

Grace Church
Roanoke, Virginia

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Lesson #54

ACTS
The Providence of God
Acts 22:30-23:35

Do you believe God is working behind the scenes of history? Are you convinced all things which happen are under the sovereign control of God? The biblical truth that God controls all is stated theologically as the doctrine of the providence of God.

“Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’” (Isa. 46:9, 10).

“ . . . who works all things after the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:11b).

By providence it is meant that God is actively carrying out His divinely ordained plan in the events and lives of His creatures. The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines providence as God's “most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures, and all their actions.” For us, the doctrine of God's providence means that as Christians God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our lives. Nothing happens to us by accident and the God of the universe somehow has charge over us as His people. But the doctrine of the providence of God also says that God has control over the actions and destinies of men who are not Christians and that God's plan for this world is right on schedule as we anxiously await the second coming of Jesus Christ to this earth to end history as we now know it.

In Acts 23, we see the providential presence of the overruling Christ in the life of the Apostle Paul. God had a plan for Paul and we see how God was working behind the scenes in Paul's life so as to get him to Rome to preach the gospel to governors and kings. God, in this chapter, begins to move people and circumstances like pawns in a chess game to bring about His plans for His servant Paul. This is a fascinating chapter because God used unsaved men, unbelieving Jews, evil plots of men and even a young boy to accomplish His plans and purposes for Paul. And the most amazing thing of all is that not one of the characters in this chapter realized he was carrying out the plan of God.

GOD’S PROVIDENTIAL DELIVERANCE FROM AN ANGRY SANHEDRIN - Acts
22:30-23:10

Presentation of Paul (22:30)

“But on the next day, wishing to know for certain why he had been accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Council to assemble, and brought Paul down and set him before them.” -- By way of background, Paul, on completion of his third missionary journey, came to Jerusalem on his way to Rome to preach the gospel. While in Jerusalem, he was taken by an angry mob of unbelieving Jews while worshiping in the temple. These Jews intended to kill Paul but the Roman occupation troops, under Claudius Lysias, intervened and saved his life. Paul was then permitted to speak to the crowd and he gave his testimony, telling how he met the resurrected Christ. Then the irate mob became even more violent so the Roman officers ordered Paul to be put under arrest. Claudius Lysias was not sure why the Jews were angry with Paul so he released him but ordered the Sanhedrin to assemble in the Fortress, Antonia, in order to find out what Paul had done. He brought Paul down and set him in the midst of these 70 political and religious rulers in Jerusalem. This must have been a tense moment since Paul had probably been one of these men 25 years before, and he was sent out by the Sanhedrin to arrest Christians as heretics before his conversion to Christ. Paul undoubtedly knew some of these men but now they had only enmity and hatred for Paul since he became a Christian, for they thought of him as an apostate from Judaism.

This trial before the Sanhedrin served two purposes. First, it was the means God used in His providential care of Paul to get him officially arrested by the Romans and taken ultimately to Rome. Second, this was God's last major appeal to the Jews to turn to the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The Jews rejected Christ. They rejected the message of Stephen about Christ. They rejected the teaching of the Apostles in Jerusalem. Now, what would they do with Paul and his message about Christ? This was God's final appeal for the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem to receive Christ as Savior and Lord. Jerusalem was weighed in the balances and found wanting. They had denied the Lord, Stephen, the Apostles and now they denied Paul. The theocracy would be judged and Israel destroyed in 70 A.D. because these stiff-necked Jews refused to come to Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

Purity of Paul's Conscience (23:1)

“And 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 statement almost seems like bragging on the part of Paul, but it is a very accurate statement about Paul's life before and after his conversion to Christ. Throughout his life, he always followed his conscience before God. Even before he became a Christian, he did have a conscience bent towards God. Even the approval of the stoning of Stephen, the imprisonment of Christians and the signing of death warrants for Christians was done in sincerity towards God even though he was sincerely wrong. However, Paul thought he was doing right. “Even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. And yet I was shown mercy, because I acted ignorantly in unbelief” (I Tim. 1:13). This brash statement coupled with the fact that he addressed the Sanhedrin with the common term “brethren,” making himself one with them, caused the high priest to think Paul was showing disrespect and an insolent attitude.

Provoking of Paul to Anger by the High Priest (23:2, 3)

“And the high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth.” -- This is not the Ananias of the Gospels, but he was placed in office in 47 A.D. and remained there for 17 years. He was notorious as one of the most wicked men of his day. He was a scoundrel who had his enemies assassinated at the drop of a hat. Ananias, offended by Paul's common greeting to the Sanhedrin, appalled at Paul's honesty and naturally prejudiced against Paul, commanded that Paul be struck in the mouth for what he thought to be a haughty attitude.

“Then Paul said to him. ‘God is going to strike you, you white-washed wall! And do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?’” -- This slap in the mouth caused Paul’s temper to flare, and he caustically said, “You bare faced hypocrite!” The only whitewashed walls in Jerusalem were tombstones. Paul was saying, “You are like a tombstone, whitewashed on the outside but within you are filled with rotten flesh and the bones of the dead!” In essence, Paul said to the high priest, “You stinking hypocrite!” Paul probably lost his cool here but he was right to stand upon his rights as a Jew, for it was against the law of Israel to strike a Jew before he was proven guilty.

When Paul said, “God is going to strike you,” this was a hidden prediction for Ananias was killed by an assassin in 64 A.D.

Was this blow to the mouth part of God’s loving, providential care of Paul? Yes, and God somehow used it for His own glory. Even the evil acts of men somehow bring about the secret plan of God. “This man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death” (Acts 2:23).

Pardon Asked by Paul for Disrespect (23:4-5)

“But the bystanders said, ‘Do you revile God's high priest?’” -- Paul had spoken against the highest Jewish official in all the land of Israel.

“And Paul said, ‘I was not aware, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, “YOU SHALL NOT SPEAK EVIL OF A RULER OF YOUR PEOPLE.”’” -- We are not told why Paul did not recognize Ananias. Perhaps he was dressed more informally than usual, but the most probable explanation is that Paul had eye trouble and may not have recognized him. Whatever, Paul immediately admitted his mistake and apologized for his actions, for he knew the Old Testament clearly taught respect for governmental officials.

When Paul was wrong, he did not make excuses. He was instantly repentant. When we do something wrong, we should immediately rectify it if we can.

How many Christians today show disrespect for governmental leaders. They may refer to the president of the U.S.A. as an “idiot” or the congress as “clowns” and make all kinds of caustic remarks. Christian, you are to obey your government and show respect for leaders regardless of who they are or how bad they are. You do not have to agree but you must show respect. Any disrespect for government officials may catch up with us someday if persecution ever breaks out in our country.

Perpetrating a Dissension by Paul (23:6-9)

“But perceiving that one part 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!’” -- It seems to me that Paul assumed his cause for a fair trial was lost since the high priest was a Sadducee, so Paul made a last ditch appeal to the Pharisees in the group. The Pharisees were the conservatives and the Sadducees were the liberals. Sadducees did not believe in the immortality of the soul, or a future resurrection of the body, or in heaven or hell, or in demons or angels. They denied all elements of the supernatural. The Pharisees, however, were the supernaturalists, so Paul appeals to them. Paul merely stated he was on trial because he did believe in the resurrection of the dead, not just of Israel but also of the Lord Jesus Christ. For Paul, the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of all Old Testament and New Testament believers was intimately connected. “For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (I Cor. 15:16, 17).

“And as he said this, there arose 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 arose 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?’” -- Just these few simple words about resurrection triggered a tumultuous argument between the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Pharisees would not admit that Paul saw the resurrected Christ but they attributed his experience to a supernatural event in which a spirit or an angel appeared to him.

Note again God's providential care for Paul. Just a few words were used by God to cause a fight which in turn divided the Sanhedrin which just a few minutes before was solidly against the Apostle Paul. God just laughs at the plans and purposes of puny men and uses the most simple things to bring about His purposes. “The wicked plots against the righteous, and gnashes at him with his teeth. The Lord laughs at him; for He sees his day coming” (Psalm 37:12, 13).

God uses the smallest, insignificant things to accomplish His purposes. Esther and the Jews were saved in the Book of Esther because the King had insomnia. Because he couldn't sleep, he called for the records and found that nothing had been done for Mordecai. Out of royal insomnia arose the deliverance of the Jewish people.

Moses' tears as a baby awakened sympathy in Pharaoh's daughter and the Jewish nation was preserved and led out of the land of Egypt.

Protection Through Secular Government (23:10)

“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.” -- This is the third time in two days that Paul was delivered from a murderous Jewish mob by the Roman soldiers and by Claudius Lysias in particular. God used these soldiers to carry out His plan for Paul and they had no idea they were being used by God. As far as they knew, they were acting freely, but God was behind the scene of history.

GOD’S PROVIDENTIAL DECLARATION TO PAUL - Acts 23:11

“But on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, ‘Take courage; . . .’” -- For Paul, things had turned from bad to worse in Jerusalem. He was a Roman prisoner, in Roman barracks and under Roman guard. Because Christ had to encourage Paul, we assume he was quite discouraged, downcast and drooping in spirits. All of his dreams of going to Rome were, in his mind, dashed on the rocks, and it appeared that he would end up his brilliant career in a Roman cell. To say the least, he was dejected, defeated, deflated and disenchanted. He felt abandoned by Christians, for none seemed to support him in Jerusalem, and abandoned by God. However, man's extremity is God's opportunity. God often brings a Christian to the place of helplessness and discouragement only to lift him to higher levels of commitment and service. When a Christian feels absolutely bankrupt of any strength to go on, that is God's hour to step in because a man at that point is totally open to Christ and ready for help of any kind from Christ. Paul probably said to himself, “I quit! I’m tired of suffering! I don't want to be a minister of the gospel any more! I don’t even want to be a Christian!” Right at that point, God was going to give Paul a new surge of power to do even a greater ministry, even though Paul probably thought that his ministry was all washed up.

“. . . for as you have solemnly witnessed to my cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.” -- Christ appeared to Paul and said, “Cheer up, Paul, you are going to witness for me in Rome just as I promised you.” Christ stood by Paul and gave him further revelation and encouragement.

What did Paul learn here? He learned that God was sovereign and as long as he was breathing God had a purpose for his life. He learned that God keeps His promises for He told Paul he was to witness before kings. He learned something of the providential presence of the overruling Lord. Paul learned what John Wesley learned when he said, “I’m immortal until my work is done!”

I know from personal experience that God often uses crisis to accomplish His providential purposes. I was a senior in college and had a girlfriend who dumped me. I wanted to marry that girl and when this happened I thought the world was coming to an

end. She lived in Texas and I was in California. I flew to Texas to see her and she would not talk to me. God had sovereignly hardened her heart because I was not to marry her. When in Texas, I visited her parents. Her mother introduced me to an older Christian woman, Mrs. Stonum, from whom I rented a room that next summer. Mrs. Stonum introduced me to her close friend, Mrs. McManus, who was a millionaire. Mrs. McManus was used by God to put me all the way through seminary. Furthermore, it was because I was dumped by that girl that I met my wife, Carol. What seemed at the moment to be a tragedy was used by God to bring me great blessing.

GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL DELIVERANCE OF PAUL FROM A CONSPIRACY - Acts 23:12-35

Plot to Murder Paul (23:12-15)

“And 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. And there were more than forty who formed this plot. And they came to the chief priests and 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.’”
-- These Jews hated Paul so much that they bound themselves to a sacred oath to murder Paul because he was the arch apostate of Judaism in their minds.

God, in His providence, even used these evil men to further His plans and purposes for the Apostle Paul. God works with evil instruments as well as good ones to bring about His plan. God is not the author of evil, but God uses evil instruments to further His own ends.

“If a calamity (evil) occurs in a city has not the Lord done it” (Amos 3:6)?

“The Lord has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil” (Prov. 16:4).

“The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps” (Prov. 16:9).

This principle is most clearly seen in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, for it was all planned by God, yet men were totally responsible.

“For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy Servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur” (aCTS 4:27, 28).

The fact that God uses evil men does not mean that men are robots. Men are always responsible for their evil actions and attitudes. God's providence governs man but it

governs him in such a way that man is not robbed of the degree of liberty necessary for him to remain responsible for his own actions. God's plan includes the evil actions of men and yet in such a way that He is not responsible for the evil. Men are responsible for their evil and they are held accountable, but all this never occurs outside God's secret will. This is a very hard concept to understand, but the Bible illustrates it best of all for us from the life of Joseph. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery which was a very evil act. Years later, after God used that evil as a stepping stone to make Joseph Pharaoh's right hand man, Joseph could say, "And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (Gen. 50:20).

Protection Given to Paul (23:16-22)

"But the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, and he came and entered the barracks and told Paul." -- We learn here that Paul had a sister and nephew in Jerusalem. Somehow this young man found out about the plot to kill Paul. God providentially used a young boy to warn Paul of the plot to kill him. God's timing was perfect, for the boy found out just in the nick of time, and did not delay or Paul would have been dead. We call this a divine coincidence but there are no coincidences in the plan of God. Notice that this detail of a young boy overhearing a conversation seems so insignificant but it was another providential move in the plan of God for Paul.

When Columbus was sailing to America, a flight of birds caused him to change his course. (He was sailing for Virginia but, at this point, he was looking for land because they had been at sea a long time and his men were mutinous.) Suddenly, he saw a flight of birds to the southwest. He changed his direction to the southwest and hit the West Indies instead of Virginia. That simply determined whether this nation would be dominated by Spain or by England. Such a small thing as a flight of birds determining such a tremendous thing in history!

"And 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.'" -- Notice how cooperative this centurion was when Paul made this request, for God had him prepared to do so although he was acting freely. This is such a small but crucial turning point in the carrying out of God's providential will for Paul.

When in Romania several years ago, Dr. Josif Ton, the leader of the Christian movement in that communist country, told an interesting story. He had been interrogated by the communists for weeks and weeks and felt he was about to break mentally under the pressure. Then suddenly they stopped all interrogation and let him go. Later he found out that an American businessman told the Romanian government that he was not going to sell his product to the Romanian government if they continued to persecute Christians in that country. Because the Romanians desperately need American technology and money so as not to be completely dominated by Russia which they hate, they immediately stopped the interrogations of Dr. Ton. A coincidence? I think not!

Preparation for Paul to Appear Before the Governor (23:23-30)

“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. And he wrote a letter having this form: ‘Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix, greetings. When this man was arrested by the Jews and was about to be slain by them, I came upon them with troops and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. 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. And 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.’” -- The Romans called out 470 soldiers to protect Paul and bring him to Felix in Caesarea. That was a small army and no band of 40 Jewish zealots would attack a force like that.

Who raised this army of soldiers--Claudius Lysias or God? It was God using Claudius Lysias. The most amazing thing is the way Claudius Lysias believed and received the report of the young lad and acted immediately. He could have brushed the report aside but he did not. This whole thing seems like an accident but there are no accidents with God.

Why do men buck so hard at divine providence? They do not want to believe God controls everything because man seems to be a puppet, or they cannot reconcile God's love with a plan which includes suffering and sickness. Men think this is unfair according to their own standard of reasoning. But what are our choices? There are just two. Either everything happens by accident and man is left to pure chance and fate, or things are planned by God and all things are working out for God's own glory, for the good of God's elect and for the return of God's Son, Jesus Christ. To know that God has a plan and is carrying out this plan brings confidence, assurance and boldness to the Christian, for he senses he is a man of destiny. Let's face it, it is God's providence which change the course of history.

When the Spanish Armada sailed to fight the English, there was no human way the English could win this naval battle. Yet, God providentially saw to it that a terrible storm arose which would destroy much of the Spanish fleet. The English then defeated the Spanish, and Protestantism rather than Roman Catholicism would rule in England. That event has affected you and me today.

God also prepared Paul by having Claudius Lysias write a letter of acquittal, freeing Paul of any serious charges. This simple letter prepared the way for Paul to appear before the Roman governor Felix. This again shows the sovereign hand of God who works through non-Christians to accomplish His own will without them even being aware that they are being used in any way. God simply works through the normal reactions and feelings of the persons involved.

Is divine providence (predestination) the same as fatalism? No! Fatalism says what will be will be and nothing can change it; that is, God or Fate has a cold calculating plan and no matter what man does it cannot be changed. Predestination and divine providence, however, state that God has a plan that shall be carried out but behind that plan is an all wise, sovereign and loving God who is using means to accomplish His ends. While God is the First Cause, He also uses second causes such as prayer, responsibility, decisions, witnessing, etc., and these second causes are just as vital to the plan of God as the primary cause.

Presentation Before the Governor (23:31-35)

“So the soldiers, in accordance with their orders, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. But the next day, leaving the horsemen to go on with him, they returned to the barracks. And when these had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul to him. And when he had read it, he asked from what province he was; and when he learned that he was from Cilicia, he said, ‘I will give you a hearing after your accusers arrive also,’ giving orders for him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium.” -- Felix asked Paul what province he was from to make sure he fell under Felix's jurisdiction. Apparently he did.

We see, through the life of Paul, how God manipulated human history. It might not look like God is involved at all, and yet all events occurred at His command, accomplishing His purpose. Most of history is God supernaturally working through what appears to be natural to us. God has no problem handling history. He can work out His will through human events, big or small, without any difficulty at all. Even stubborn, obstinate, resistant and rebellious people are used by God to get people where He wants them and to do what He wants done in this world. Yet, through it all, man feels and senses he is acting freely. This is the mystery of history.

CONCLUSION

For you who are not Christians, you should know that God has a plan which includes who will go to heaven and who will go to hell. Yet, in this plan, God has established secondary causes as surely as He has established the plan. These secondary causes are the spreading of the gospel, prayer, witnessing, faith, repentance and a moving of the human will towards Christ.

God, based on His own character, promises to save every man who will by an act of his will trust Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior. Use the means that God has provided in His plan. Repent, exercise faith, will to come to Christ. If you will come to Christ, you will learn that your whole salvation was part of the plan of God. Trust Christ and then you will come to understand that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.