

Acts 23:11-35, No. 48**“Concursus”****October 9, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Paul has been placed under guard by the Roman authorities in Jerusalem. Remember, Jerusalem was not the capital of the Roman province of Judea. That was Caesarea, a new and beautiful city built by King Herod the Great on the Mediterranean Coast, where Paul was soon to be taken.

Text Comment

- v.12 That was a vow no one should ever have made, even if the plan to kill Paul had been a righteous one. It was a vow they could not have been certain to keep. But, certainly an illustration of the religious problem among the Jews in those days, even strict Jews had developed a number of ways to escape the consequences of an unfulfilled vow.
- v.14 That is, they went to those certain to be in favor of their plan. There were, no doubt, some wiser heads in the Sanhedrin, even some Christian sympathizers who, had they been told, would have given the game away.
- v.15 Such a plan, with Paul in custody as he was, was bound to cost lives besides Paul’s and bound to infuriate the Roman tribune and so create trouble for the Jews in Jerusalem. But no one who follows, for example, events in today’s Middle East can deny that political and religious zealots, with religious motives, are often willing to lay down their lives to take the lives of their enemies. In several years Jews of this mindset would start a war with Rome they could never have won, a war that led to their annihilation.
- v.16 Other than this single reference, we know nothing about Paul’s family or their response to his conversion and subsequent Christian ministry. His reference in Phil. 3:8 to having “suffered the loss of all things,” has often been taken to imply that he had been disowned and perhaps disinherited by his family – even perhaps divorced by his wife – but there may have been different attitudes among different relatives and some family affection may have remained even if they had resented his embarrassing alignment with the Christians. If you remember Thomas Cranmer’s story – the Reformation Anglican archbishop, the author of the Book of Common Prayer and martyr under Queen Bloody Mary – he had two sisters, one who remained a loyal catholic and one who became a Protestant, the latter the one who may well have been the one to nerve him to his immortal obedience on the last day of his life, as you will remember, sticking his hand first into the fire - the hand that had signed his recantation of the evangelical faith in cowardice some days before. [MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 605-606]
- v.19 The fact that the commander took Paul’s nephew by the hand – another eyewitness touch – suggests that he must have been rather young.
- v.23 In other words, they would leave the city under cover of darkness.

- v.25 “To this effect” may mean that Luke hadn’t access to a copy of the letter and so was not citing it *verbatim* but was giving only a summary of its contents. On the other hand, it may have been read out later at the trial with Luke present to hear it.
- v.26 We will hear more of Felix, of course. He was the governor of Judea from A.D. 52-59 and we are, at this point, almost at the end of his governorship. He was no great man. Tacitus, the Roman historian, sums up his career in a sentence: “He exercised the power of a king with the mind of a slave.” He was a harsh governor and the Jews hated him. But he was a favorite of the emperors Claudius and Nero. T.R. Glover, the English scholar, famously reminded us: “The day would come when we would call our cats Felix, our dogs Nero, and our sons Paul.”
- v.27 He naturally omits the part about his getting ready to beat Paul and having put him in chains, which he wasn’t allowed to do, Paul being a Roman citizen.
- v.29 It had become clear to the tribune by this time that the original charge, that Paul had instigated a riot in the temple by violating its sanctity, was bogus. Interestingly, even the Jewish plaintiffs would not make much of that charge later when Paul was tried.
- v.32 Antipatris, at the foot of the Judean hills, was more than half-way to Caesarea but that first part of the trip represented the dangerous part, where ambush would have been easier to effect. A forced march got them there by the morning, so, with the conspirators far behind, the infantry was sent back to Jerusalem while the cavalry took Paul the rest of the way to the capital. [Bruce, NICNT, Bock, 683]
- v.35 The mention of Cilicia – the area in which Paul’s hometown Tarsus was located – is an interesting historical detail. In this period the procedure being developed was to permit an accused man to be sent back to his home province for trial and that would have let Felix off the hook, though it would have irritated the Jews, who would then have had to travel much farther to present their case against Paul. But at this moment Cilicia was not yet a full province, as it would be just a few years later. It was ruled by the legate of Syria who would not want to be bothered with minor offenses. Hence Felix ordered the case to be tried in Caesarea. It has been pointed out by scholars of the first century Roman world that all of this reflects a detail of Roman jurisprudence unlikely to have been known or understood by a later writer and so unlikely to have been mentioned by him. In other words, we have here another of the many impressive confirmations of Luke’s historical accuracy. [Marshall, 373]

What we have here, and will have again in chapter 27, is one of the Bible’s most fascinating and illuminating illustrations of *divine providence*. Providence is the name given to the doctrine that God exercises an absolute control over everything that happens in this world, from the greatest events to the smallest details, all with a view to bringing his plans and purposes to pass. You remember our *Shorter Catechism*’s definition:

“God’s work of providence is his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions.”

To put it simply, what happens in human life is what God intended to happen. In Christian theology this doctrine of divine providence is then typically divided into three dimensions: 1) conservation (God's preserving of the world he has made; 2) government (God's ordering of all things to a particular end or purpose; and 3) concurrence (the Latin term is *concursum*), that is, his use of and cooperation with second causes by which any event might be attributed either to God or to the second cause, or to both. For example, in many places in the Bible the same event is said, in one place, to have been caused by God and, in another, by a human being or human beings. In one famous case in Samuel and Chronicles – that of David's numbering of the people at the end of his reign – the same event is said to have been caused in one place by God and in another by Satan!

It is this latter dimension that is so exquisitely illustrated in our text this morning, this *concursum* in divine providence. God causes earthquakes, but so do tectonic plates under the earth's surface; God causes hurricanes, such as Matthew, but so do conditions of climate and weather; and God causes events in your life and mine, but so do we, and so do a myriad of other things. This is everywhere the view of life taught and illustrated in Holy Scripture. God is the ultimate cause of everything that happens, but many other things enter into that event and bring it to pass. All of those other things, of course, are under God's control, which is why the Bible can say that it is God who brings to pass everything that happens. But, at the same time, it does not hesitate to name the various factors that brought some event to pass. They are real causes, without which the event could not have occurred.

In this case, we have already read, in 23:11 that God told Paul that his life would be preserved and that he would have the privilege of bearing witness to the gospel in Rome, the capital of the world. But now we read that a plot was hatched to murder Paul. "Somehow" that plot came to the attention of Paul's young nephew. "Somehow," "as it happened," even in one case "by chance" are words the Bible uses to draw our attention to the character of these events as being what the world would call "good luck" or "coincidence." But, of course, ultimately, "luck" and "chance" are pagan terms. *God was at work* delivering his servant from danger. He had told him that he would go to Rome; here God is acting behind the scenes to guarantee that outcome. The French have a saying: "Coincidence is an event in which God wishes to remain anonymous."

And take note of Paul in all of this. We might have thought that knowing God's power and sovereignty as he did, he would have relaxed, even told his nephew on hearing of the plot, "No need to worry. Go on home. God has already guaranteed my safety." But he did nothing of the kind. When he got the news he told his nephew to see the commander and tell him what he had discovered. Paul obviously did not take the view that the fact that God controls events in the world - that they unfold according to his plan - meant that he had nothing to do. Not at all. He took action and by that action set in motion a train of events that would be the means of his rescue. This is the mystery of what theologians call first and second causes or *concursum*. Both are real causes. Both matter. Both are necessary.

But there is still more here than that. While it is not so difficult for us to see the connection between 23:11 – God's promise of Paul's safety and his eventual arrival in Rome – and the discovery of the plot by Paul's nephew – we can't help but wonder precisely how that boy or

very young man heard of this! – the fact is no one could read those two statements together and predict how things would unfold: what the tribune would decide to do, how effective his plans would be in securing Paul’s safety, or what the outcome of the move to Caesarea would be. Surely no one was thinking that night in Jerusalem that Paul would languish in Caesarea for two long years before traveling to Rome. It is easy enough to see that by means of the nephew’s discovery of the plot to kill Paul God was protecting his servant and fulfilling his prophecy. But still, to such a great extent, we remain in the dark. Who would ever have thought that God would have the great man stuck in jail in Caesarea for two long years? What a waste, we think. God’s ways are so mysterious. Only from time to time do his purposes rise to the surface that we may get a peek at them, and that’s all it is that is ever given to us, just a peek.

But take the point. We are given here a perfect encapsulation of the biblical doctrine of providence, the more convincing for its being given us in flesh and blood. We have, first of all, God’s sovereign disposal of history, even the history of a particular man, the events that make up his life, that take him from one place to another, from one situation into another. The divine plan and purpose include, very obviously here, not only the end result, but the means by which it is achieved. So we have here *concursum*, the way by which God orders history by ordering the causes of it, that way that makes it possible for the Bible and for us to describe an event either as the act of God or the act of someone else or the result of something else. God, as it were, is hiding himself behind the second causes of things. We can thus say, entirely truthfully, that God delivered Paul from the hands of these assassins. But we can also say, equally truthfully, that the apostle was delivered from their hands by his nephew’s discovery of the plot and his informing the military tribune. God promised Paul he would be spared and make it to Rome. He did not tell him by what fascinating means he would get Paul to Rome.

We find this same *concursum* throughout the Bible. God told Abraham that his descendants would spend a long sojourn in Egypt before they ever took possession of the Promised Land. He did not tell him by what unexpected and astonishing steps that divine plan and purpose would come to pass. He didn’t tell him that his great-grandsons would have a falling out, that ten of them would sell one of them into slavery, that subsequently that one son would rise to greatness in Egypt and be in a position eventually to bring the entire family there and save them from starvation. Nothing about Joseph’s coat, or Potiphar’s wife, or the famine. But Joseph himself had no difficulty, looking back on what had happened, seeing the reality of both levels of causation: the plan and purpose of God and the actions – even the evil actions – of his brothers. He said to them in one place, “You meant it for evil but God meant it for good.” [50:20] And, in another, “God sent me before you to preserve life.” [45:5]

The plotters, of course, had no idea – they would have gnashed their teeth at the thought – that they, with their plot, far from killing Paul, would facilitate God’s plans to send him to Rome to make the witness of the Christian gospel even more widespread in the world. But, as it happened, that is exactly what they accomplished. They sent Paul on his way to Rome; only the first step, there would be others, but on his way.

All of that is very clear here. Luke leaves us in no doubt about what had happened by setting the divine promise of safety in 23:11 right before his account of the plot to kill Paul. But the narrative also reminds us of how little we see of the divine plan, how impossible it is for us to

understand precisely how it will unfold or the reasons why it takes the twists and turns that it does. Still today we can explain only the most basic contours of that providence. Why, for example, if he were to go to Rome, the two years cooling his heels in Caesarea? What might such a man as Paul have accomplished in those two years had he been free to travel and to build the church? Well, we might now say, those two years provided Luke the opportunity to write his Gospel and to begin, if not almost to finish, his second volume, the book of Acts. Surely that is one reason. Where would the church be without Luke's two volumes? But surely those books could have been written while Paul was free and prosecuting his ministry. God's ways are not our ways and are past finding out!

I suspect if each one of you carefully studied your own personal history, you would find circumstances very like the one Luke has narrated here: history unfolding according to the plan of God but, at the same time, through the intentions and actions of other people. I am sure that God intended me to marry Florence. But, in a very real way, I should never have met her. She was from an Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Iowa and, thinking to spend a year studying theology, she applied to Covenant Seminary in St. Louis and Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. The OPC had a much closer relationship to Westminster than to Covenant. All in all it was more likely she would have gone to Westminster. What is more, the president of Westminster at that time, Edmund Clowney, was a Roskamp family friend. When he saw her letter he took it from the admissions people and put it on his own desk in order to make a personal reply. Dr. Clowney was a great man, a significant theologian and a very fine preacher. But he wasn't the greatest administrator or letter writer. The letter sat on his desk for days, for weeks, and by the time he finally replied, Florence was already on her way to St. Louis. God intended her to marry me, not some nerdy Westminster Seminary type, so he put her letter in Dr. Clowney's inbox and, as they say, the rest is history. Come to think of it, for some reason Florence has never thought well of Dr. Clowney. Never a nice word for the great man. I've never understood that.

But you deserve a better illustration than that. We are going to sing at the end of this service William Cowper's immortal hymn, *God Moves in a Mysterious Way*. Cowper was a great poet – if you study English literature in college you will certainly study William Cowper, one of the great poets of the 18th century or any century – the sort of poet it takes to write a hymn as fine as this one, combining as it does such beautiful, memorable, and suggestive expression with such deep and accurate reflection on the teaching of Holy Scripture and the experience of life. It is an assertion of God's absolute control over events in this world, his bringing all things to pass according to his will, but, at the same time, the mysterious way in which he does so. "God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform." That is a line one hears all the time being spoken by people who have no idea that it originated in Cowper's great hymn. In fact, one writer refers to that first line of Cowper's hymn as "a commonplace of colloquial speech." [In Routley, *Hymns and Human Life*, 4] Cowper had no doubt that God was sovereign, that "he plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm." But, Cowper also understood that we typically see his sovereignty best, and need to confess his sovereignty most, as here in Acts 23, in the difficult events of life.

But Cowper is also clear that it is by no means possible for believers themselves to see the end from the beginning of God's plans for them. They must trust God that he knows what he is

doing. They must have faith, in other words. Only by faith does the believer know that behind a frowning providence – a plot to murder Paul – God hides a smiling face – a way to speed Paul safely out of harm’s way. The lesson, as Cowper describes it in the final verse is that, recognizing our limitations, we must trust ourselves to God’s wisdom, goodness, and mercy.

“Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan his work in vain;
God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain.

In one study of hymns the author compares this hymn of Cowper with the hymns of Isaac Watts and says this:

“This is the Calvinism we have met earlier in Dr. Watts. But whereas the good doctor boldly asserted the dogma that God is sovereign, all-powerful, arbitrary, and not to be questioned, Cowper takes a more trustful attitude and assures us that in due time the event will interpret God’s purpose for man’s good. Poetry and the attitude of faith can make even Calvinism comforting!” [A.E. Bailey, *The Gospel in Hymns*, 133]

Baloney! What this author took to be a different approach, both Watts and Cowper, with Bible in hand, would take to be both complimentary and faithful to the nature of God’s providential rule of human life. Sometimes the Bible asserts, as it must, the naked sovereignty and absolute rule of God extending down to the most minute details of human life: the number of hairs you have on your head at any particular moment, every bird falling dead out of a tree in a forest where no one is there to observe. It does this to humble us, to warn us against any futile effort to assert our own will against that of God, and to comfort believers in the knowledge that there are no accidents in human life. Even at its worst, God has our lives under his control. The reason life can sometimes seem so hopeless is only because we cannot see what God is doing and what he intends to bring to pass at last.

Sometimes, on the other hand, the Bible asserts the real causality of human thought and action as if there were no plan or purpose, as if there were no divine providence. Things take place in this world because of what people choose to do. And sometimes, only sometimes as here in Acts 23, the Bible brings both levels of causality together at the same time, as it does in Genesis in Joseph’s reflection on his personal history, or as it does here in the case of God’s promise to save Paul and then the account of the plot to kill Paul. It is those few texts that open for us a window on our world – not only the world as a whole, but our world individually as human beings – and allow us to see that at every moment and in every circumstance, God is working his purposes out *through* the free and conscious decisions of human beings.

We don’t know what were, if any, the precise circumstances that prompted Cowper to write this hymn. It has sometimes been thought to be connected with the mental breakdown he suffered in 1773 that led to an attempt to take his own life by drowning. But, whatever the precise circumstances, if any, that led to his writing the poem, it certainly reflects in a profound way Cowper’s own experience of life. His first bout with mental illness landed him in an asylum, which experience led to his conversion. Then later, when happily settled in the home of a Mrs. Unwin, her sudden death crushed him and left him wondering what would become of him. But it

was that calamity that led Cowper to John Newton and to the Newton home and the long and wonderfully fruitful association between those two men at Olney.

It is widely thought that *God Moves in a Mysterious Way* was Cowper's last hymn. If so, that would be fitting. The lesson of his long and difficult life had been learned. Through all the chiaroscuro of his life, the alternations and interpenetrations of light and shadow, success and failure, happiness and sorrow, God was working his purposes out in, under, around, and through all that happened to him, all the choices that he made, both wise and unwise, all the things that he did, together with all the things over which he had no control – mental health, the death of friends, and so on. It is the lesson we are all to learn, take to heart, and practice in our lives. *It is for this reason that Luke gave us a record of the Lord's promise to Paul just before telling us of the plot to take his life.*

In the midst of our daily life, we may be able to see very little of the divine plan and purpose. Like Hebrew, God's providence must be read backward. We cannot tell what purpose may be served by the things we do and the things others do. But we can trust the Lord to keep the many exceeding great and precious promises he has made to us, and, supremely, the promise to bring us at last safely – not to Rome – but to heaven itself.

If I find him, if I follow, is he sure to bless?
Saints, apostles, prophets, martyrs, answer "Yes!"