into the barracks where he was almost flogged by the Roman commander. But when it was discovered that he was a Roman citizen, he was spared that.

And now, we come to a trial that Paul faces before the Sanhedrin. We read in verse 1 of chapter 23:

Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, "Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day." The high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?" But the bystanders said, "Do you revile God's high priest?" And Paul said, "I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'"

But perceiving that one group were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul began crying out in the Council, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!" As he said this, there occurred a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. And there occurred a great uproar; and some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party stood up and began to argue heatedly, saying, "We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" And as a great dissension was developing, the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them and ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force, and bring him into the barracks.

But on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also."

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."

But the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, and he came and entered the barracks and told Paul. 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."

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.

The remainder of the chapter is the letter that Claudius Lysias wrote to Felix the governor. We'll cover that in our lesson. Let's bow now in a word of prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank You for Your goodness and Your grace and we thank You for this text of Scripture in which we learn about Your sovereign providence over all of the affairs of life. And we can take the example of the apostle Paul and apply it to ourselves and we can see that as You control the circumstances of his life in unusual ways, You do that for us too in ways that seem not so unusual. But all of the occurrences of life, they are a result of Your providential care of us. Remind us of that this morning, Father, as we consider this text, as we look at Paul's life and his experience. Remind us of how You deal with each of us, every day, individually. We do thank You Father that life is not left to chance, that there really is no such thing. But our lives are ordered according to Your will, and according to Your plan, which is perfect for us. And we praise You and thank You for that. So bless us this morning as we study, encourage us with that fact. Bless us Father with the knowledge that You being in control of all things, are the provider of all things. We know that spiritually, You are the one who gives us all that we have. Salvation is of the Lord.

But, so too Father are all the details of life, all of the material things of life. Every good and perfect gift comes down from above, and we thank You for that. So encourage us with that. Encourage those who are experiencing difficulties in life, that life is not out of control, but it is thoroughly and completely in Your control. Encourage the sick. We pray that You would give healing, where that would be Your will. We pray that You'd give encouragement, whether as discouragement.

So Father, bless us to that end. We pray also Father for the meeting that we have this evening. Bless it as we meet together. Bless our time as we gather to remember Your Son, our Savior, and His coming for us, His death, and His coming

again when He will establish His kingdom. And bless us now as we sing our final hymn. May it prepare our hearts well for our time of study together. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

[Message] God has a wonderful plan for your life. He has a promise that Campus Crusade for Christ has long used to begin its presentation of the gospel. That promise is certainly true for every believer in Jesus Christ. We have eternal life. We have the hope of the resurrection of the dead. Jesus our Lord gave us that very promise in John 6:44. He said, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him. I will raise him up on the last day." That is a promise. That is a certainty. The grave is not the end. The resurrection will occur, and there could be no greater plan, no more wonderful plan for a life than that.

But what about everything in between? What about the circumstances of life now until that time today? Do they also fall between God's control? Are they part of His plan for us? And the answer to that question is: yes. The Lord is guiding us and protecting us daily and will accomplish His purpose for us. Paul gives that very assurance in Romans chapter 8 and verse 28, the verse well-known to you, a favorite of many where he writes, and we know, that God causes all things to work together for good, to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. He causes it all. That is His work of providence, which is His all-wise, all-powerful preserving and governing His creation and preachers.

I've sometimes illustrated divine providence from the Scottish economist Adam Smith's metaphor of the invisible hand. He used that 200 years ago in his book, *The Wealth of Nations*, to describe the principle of competition that guides a market economy. Now, he's speaking of economics, but it's a good metaphor to describe God's rule, God's guidance, God's providence in the world. His hand, so to speak, is on and in all of the affairs of life. It's invisible. God is a spirit. Therefore, He cannot be seen. But sometimes we are made aware of His presence and power from the arrangement and the occurrence of life's circumstance. But whether or not we are aware of that, whether we see the evidence of it or not in the events and the circumstances of life, we know it to be true.

Paul did, and he could confidently say a few verses later in Romans 8 and verse 31: "If God is for us, who is against us?" Well, it doesn't really matter who is

against us. We may have many against us, and we certainly do not only in the visible realm, but the invisible realm. But it doesn't matter. Not if God is for us, and not if God is in fact working all things together for our good. And we see the significance of that illustrated in our passage this morning in Acts 23 where God's invisible hand was in evidence in a very clear way. Paul had been rescued by the Romans from a violent mob in the temple. He was allowed to speak to the people and defend himself against the false charges that were made against him, basically, that he was anti-Jewish. He did that by giving his personal testimony, the testimony of his conversion, of how he met Jesus Christ, alive from the dead, on the Damascus Road, and we read how the people listened very quietly to what he had to say until Paul told them that God sent him far away to the Gentiles.

And at that point, they interrupted his speech, and the riot was on again. The commander brought Paul into the barracks, prepared to scourge him in order to find out what his identity was and what he had done. Then he learned that Paul was no ordinary individual. He was, in fact, a Roman citizen, and that put an end to the attempt to flog him. But with that discovery, he still was very keen to know: what were these events? What were these circumstances? What was the reason for the disturbance and what the Jews were accusing Paul of doing? And so he called for a trial before the Sanhedrin, which is the Jewish high court. This is the same court, the same counsel that had condemned Christ. It was the same body that Paul had served before his conversion when he was persecuting the church. It became clear from the outset that it was no more receptive to Paul than it was to those early Christians it persecuted to Stephen, who had been stoned, or to the Lord Himself.

The chapter begins with Paul standing before the Sanhedrin in his own defense. And Luke says, looking intently at the members of the court, and maybe we can imagine seeing some of his former friends on that council. But, knowing that the court as a whole was very hostile to him. And so, Paul tried to open the trial with the assurance that the rumors about him were not true. He was not an opponent of the law, was not an opponent of the Jewish people, and he had not defiled the temple. "Brethren," he said, "I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day." That is a statement that few men can make, but Paul could make it. He had lived his life before God with a clear conscience. He stood before them an innocent man, a man innocent of the charges that had been brought against him.

But, the leading member of the court was infuriated by Paul's statement and his claim to innocence. And before Paul could continue, the high priest, Ananias, told those standing by to strike Paul on the mouth. It was obviously wrong, but it was completely in character for Ananias because he was a notorious character. He was a man known for his violence. He was appointed to be the high priest in the year AD 47 and he served in that office for 11 or 12 years and disgraced it. He was friendly with the Romans, and he was hated by the Jewish people. He was a thief. Josephus wrote about Ananias and wrote that he would send his servants to the threshing for the temple, to confiscate the tithes of grain that were set aside for the ordinary priests. And so he'd take it for his own use. The Talmud also lampooned him as a glutton. And what he did to Paul was illegal. Under Jewish law, the rights of a defendant were guarded. He was considered innocent until proven guilty, and Paul stands at the very outset of this trial, and he has not even yet been formally charged with a crime when he's struck on the mouth.

Well, Paul was naturally indignant at that, and he responded sharply. "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall. You sit to try me according to the law, and in violation of the law, order me to be struck?" Paul has been criticized for his response. He has been described as losing his composure in contrast to Christ, who as Peter wrote in 1 Peter 2:23, was reviled but did not revile in return. But our Lord did respond in a similar case and in a similar way. Jesus was being interrogated, you remember, the night of His arrest before the high priest at His trial, and He was struck on the face by the command of the high priest, and He objected to that. Now, it's not wrong to protest an illegal act. That's what Paul did. That's what our Lord did. But Paul did show some passion in his response, though a lot more dignity than Ananias had shown. Ananias, whom he called a "whitewashed wall," which is a way of calling him a hypocrite. That's what the figure represents. He was like a wall that was in bad condition. It's leaning. It's about to fall over, but there is little time or little money in which to prepare it. And so, it's whitewashed just to make it look better. It's really no better. Same wall. Still flawed, still broken, and about to collapse.

Well, that was Ananias. In spite of his appearance with his official robes, in spite of his high position as high priest, what he was, really, was a hypocrite, and he was doomed. He would fall. Paul predicted that. The Bible predicts that of such

men. Proverbs 16:18, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." Ananias certainly fit that. He was a proud man, he was an arrogant man. He was an abusive man. So as F.F. Bruce wrote, Paul could not have spoken more aptly. He did speak aptly, but those who were present standing by did think so. They were shocked that Paul spoke as he did to the high priest, and they rebuked him. Do you revile God's high priest? As soon as that was pointed out, Paul apologized. He did that, and in doing so, showed his submission to the law, which forbids speaking against a ruler. "I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest, for it is written you shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people." It's not clear why Paul didn't know that Ananias was a high priest, and also not clear that Paul was actually speaking seriously when he made that apology.

Calvin and Augustin felt that he was being ironical or speaking sarcastically in order to say that he recognized nothing priestly about Ananias' character and conduct. I was not aware that he was high priest, means, I don't see anything priestly about this individual. It was a way of rebuking him, a way of saying he may occupy the priesthood, he may occupy the office, but he's not a real priest, not genuinely. His character certainly doesn't reflect that.

Well now, that is a possible interpretation. That may be exactly what Paul meant. But taking Paul's words at face value, we can understand that he might not have known who Ananias was, or at least not known by sight that he was the high priest. Because, for many years, Paul had not been in Jerusalem. When he went up to the city, he was only there briefly, and so may not have known the identity by face, by appearance of the high priest.

So, if that is the case, if the apology was legitimate, it was not sarcastic or ironical. It proves yet again that Paul was not against the law, as he was accused of being, when it was noted that he had spoken against the ruler, which he said was contrary to the law, Paul acted apologetically because he respected the law. Still, everything Paul said to Ananias was true, and it was prophetic because God did strike him. And during the Jewish revolt against Rome in AD 66, some patriots burned his house. Ananias fled, but he was found. He was dragged out of his hiding place, and he was put to death along with his brother. But in the meantime, he was very much alive, and he was in charge of the council, and Paul knew that his case before that

man was doomed in that court. He would never get a fair hearing before the priest before the Sadducees.

And so he changed his approach. The court, the Sanhedrin was made up of two groups: the larger group was that of the Sadducees. They were the priests. They were the aristocrats. They were the men of the temple, and the men of Jerusalem. And the smaller group was that of the Pharisees, the rabbis. And instead of continuing with his defense, Paul spoke directly to the Pharisees on the court, and he addressed the central issue in all of this. He said, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!" And in saying that, Paul exposed a major difference between the two parties, which Luke explains in verse 8. The Sadducees, he said, didn't believe in the bodily resurrection or in the spirit world, that of angels or demons. Josephus, who was himself a Pharisee, gives us more information about the two groups. And he writes that the Sadducees denied the immortality of the soul. Souls die with the bodies, they said. So, they were what we might call naturalists. They were very much like theologians today who believe in a closed universe, who deny the supernatural, who deny the incarnation of our Lord, deny the resurrection of the dead. People who say this life is all that there is; the world is material, and once the material ends, that's it.

The Sadducees were very much like that, and these issues, and particularly this issue of the resurrection was a major dividing issue between the two. In fact, the Mishnah, which is the rabbinical writings of that era stated that those who say there is no resurrection of the dead have no share in the world to come. Paul agreed with that and explained to the Pharisees that not only was he a Pharisee, but that his belief and the resurrection was the same as theirs and was the central issue of the trial. It was the reason that he was on trial. Now, some have analyzed Paul's statement as being disingenuous and have seen in this a strategy of divide and conquer to disrupt the trial since he wasn't going to get a fair one anyway. That did happen, but Paul's motive was higher than that. I don't think that was Paul's motive at all. His motive was to give them the truth.

And so he comes right to the issue, and the issue in all of this was what he said. It was the resurrection from the dead. That is the reason that Paul was a Christian. That was the reason that Paul was a servant of Christ, and that was the reason that Paul was on trial. If Christ had not been raised, then Paul would not have

believed in Him, would not have been an apostle, would not have been placed on trial. In fact, if Christ was not raised from the dead, then no one would be raised, and there is no gospel to preach because there is no hope in the world for anyone. That is Paul's great statement, great explanation in 1 Corinthians 15. But, if Christ was raised from the dead as Paul himself said, as Paul was a witness, he saw him on the Damascus road, then everything that Paul said was true and he should be acquitted of any wrongdoing. That didn't happen. Paul was not acquitted. What Luke tells us was a great uproar. The scribes, who were the Pharisaic scholars began to argue that Paul had done nothing wrong, and they even suggested that an angel might have given him his revelation. The Sadducees, of course, weren't buying that. Didn't believe in angels, and they certainly weren't persuaded by Paul's reference to the resurrection, which they rejected completely.

So, the result of all of this was the anger between the two groups increased, and it increased to the point of violence, and Paul's life was very much in danger. When the Roman commander saw that, he saw the furor that was going on in the trial, in the court, he realized that a careful examination of the case had become impossible, and he ordered the Roman troops to take Paul by force, to save his life, and take him back to the barracks. So evidently, hands were being put on Paul, people were about to actually kill him.

Well, with that, the trial ended, nothing was resolved, and Paul remained in prison. His grand plan to visit Rome and then go on to Spain seemed very much in jeopardy. He was discouraged and alone. He seems to have been not given much help, if any help, or encouragement from the leaders of the Jerusalem church who had developed the idea of him going up into the temple in the first place. It's not clear evidence that they did not come and encourage him, but we see no evidence that they did, and there was nothing that they could have done to free him anyway.

The situation seemed desperate. Paul was dejected, but Paul was not alone. And the night following his appearance before the Sanhedrin, the Lord appeared to him. He stood at his side, Luke says, and He said, "Take courage." How often do we read the Lord saying that? All through the gospels, we read Him encouraging His disciples or encouraging other people with those words. Take courage. Do not be afraid. Now how could He say that? Well, He could say that first of all because He cares for His people. That's the motive for making the statement, "Take courage."

But He could say that with force, with authority, because He is sovereign. He is alive, He is in control, and He is able to make good on His word. And so here, He came to Paul. He appeared to the apostle Paul, and he reassured him. Take courage, for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause in Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also. In spite of the circumstances, Paul's mission was not over. In fact, his circumstances were part of the process in getting Paul to Rome. God causes all things to work together for good for those who love Him. We cannot judge our welfare, and we cannot judge God's love for us by the circumstances of our lives.

Now, we might wonder: well, how else are we going to judge it than that? How else can I judge my welfare than by the circumstances that I have in my life, by the situation of my life? The way we judge our circumstances, the way we ascertain the love of God is not by the things that are going on around us, but by the Word of God itself. It is filled with promises. It is filled with the assurances of God's love, and so we must trust His word, which means we must trust Him.

One of the best examples in the Bible of that very fact is found in Genesis 42, and it is in the life of Jacob, a man who lived most of his life aggressively, trying to control the circumstances of his life and learning, time and again that he couldn't do it. But he also learned that he didn't need to do that. He didn't need to control the circumstances of his life because there is someone else far greater than him, infinitely greater than him who does control the circumstances of life. He learned that in what was perhaps the greatest trial of his life, final great trial of his life. He was an old man. His wives were dead. His favorite son, Joseph, was presumed dead when terrible famine occurred in Canaan that threatened to destroy the rest of his family. And so he did what so many people in the ancient world did during time of famine. He sent his sons down to Egypt to buy grain. He kept one of them home, but the other sons were sent down there, and there, they got in trouble with the prime minister, who kept one of them, Simeon, and demanded that Jacob's youngest son, Benjamin, be brought down to him.

When Jacob heard that, that was the last straw. He was in utter despair. He couldn't understand what was happening. His world was falling apart. There was nothing that he could do about it. The circumstances were completely out of his control, and in despair, he cried out: "All these things are against me." The reality was all those things were for him. Simeon was okay, and the prime minister was

actually Joseph. All the events that seemed to have conspired against Jacob were actually working in his favor, working to reunite the family in Egypt where it would prosper and it would grow into a great nation.

The same was true for Paul. In his darkest hour, his darkest hour spiritually, his darkest hour emotionally, but literally, the darkest hour in the night when all seemed lonely, lost, and hopeless, the Lord appeared to him, and I don't doubt that the Lord chose the nighttime to be the time when He appeared, because that is the lonely time of the day, and that is when thoughts crowd in our mind to disturb us, and that's when the Lord appeared, and He assured him that he was where he was supposed to be, and he would end up where he wanted to be: in Rome, preaching the gospel.

Now, the same is true for us. And so, we are to walk by faith, not by sight. That's not natural. That's not normal. What we normally do is we walk by sight. We look at the circumstances around us. We gauge our life by that. We use our wisdom as we have it, we try to sort things out. We try to control the events and the circumstances. We walk by sight, but we're not to do that. Not a child a God, not one who has the Spirit of God, not one who's in Jesus Christ. Not one whose Father is the Lord God of heaven and earth. We are to trust Him and let Him guide us.

In his study on the Book of Acts, H.I. Ironside wrote that there are times in our lives when things seem very dark and God seems to be silent. That doesn't mean that God isn't near, or that God has forgotten us. He writes, "God is never closer to His people than when they cannot see His face." That's the promise of Scripture. God is always with us. He speaks to us in the night just as truly as He spoke to Paul. He doesn't speak to us audibly, He doesn't appear to us visually as He did to the apostle, but He speaks to us just as truly because He speaks to us through His word with the great promises that He has given there, and the promises that He is guiding us and He is protecting us.

Just before John Wesley died, he opened his eyes and he declared in a clear voice: "The best of all is: God is with us." He is. The rest of the chapter shows how He was with Paul, and that His work was true. His promise is reliable. Paul's troubles were not over after this great appearance, this encouraging appearance of the Lord. In fact, they seem to just be beginning. More than 40 Jewish men had formed a plot to kill him, and they put themselves under an oath not to eat or drink anything until they had carried out their plan. They arranged with the chief priests and elders,

the men of the Sanhedrin to have Paul brought back to court. And as he traveled down the narrow streets of Jerusalem, they would ambush him and put him to death.

So these men were fanatics. You see that in the fact that they were prepared to fight Paul's Roman guards, and obviously prepared in order to kill him. So they were a determined group of men, and they had the full cooperation of the Jewish authorities. All these things were against Paul, but man's plans are subject to God's plan. It was God's will that Paul go to Rome, not die in Jerusalem, and His will cannot be overruled.

Isaiah 8:10 makes that clear. Devise a plan, but it will be thwarted. State a proposal, but it will not stand, for God is with us. We don't see Him. His hand is invisible, but sometimes He makes His presence with us known in unusual ways, and He did that for Paul. Paul had a nephew, the son of his sister, living in Jerusalem, and we read in verse 16 that he overheard the plot against Paul's life. Now, to this point, we knew very little about Paul's family. We learn in his speech before the Sanhedrin that he was the son of Pharisee, so his father and his grandfather were Pharisees. We know that his father was also a Roman citizen. But it's only here that we learn that Paul had a sister whose son was living in Jerusalem, maybe growing up in the city to study to be a rabbi, just as Paul had done in his youth. He seems to have been young, because in verse 19, we read that the Roman commander took him by the hand, and that would suggest that he was a boy.

We don't know how close he was to Paul. We don't know how close the family, the sister, was to Paul. In Philippians chapter 3 and verse 8 we get a suggestion of the relation that he had to his family because there, he writes that he suffered the loss of all things for Christ, which might suggest that his father disinherited him, ostracized him from the family when Paul became a Christian. That was not uncommon among the Jewish people. But it may be that his sister retained her love for her brother and passed on her affection for Paul to her son, Paul's nephew, and he acted in Paul's behalf out of affection for his uncle. We don't know any of this for sure. It's speculation. In fact, we're not even told how it is that the boy came to learn of the ambush. The verse seems to indicate that he heard the conspirators talking. Perhaps he did. Perhaps he happened upon this plot. Perhaps he was in the home where it was taking place. Perhaps he knew someone, another young person who heard about it and passed it on. However it happened, he was the right

person in the right place at the right time. That's the providence of God, and it reminds us of how God works in ways that we are not aware of and reminds us of the fact that He's always working in our behalf, working for us.

John Calvin had some good observations about that in the *Institutes* where he points out that innumerable are the evils that beset human life, innumerable to the deaths that threaten it. We can't escape all of the issues of life that threaten our own lives. He writes, and he gives some examples of this. Embark upon a ship. You are one step away from death. Mount a horse. If one foot slips, your life is in peril. Go through city streets. You are subject to as many dangers as there are tiles on the roof. You can't escape it. If you think, well, I'll escape it by staying in my house and just shutting myself off and not going down to the mall or not getting off onto the street, not getting around anything, I'll just stay in my house, well, Calvin says: in your house, there's danger of fire, and it threatens in the daytime to impoverish you, at night even to collapse upon you. Even your house is not even secure from that.

The point is: we face all kinds of hidden dangers every day. Maybe not conspirators, as Paul faced, though some businessmen no doubt face that kind of thing. Others trying to undo them in one way or another. But if not, there are all kinds of dangers. It's in the air. It's on the streets. It's wherever. There are things that are there, forces at work that could take our lives at any time. We take safety and health for granted, but they are not givens. The reason that life proceeds in such an orderly manner is due to God's providence, His preserving and governing all things. He is the God of circumstances, who protects us, and protects us in unusual ways. He uses the weak to overthrow the strong. He did that for Paul. He used a boy to defeat over 40 conspirators, and that boy then went to Paul in the barracks and informed him of the plot.

Paul called for one of the centurions and asked him to take his nephew to the commander. He did. The commander received the boy warmly and with great interest. The boy told him his story. The commander believed him and he did everything he could to protect Paul. This was a Roman citizen, and he did all that was in his power to protect Paul from danger. He went to great extremes to do that. He gave the order to assemble a small army to escort Paul some 60 miles from Jerusalem down to cesarean on the coast. We read in verse 23: "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."

So, leaving under the cover of dark, they marched all night, some 35 miles down to Antipatris at the foot of the Judean hills, far away from the conspirators. Paul was out of immediate danger there. So, the infantry, the spearmen, they returned back to Jerusalem, and the cavalry took Paul on to Caesarea where they delivered him to Felix, the governor, along with a letter from the commander, Claudius Lysias, summarizing the events.

One of the fascinating things about this is that Paul, a Jew, was in safer hands with the Romans than he was with his own people. God assembled an army of pagans to protect his apostle, and it shows that God can and does use unbelievers for His own good purpose and for our welfare. God is not limited in what He can do. He's all-wise, all-powerful, and here, He protected the apostle in an unusual way. And yet, that's not all that unusual, as we study through the Bible. He did it in Egypt when Pharaoh was killing the male children of Israel, and Moses, as a baby, was put in a basket and set adrift on the Nile. You know the story. You know it well. He was found by Pharaoh's daughter who happened to be at the right place at the right time. She opens the basket and Moses cries at the right time, and it touched her heart. She had pity on the child and we read that she took him into her home, and Moses grew up in the very palace of Pharaoh, nourished by the enemy.

The Lord is the God of circumstances. He delivers His people in the most unexpected way, and He uses the most unusual means, the most unusual and unlikely people. He used here the Romans to deliver Paul from danger.

When Paul arrived in Caesarea, Felix read the letter from Lysias. It was basically accurate, but also a bit self-serving. Lysias wrote that he rescued Paul having learned that he was a Roman. The idea being: I learned this man was a Roman and we went and we rescued him. Well, not quite. He learned Paul was a Roman after he rescued him, after he had put him in chains and prepared to flog him. But, Lysias didn't mention any of those facts. Still, he was essentially accurate in what he said. The letter was accurate, which exonerated Paul. He wrote in verses 28 through 30: "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."

In other words, what Lysias was saying in his letter was: Paul is an innocent man. And every Roman official before whom Paul appeared declared him to be that, declared him to be innocent. Earlier, we read about Gallio in Corinth who exonerated Paul. Lysias here exonerates Paul. Felix and Festus would do the same in the chapters that follow. Still, he wasn't free. Paul was held a prisoner of the empire, which seemed bleak. But, there as a prisoner, he would be able to speak the gospel to all kinds of people. All of these events, hard events though they were, discouraging events though they were, all of these events were serving God's purpose. They were all part of God's plan for Paul's life, and we can be sure that God is doing the same for our lives as well.

The other day I read an interesting book review in the Wall Street Journal. It is a review of a book entitled, *The Power of Gold*. And in it, the author speaks about the fascination that gold has had for people down through the ages and the part that it has played in various economies throughout history. And toward the end, the reviewer writes: "The legendary Midas, the emperors of Byzantium, the kings and queens of Spain, and the gold bugs of the 1980s all were fools for gold. They chased an illusion because they believed that gold occupied an almost metaphysical realm as a hedge against the uncertainties of life." It caught my attention. That's why we do collect gold or money, not that that's wrong. But the reality is: there are no hedges against the uncertainties of life. All of it can evaporate. People who invested heavily in gold in the early '80s found out that. Its value evaporated. There are no hedges against the uncertainties of life, but the child of God has the absolute hedge against it all because we are in the presence and the power of God. We are in His presence in that we are in Christ, and He is in us, and we are secure in His hand, and there is nothing more secure than that. He is working out all things together for our good. That is a certainty.

Last week, we sang an old hymn, a hymn by Isaac Watts. *I Sing the Mighty Power of God*. It is a hymn to God's sovereignty in His providence. The third stanza goes like this: "There's not a plant or flower below, but makes Thy glories known/And clouds arise, and tempests blow, by order from Thy throne/While all that

borrowed life from Thee is ever in Thy care/And everywhere that man can be, Thou,
God art present there."

Well, God assures us of that in His word. So, we should never despair when circumstances seem to conspire against us. They're not against us because God is in control. And best of all, as Wesley said, God is with us. But the promise of God's wonderful plan for your life is only true for the believer in Jesus Christ. The end for the unbeliever, for all who reject His Son is not wonderful. It's judgment.

And so if you are here without Christ, realize that your soul is in great peril. That's not simply what I am saying. I say that on the authority of the Word of God, John 3:36 among others make that very clear. But in John 3:36, we read that the wrath of God abides on all who do not believe in Jesus Christ, who do not obey Him. It presently abides, but there is a way of escape. The God whose wrath abides on the unbeliever sent His own Son Jesus Christ to die for unbelievers, to bear the penalty of their sin. And all who receive Him, all who believe in Him are saved freely, forgiven of all their sins, and given life everlasting, life that can never be taken from them. So if you're here without Christ, believe in Him, trust in Him. May God help you to do that and help all of us to rest in Him, confident and secure. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank You for Your goodness. We come to a text like this and we see exemplified in this example of the apostle Paul, the promises that You had given, that You are with us, that You will never forsake us, that You cause all things to work together for good. That doesn't mean that therefore, the experiences of life are all pleasant and easy. They're not. They can be crushing and dispiriting. They can be very confusing. So Father, when we experience hardship, when we experience joyful times, cause us to –