

Confident in the Providence of God: A Case History

Acts 23:12-35

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December 29, 2013 – Morning Sermon

Acts 23:12–15 says

[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.”

May God bless His Word as we consider it here.

In thinking about the providence of God in this situation that the Apostle Paul is in where there is this big threat on his life, God is controlling things and so on and ruling the world with a plan where a lot of events occur. Here is a true story. This happened on Mother’s Day according to a news report. A man named Michael Murray was 27 years old and he decided to take his two children to the medical center in Massachusetts where his wife was a nurse so his two children could see their mother on Mother’s Day. They got their and gave her a present that was a necklace that said ‘#1 Mom’ and a single rose. When they had done that the father and his two children made their way back to where the car was parked in a darkened indoor garage.

He gently sat the infant seat with the three month old Matthew in it on the sunroof of the car and turned his attention to buckling Matthew’s twenty month old sister into her seat. Without thinking further he slid into the driver’s seat and drove off forgetting that Matthew was still on the roof of the car. Moving slowly from the darkened garage into the bright sunlight he drove through the busy streets toward Interstate 290. Despite heavy traffic nobody beeped or waved to warn him that anything about his car was wrong. Pulling onto the expressway he accelerated to 50 miles an hour and then he heard a scrapping on the roof of the car as the tiny seat with Matthew strapped in it began to slide. He said “I looked

at where Matthew should have been in the car and then in the rearview mirror and I saw him sliding down the highway in his infant seat.” Matthew landed in the middle of the interstate in the path of the oncoming traffic.

The seat was sliding down the road almost as fast as the cars that were coming toward it and there was an antique dealer named James who had been following Murray’s car. He saw the whole event unfold and as he saw Matthew slide off the roof and hit the road James hit his brakes and turned his car around in the lane so no other cars could go by. James jumped from the car and found an uninjured baby in an undamaged car seat. I picked him up and went and gave him to his petrified father. Talk about God’s control of things in this situation. It’s amazing that neither the baby nor the seat were even hurt. What an amazing way God delivered that baby.

R.C. Sproul, a famous theologian, in his book *The Invisible Hand* speaks about God’s providence. He said I had just pulled my car into the garage and stepped out of it when the door to the kitchen opened and my daughter Sherry appeared. Her face had a look of horror on it and she rushed into my arms blurting out the words “Oh daddy, my baby is dead!” I held her against my chest as she sobbed and she was in the ninth month of her pregnancy. She had just returned from a checkup with her obstetrician who could not detect a heartbeat. They went in and took the baby out and the baby was dead. The child was perfect in every respect except it didn’t breathe. Who can experience such a thing without crying to heaven and saying why? There is an amazing deliverance of one child and for another child their life was taken. It is all a part of God’s providence.

In Acts 23 we see God’s providence in an amazing way. The Apostle Paul is in prison in Jerusalem. He has been in prison by the Roman authorities. They sought to save his life in the public and the Jews were very upset with him. There was a big riot and the Roman authorities rushed in, rescued Paul and put him in prison to find out what this riot was all about. There is a plot on his life where it says in Acts 23:12–15

[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 (Jewish leaders), give notice to the tribune (Romans) 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.”

So here is this plot of Paul’s life. God is working behind the scenes here. He moves the scenes. In the shorter catechism we talk about God’s providence and our denomination defines it this way; God’s providence is His most holy, wise

and powerful, preserving and governing all of His creatures in all of their actions. It is not some but all of their actions.

I'd like to share with you John Calvin's comments on this passage in Acts. Here we see that God counters the plan of the ungodly as though by a flanking attack. Indeed He allows them to devise many schemes and He even allows their wicked enterprises to proceed, but in the end He shows, in the nick of time, that He is laughing out of heaven at all the things that men are busy about on earth. Solomon says "There is no wisdom, there is no counsel, against the Lord (Proverbs 21:30)." That is set before us in the present story. The matter is almost accomplished that Paul should come forth on the following day to be slain, but the Lord shows that his life is faithfully guarded and protected, so that anything that men endeavor to do is in vain. As for ourselves, let us not doubt that He extends His providence, evidence of which He showed on that occasion to protect us; because the promise remains unshakeable, 'not a hair of your head will be lost (Luke 21:18).'

Paul sends his disciples out and says "I'm sending you out as sheep among wolves, don't be afraid." Not a sparrow falls without your heavenly Father controlling everything. The hairs of your head are all numbered. He is controlling everything. Nothing happens by chance.

God was working to a plan. The previous night Jesus, the resurrected Christ, He stood by Paul. Acts 23:11 says [11] *The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about Me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome."* God is going to move Paul to Rome and He is going to have the Romans to do it. Paul has this threat on his life and it winds up where the Romans will be the ones to move him there. Acts 15:17b–18 says *the Lord, who makes these things [18] known from of old (to all His creation).* Ephesians 1:11 says [11] *In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.* He has control of all events.

God works with evil instruments as well as good. I think of the crucifixion of Christ. It is the most evil thing that ever happened in the world. All of that was planned out and all was told hundreds of years ahead of time. It was predestined by God. God is in control. He is sovereign. He uses evil instruments but He is not contaminated by that. They choose to do it. He doesn't force someone to do evil but He uses their evil for His own good.

There is a poem about a young man who was angry with God and he goes outside with a knife and slings it up to heaven. He thinks "If I could just stick it in God's heart." All of a sudden this hand reaches out of the cloud and grabs this knife. Then it goes back into the cloud and there are five drops of blood that come out of the cloud. The young man falls to his knees and realizes that is picturing what God did to His Son on the cross as He plunged the dagger into

Christ's heart for us because of our rebellion against Him. The poem says 'Through love and peace abounding he sank on lowly bended knee, looked up to heaven and cried, 'Have mercy, mercy, Lord on me, for His dear sake, who on the tree, shed forth those drops and died!''

He realized God's gift of His Son for him. It broke his heart and he fell to his knees and responded. We have to do the same, of course. Christ died so God could justly forgive us. He couldn't overlook His law so He had His Son fulfill it. That was His plan from the creation of the world that He would have His Son come and pay for our sin. At a point in time He predicted it, He pictured it by having the lamb slain with forgiveness through the blood of the Lamb and Jesus would be the real Lamb would die on the very day the lamb was killed on the Passover. That was the day in a sense Jesus would die on fourteen hundred years after the Passover.

When we respond to Christ's claim to be God, God the Son who became Man and died for us, in true surrender of our will to Him that is repentance, where I purpose to obey Him. I won't always obey Him but I am dead earnest about it and I put my trust in Jesus Christ alone is my approach to God. It's not trusting that I haven't been too bad or I'm going to be better, but trusting that Christ paid for my sin. When we do that we are forgiven. We are adopted into God's family. He becomes our heavenly Father. He comes to live within us. His Holy Spirit begins to produce the fruit of the Spirit and our lives change dramatically and that is the evidence that we really did make that commitment. God had all that planned out.

God runs the world by providence here amazingly. When we follow this here we see His amazing providence. God uses evil instruments to bring good about. Jim Elliot was a famous missionary who went to the Auca tribe down in Ecuador. No one had been able to reach that tribe and he and five other men went in there to try and reach them in the 1950s. They had a life plane and they flew over the tribe and would lower presents down out of the plane to try and communicate with the Indians that they were friends. The Indians would take those presents and then they started putting things in and they would pull them back up. They thought they know we're their friends so they landed near the tribe and within a few hours all five of them had been speared to death.

Elisabeth Elliot, Jim Elliot's wife, stayed near that area and a woman came out of the tribe and Elisabeth befriended her. Elisabeth and her children went back into the tribe with this woman. The women and children weren't a threat to the tribe and they ended up leading other women and men to Christ. Those men from that tribe became missionaries to others. Elisabeth asked the men who speared her husband why they did it and they said "We thought he came to eat us." She said "Why would you think that?" They said "For no particular reason." She said "The God who holds in His hands the breath of every living thing had a purpose. He

answered Jim's prayer. Jim had prayed earlier 'Lord, let me live until I have declared Your works to this generation.'

God let him live until he was speared there but God used that spearing to insight Christians all over the world to begin to try and reach out to those tribes and to reach others. It was a huge motivation for world missions. Elisabeth said "The God who holds in His hands the breath of every living thing had a purpose. He answered Jim's prayer mysteriously and exceedingly abundantly above all that he had asked or thought. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Jim's generation for whom he had prayed were brought to their knees, some of them in life long surrender to the call of Christ." God uses evil things to bring about wonderful good.

B.B. Warfield, a famous theologian, taught at Princeton Seminary when it was a good seminary, for thirty four years, until his death in 1921. In 1876 when he was 25 years old he got married and he and his wife went to Germany on their honeymoon. As they were out one day lightning struck and hit his wife. She was paralyzed the rest of her life. They were together for 39 years and then he buried her. Because of her paralysis, although he taught 34 years there at Princeton, he could only be gone from her for about two hours at a time. So he did this for the rest of his time with her where he would be gone for two hours, come back, tend to her and then leave for two hours and so forth. Here is what Warfield had to say about God's providence. *Does God send trouble? Surely, surely, He and He only, to the sinner in punishment, to His children in chastisement, to suggest that it does not always come from His hands is to take away all our comfort.*

As I notice here, I think of a hymn that we sing *Like A River Glorious* that says, 'Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blest, Finding, as He promised, perfect peace and rest. Every joy or trial, Falleth from above, Traced upon our dial, By the Sun of Love. We may trust Him fully, All for us to do; They who trust Him fully, Find Him fully true.' God is sovereign and He is in control. He is running the world and He causes things to ultimately work for our good.

We have here the message to Paul's captor. Acts 23:16 says [16] *Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul.* Apparently Paul's nephew overheard this plan to ambush Paul. We don't know how he heard this but he must have heard someone talking about that plan. He goes to the barracks and asks to talk with Paul. Acts 23:17-22 says

[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.”

So here is this young man who tells Paul and Paul gets the news to the Roman soldiers there and the timing was perfect there. The fact he overheard this, being able to tell Paul and so on. We think why do people have a problem with this? They would say the distribution of the good and evil seems to unfair when painful things happen to people. God is better to the worst of us than the best of us deserve, really.

Notice the means of Paul’s deliverance here. Acts 23:23–24 says [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.” Here they are going to move Paul toward Rome which is where God wanted him moved. So imagine the amazing means God uses here to bring about this.

What does all this mean to us as you think about God’s deliverance of Paul here? It should give us caution. Calvin says “Though God’s will is the first cause, no Godly man will close his eyes to second causes.” If he suffers to take care of his own body he wouldn’t blame God for he needs to blame himself. If you had someone you were taking care of and you neglect them and they die then you ought to hold yourself responsible and not just God’s providence in a sense. So it gives us caution as to how we look at this and how we handle it.

It should also give us courage. We are sent out as sheep in the midst of wolves, like Paul was here, but God is with us there. R.C. Sproul talks about how we can have confidence in situations like that. He says suppose Jesus were to walk into this room and say to us ‘Don’t be afraid for from this moment on nothing bad will ever happen to you.’ How would you feel if Christ walked into this room and said that? It would give us an enormous sense of relief, wouldn’t it? Christ did say over and over ‘Fear not, I am with you.’ Christ has not walked into our church buildings and announced from this day forward no evil will befall us, yet in another sense He has done precisely that. How? Romans 8:28 says [28] And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Every true Christian has been called. We know that all things, everything, works together for good to them that love the Lord, them that are the called according to His purpose. Note that Paul doesn’t say here that all things that happen to us are good things. In fact, bad things happen to us. Painful things happen to us that

crush our spirit, things that leave wounds and scars, things that evoke grief and lead us to the house of mourning, yet all of these bad things that happen to us are working together for our good. This is to say that ultimately it's good that these things happen to us. It isn't that we have an easy time with it. Our good is that we be conformed to the image of Christ and that our lives be molded, shaped and reflect Him more and more. God is working all things together for our good.

It makes a tremendous difference if we believe that and apply it to our lives. Recently I visited a lady in our church who 13 years ago had a very painful illness come to her that she will never get over and she is basically homebound in a lot of pain. I was amazed at her joy and peace that she applied of what we have been talking about. She said "God has used this wonderfully in my life. My confidence in Him and His love for me is just incredible. He has used me to help other people who are going through hard times and I'm able to talk with them on the phone and help them a lot." I was just amazed at her joy and peace with her situation as she applied this. What a difference it makes if we understand and apply God's providence as we have it pictured in this passage for us and brought to us in Scripture.

It should also lead us to Christ. If we are in rebellion against Christ like that young man was who threw that knife up to the sky, think of what broke his heart as he realized God has send His Son to die for him. God loved him and it broke his heart as he thought of his rebellion and dropped to his knees. He committed his life to the Lord. Have you ever really surrendered your will to Christ and put your trust in Him? Why not do it today? Let's pray.

Prayer: Father, we are so grateful for Your sovereignty, Your control of things and Your love for us. Lord, we pray that You would help us apply these principles daily to trust You when very painful things come into our lives. When we look at our nation we see the issues facing our nation and us as citizens here. Lord, help us to trust You and to believe that all things are working together for good to those who love You. Father, we pray that each one reading this would love You and we pray for anyone who hasn't committed their lives that even right now they would do so. If you've never committed your life to Christ but you're willing for Him to be your Master and you trust Him to be your Savior say "Lord Jesus, I surrender to You. I take You as my King. I purpose to obey and I trust You as my Savior. Come into my life and change me. Amen."

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