

## **“Miracles in the Mundane”**

### Acts 23:12-35

Good morning, we'll be picking up the story of Acts in chapter 23, starting with verse 12, which you can find on page 877 in one of the pew Bibles. For the benefit of anyone who may be newer to EBC, for the past year or so we have been walking through the book of Acts, which details the initial expansion of the Christian church. This expansion followed on the heels of Jesus' death and resurrection, and really exploded when the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus' followers at Pentecost. In fact, although the full title of this book is "The Acts of the Apostles", it is really the record of the Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles. For the Apostles wouldn't have made it very far without the Divine Helper.

The Holy Spirit has empowered the mission of the Church in Acts from the beginning. On Pentecost, it was the Holy Spirit who enabled the disciples to speak in other languages, so that the gathered crowd of people from all over the world could hear the first preaching of the Gospel in their own tongues. It was the Spirit that gave the apostles boldness to preach the Gospel in the face of increasing persecution. It was the Spirit who filled Stephen to endure his martyrdom with grace and forgiveness for his murderers. It was the Spirit that revealed to Peter that Gentiles, non-Jews, were no longer outsiders, but were to be grafted into God's people. It was the Spirit that set apart Paul and Barnabas for their missionary work that would lead to the transformation of the 1<sup>st</sup> century world, both religiously and culturally. And it was the Spirit that led Paul to return to Jerusalem, where he was arrested, sparking the storyline of Paul's various legal trials that will dominate the rest of Acts.

So far in Acts, we have seen the Spirit work powerfully in, for, and through His people to enable them to be witnesses to Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth, just as Jesus said would be the case. Our passage this morning is the continuation of that progress towards the end of the earth, although that progress takes a somewhat unexpected form, as we'll see. As I mentioned, we are in the portion of Acts where Paul is on trial, and last week we saw him stir up controversy between the Sadducees and Pharisees, resulting in a violent disagreement between those two parties. As we will see, a good night's sleep doesn't seem to have cooled that violence. Let's begin by reading Acts 23:12-15.

“When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. They went to the chief priests and elders and said, ‘We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul. Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. And we are ready to kill him before he comes near.’”

A new day brings a new predicament for Paul in the form of a plot against his life. Initially, his enemies were set on getting him killed through legal means. However, once they became divided by the question of the resurrection, it seemed unlikely that they would be able to organize a cohesive legal attack against him. Therefore, a group of them decides to get rid of Paul through a conspiracy.

It's unclear who makes up this group of Jews. It could be the Jews who had followed him to Jerusalem from Asia Minor. It could be a group of Sadducees angered by Paul's conduct the day before. Or it could be some other group or mix of groups.

Whatever the makeup of this group, they are quite literally dead set on killing Paul. They take an oath to neither eat nor drink until they have done the deed. We never find out if they follow through on that oath, but it shows their seriousness. Their plan is to get Paul out in the open, and then ambush him. Happily, for Paul, things do not go according to their plan, as we see in verses 16-22.

“Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. Paul called one of the centurions and said, ‘Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him.’ So he took

him and brought him to the tribune and said, 'Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you.' The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, 'What is it that you have to tell me?' And he said, 'The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more closely about him. But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in ambush for him, who have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they have killed him. And now they are ready, waiting for your consent.' So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, "Tell no one that you have informed me of these things."

We're not told how, but Paul's nephew finds out about the plot. Since, according to Paul, his family were Pharisees it's possible it came through their connections to that sect. Or it's also possible that the plot simply involved too many people, and the information just randomly found its way to the nephew. Whatever the case, he finds out, and immediately goes to the prison to let Paul know. Upon hearing from his nephew, Paul sends him to go tell the tribune, who immediately gives him an audience, and seems to believe him without question.

You may remember that this is the same official who initially rescued Paul from the mob, but then bound him and was about to beat him, before Paul informed him of his Roman citizenship. Upon learning of that citizenship, the tribune realized he had potentially gotten himself into hot water by putting Paul in chains. Consequently, it seems that the tribune and his soldiers are now intent on making it up to Paul, so that they don't get in trouble. For they are remarkably accommodating toward Paul, and anyone associated with him. First, they let the nephew in to see Paul. Then the centurion quickly follows Paul's instructions to take his nephew to the tribune. And then the tribune takes the nephew at his word, no questions asked. And finally, the tribune's actions in verses 23-24 make it clear he is leaving nothing to chance.

"Then he called two of the centurions and said, 'Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night. Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor.'"

The tribune puts together a force of 470 soldiers to transfer Paul. That's a force more than ten times the size of the known threat. It's possible there were other potential dangers between Jerusalem and Caesarea that would warrant such numbers, but it is clear the tribune is not going to open himself to the charge of mistreating Paul again. I imagine he also sees this as a golden opportunity to pass Paul off, and so remove himself from a precarious situation. To that end, he writes a letter to Felix the governor, in which he casts himself in the best possible light.

"And he wrote a letter to this effect: 'Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings. This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen. And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council. I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him.'"

For the most part the tribune's account is accurate, he just conveniently forgets how he bound and was going to flog Paul against his Roman rights, instead portraying himself as the hero who rescued a Roman citizen from the mob. Nonetheless, he gives Felix the essentials, and then executes the pass off in verses 31-35.

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

The host of soldiers proves to be an effective guard for Paul's transfer, and he makes it safely to Felix in Caesarea. Upon his arrival Felix reads the letter, and eventually places Paul in custody. He asks Paul where he's from, probably in

order to ensure his jurisdiction over the case. He decides to take it on, and finally, orders Paul to be guarded until his accusers arrive. And that is the story of how Paul escaped yet another plot against his life.

However, did you notice anything strange about this passage? Is there any character that seems conspicuously absent? What about Jesus? Where is He in all of this? After all, this is a deadly serious ordeal for Paul, and yet, there is not one mention of God, Father, Son, or Spirit, doing anything from verse 12 to verse 35.

Is He absent? Or just passively watching Paul narrowly escape this threat? I started off by making the case that Acts is the story of *God* acting, by His Spirit through His people, yet at this critical juncture He doesn't appear to be doing anything. It's Paul, his nephew, the tribune and his soldiers who seem to do all the work. What are we to make of that? What are we to make of Jesus showing up in person to Paul one night, and then seemingly abandoning Paul when the crisis hits?

These questions take on even greater importance, because this is such a relatable experience. If you've walked with God for a little while, chances are you've had this kind of experience. An experience in which one second God feels so close, and things are going so well, and the next the whole world seems to be falling apart and God seems silent. What are we to make of such experiences?

Well, if we go back to Acts 23:11, I think we can begin making sense of it all. This is when Jesus shows up in person to Paul, and in that verse, Jesus says to Paul, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome." Implied in this statement is that Jesus will preserve Paul until he gets to Rome. And our passage this morning is one link in the long, winding, precarious chain of events that leads Paul to testify in Rome in the end. So, Paul's experience here forces us to make an interpretive decision. Was Paul's escape luck or coincidence or just the natural course of events? Or was it a result of God's activity?

Of course, I would argue that this sequence of events makes it very clear that Paul was delivered from his plight by the hand of God, even if that hand was unseen and unmentioned. I think this passage is clear evidence of Jesus' presence in Paul's circumstances, even if that presence is not evidently clear in those circumstances. And I would argue the same for those confounding circumstances that so often define our lives; there too, God is working, even if nothing miraculous seems to be happening.

If that is so, then we must affirm this very basic truth: God works in and through the normal circumstances and occurrences of life. He works through what we may call "luck", "coincidence", or "normal". Now, there may be a place for such ideas in God's world, but regardless of if there is or isn't, I am sure of this: those ideas often steal God's glory by blinding us to His grace in our lives. Because we mislabel providence as coincidence, salvation as luck, and extraordinary as normal.

It is, therefore, worthwhile for us to remind ourselves repeatedly of our main idea this morning, which is that much, if not most of God's work in our lives takes the form of everyday occurrences. To say it another way, many of God's miracles take place in the mundane. Very often, we are simply blinded to God's exceptional care for us by what the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge called, "the film of familiarity". So, if we are to recognize the goodness of God in our lives most fully, we must develop eyes that see past the film of familiarity to behold the glory underneath. Let me try to show you what I mean.

We often look for clear answers to prayer as evidence of God's presence and activity in our lives, but we're kind of picky about which answers to prayer qualify as evidence. For instance, I'm guessing most of us are thoroughly unimpressed by how consistently and abundantly God has answered the prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread." For most of us that prayer has been answered every time we have ever prayed it, and, in fact, it has been answered so generously that most of us have never prayed it literally, though I recognize there may be some here who have. The miracle of God's provision is obscured by its familiarity. And by the way, how about the miracle of having bread to eat?

The process of growing grain is unremarkable to us, but have you ever really thought about it? We place a seed in dirt, give it some water and sun, and it reproduces itself exponentially. As Jesus would say, thirty-, sixty-, or hundredfold. Perhaps, we can gain some appreciation for how extraordinary this is if we imagine someone burying a tire and having a car spring out of the ground. It's incredible, and yet this is how God provides for many of our necessities.

And then, there's the mystery that by grinding grain into flour, combining it with water, yeast, and salt, and heating it, we can create something utterly different from those individual components. Something that gives us both sustenance and pleasure. All of this goes into the answer to our prayer for food, and yet, that answer is hardly ever regarded as miraculous. The mundane *is* evidence of God's active presence in our life and circumstances, we simply need the eyes to see it; this is the trick as we look for God's work in our lives.

It's also important to remember that God is active for *His* purposes not ours. Notice that Paul's circumstances don't really improve from a human perspective, but they do move him closer to the purpose to which Jesus has called him. So often, we are disappointed with how our lives are going, because our purposes for our lives don't align with God's. We want God to fix our circumstances, but He wants to fix us. We want God to make us comfortable, but He wants to make us like Christ. Therefore, if we are to recognize God's hand in our lives, we must align our purposes with His.

And yet, even then we will not always be able to see how God is working. We can't always know how God is working among the mundanities of life, but He clearly is. The reality is that His work is often hidden in its working. It only becomes clear He *was* working in retrospect. An example of this from my own life was when my daughter Fay was born.

Amanda, my wife, went into labor in the early hours of the morning, and for about 10 hours she labored at home, and everything seemed fine. However, the labor eventually stalled, then our midwife was unable to find Fay's heartbeat for a minute, and so she immediately transferred us to Salem Hospital. We got to the hospital and were frantically ushered into a delivery room where Amanda labored for another very stressful hour or so. But things were not progressing, and there was more bleeding than normal, leading us to eventually make the decision to have an emergency C-section. Amanda was rushed into an operating room to get prepped, while I sat out in the hall with our midwife, shocked and numb from the chaos and stress and fear of the last few hours. Eventually, I was let into the operating room, and a few minutes later, praise God, we had our baby girl.

In the midst of such an ordeal it's hard, perhaps impossible, to fathom what is going on, and why God would allow us to experience such fear, stress, danger, and difficulty. But often, after the ordeal is through, the reasons for it become very clear.

In the case of Amanda and Fay, we found out the labor had stalled because Fay was at an odd angle and so had gotten stuck. This was incredibly fortunate though, because when they performed the C-section they discovered the placenta had detached from the uterine wall and broken into pieces causing significant internal bleeding. If Amanda had been able to have Fay naturally at home, she may well have bled out (a scenario we found out our midwife had dreamt of about a week before Fay's birth), but because we had the C-section in the hospital everything was fine. This is one tiny example that shows God knows what He's doing, even when life is chaos, and we can't see or understand what He is doing.

As I said, to understand God's work in our lives, we must understand His purposes for our lives, and perhaps His most fundamental purpose is for us to learn to trust Him unconditionally. Unfortunately, this is one of those purposes we often fail to get on board with. We want God to help us control our circumstances, but He wants us to trust Him in our circumstances, even when things are out of our control. This is one of God's most important lessons for us, and He will insist on us learning it. I am convinced that a big part of the reason God allows us to walk through hardship is to teach us this lesson. We tend to think, "If this happens, then all is lost...", "...if I lose my job...if I lose my spouse...if my kid stops talking to me...all is lost..." God wants us to learn that with Him all is never lost. But to show us He is faithful *in* the darkest night, He must have us walk *through* the darkest night.

That is, invariably, a difficult experience, but through that experience we learn that we are never truly alone, God is never truly absent, and He is always active for our good. We learn that Jesus' presence with us is a fact, even when it's not a feeling. We learn with Elijah that the power of God is not always, or even most often found in the sensational, in windstorms and earthquakes and wildfires; rather, it is found in ordinary, easily unnoticed things, like the softest of whispers. We learn with David that though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death we have no evil to fear for the Lord our Shepherd is with us.

As a pastor, I am privy to many of the struggles and trials within our church family. So, I want you all to hear this: wherever you're at, whatever you're walking through, despite how things may look and you may feel, God has not abandoned you, and He is active for His good purposes in your life. As Paul writes in Romans 8:28-29, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son..." God is at work for our good in all things, specifically the good of making us like Jesus. By His Spirit who helps us in our weakness and intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words, our part is to love Him, seeking to align our hearts with those purposes.

And by the way, that Son is the greatest proof of the fact God is working for our good. The Son who was baptized with the Father's blessing only to be driven out into the trial of the wilderness. The Son who experienced all the confounding, frustrating realities of human life. The Son who begged for His suffering to be removed, but then faithfully endured it when it wasn't, trusting God to work in and through it. The Son who was actually forsaken by God on the cross, so that we would never have to be. The Son who sank into the shadow of the darkest night, and then rose with healing and new, eternal life in His wings.

Would God send His Son to do all that, only to abandon you now? Of course not. Again, as Paul says rhetorically, just a few verses later in Romans, "He who did not spare His own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" The rhetorical answer is that He *will* graciously give us all things that are for our good.

And so, we can say, as Paul did at the end of that chapter, "I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, no powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." So, we can be sure of this: God is at work in the ordinary, confounding circumstances of our lives. There are miracles in the mundane. May we have the eyes to see them, and the hearts to trust our God even when we don't.

## “Miracles in the Mundane”

Acts 23:12-35

**Main Idea:** Much, if not most of God’s work in our lives takes the form of everyday occurrences.

Introduction – The Acts of the Holy Spirit

Acts 23:12-15 – New Day, New Predicament

Acts 23:16-22 – The Plot is Discovered

Acts 23:23-24 – Leaving Nothing to Chance

Acts 23:25-30 – Lysias’s Letter

Acts 23:31-35 – Felix Takes the Case

Application – Learn to See, Learn to Trust

- 1) Have you ever gone through seasons that were confounding and frustrating at the time, but that had clear purpose when you look back?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 2) How might God’s provision (whether seen or unseen at the time) in past difficult season inform your approach to current or future difficult seasons?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- 3) How does Romans 8:29 change your understanding of Romans 8:28?