

God Executes His Plans in Unexpected Ways

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Thank you so much, Lynn and Derek, for reading such a long passage and for praying for us. So when my wife and I went on our honeymoon, we did something, you could call it vintage.

We sent a postcard to our parents like everyone used to in the good old days. So we got married on the 13th of September 2014, and they received it in Sicily.

I'm not joking, that exact week, a year later. It took exactly a year to travel from the Canary Islands to Sicily.

They got it for our first wedding anniversary. Now, as you can imagine, we'd basically given up on the idea of that postcard ever, getting there. We'd actually forgotten about them, there were two.

But the plan intended for those postcards was always to reach our parents. And to our own surprise, that plan actually came to fruition after all.

[1 : 01] And so I'm sure there were a lot of different people involved to make that possible, as there always is when you're shipping stuff. And considering how long it took the postcards to arrive, I just like to think about all the different improbable things that might have happened.

So was the postcard stuck in the Canary Islands, maybe under the seat of some van, and when it finally got professionally cleaned a year later, someone found it? Or did it get diverted to some exotic location, maybe on the other side of the world, I don't know, Vietnam?

Or maybe it got to our hometown in a matter of days, and then it got stuck under a desk in the post office. And it was literally around the corner from our parents, but they never got it for a whole year. The possibilities are endless.

And I'd actually forgotten about the misadventures of our postcards until I was studying this passage earlier this month. Because isn't Paul a bit like those postcards of ours?

He seems hopelessly dependent on the different random people that move it from post office to vans to planes.

[2 : 10] And at some point, also forgotten for a really long time. But ultimately, what is determining its final destination is the address that is written on it.

And for Paul, it was God who put the address. And that address was Rome. You might remember this verse from last week's passage in Acts 23.

The following night, the Lord stood near Paul and said, Take courage, as ye have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.

And Paul wanted to go to Rome. He'd said it in Acts 19. I must go to Rome also. And so now everything seems to be completely out of his control.

He's being passed from city to city, from Roman official to Roman official. But the truth is, we know that nothing is out of God's control. And so Paul is going to Rome.

[3 : 10] And that's what we'll see today. There will be delays compared to how he would have gone about it, I'm sure. It won't be straightforward. And God will use the most improbable people to accomplish his plan for Paul's life.

He'll use a diligent tribune, a dishonest lawyer, and what I'm going to call two noncommittal governors. So before we look at these characters, just a bit of context, especially for anyone who was in here the past couple of Sundays.

How did Paul end up in this situation? He is in Jerusalem, and his life is in grave danger. There are some Jews from Asia who stirred up a riot while he was in the temple.

And then the Roman soldiers came in, stopped the riot, brought Paul to their barracks. And just as Lysias, the tribune, ordered to flog him, they found out that he's a Roman citizen.

And so Paul is now actually being protected by the Romans, who don't want to be caught mistreating a Roman citizen who hasn't been proven guilty. And Lysias has just been told as well that there is a plot against Paul's life.

[4 : 24] There are 40 men who are so committed to killing him that they took an oath. And so it was no joke, as you can imagine, at the time when Jewish people took an oath as a group.

They really want him gone. And so let's look at what happens to Paul as Lysias, this diligent tribune, is in charge of him.

He takes 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen to escort Paul out of town safely. That's in verse 23.

470 men to protect the one Paul. And to put 470 in context, in Jerusalem there was only one cohort of students, of not students, soldiers.

So that means up to 1,000 soldiers. So we're talking about half the soldiers that were in Jerusalem are leaving the city to escort Paul out of it.

[5 : 29] And so God carries out his plan even through Roman commanders. It wasn't time for Paul to be killed. And so what Lysias is doing is both moving Paul away from the immediate danger and also escalating the issue through the Roman ranks.

And he sends Paul with his letter to governor Felix. He says in verse 29, there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment.

And basically he says, here you go. This hot potato, don't want it anymore. I'm not paid enough for this. And I'll tell the Jews to come and present their charges to you.

Thank you and bye. And maybe you noticed, but he also retold the events in his letter in a way that actually makes him sound way more in the know and kind of on the ball than he was.

Because verse 27 says, I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen. When in fact he'd already ordered to flog him.

[6 : 31] He had no idea that Paul was a Roman citizen until Paul himself told him. But either way, Paul is accompanied all the way to Antipatris by the 470.

They spend the night there. Then the soldiers on foot return to Jerusalem. And the cavalry keeps going with him all the way to Caesarea to Felix. And then Felix reads the letter.

And you can almost see him roll his eyes. You can tell that he's not a fan of a Jewish hot potato himself. In verse 34, he kind of double checks what province Paul is actually from, hoping perhaps that this was all a mistake.

And he doesn't actually fall under his jurisdiction. But he does, because Cilicia and Judea at the time are part of what used to be called Syria. And it is all under Felix.

So Felix has Paul put away for a few days until his accusers come from Caesarea for a total of five days.

[7 : 36] The next group of people that play a big role in Paul eventually going to Rome, as per God's plan, are his Jewish accusers. It's a delegation of elders led by the high priest Ananias.

And on this occasion, actually represented by a Gentile, Tertullus, the dishonest lawyer. Tertullus makes his dishonesty known from the very beginning, even before telling lies about Paul.

Look at how he addresses Felix in verses 3 and 4 of the next chapter, chapter 24. We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation.

Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude. Now, by just reading the passages, we wouldn't know.

But actually, the truth is that, contrary to everything that Tertullus would lead us to believe, Festus was an extremely violent man, virgin on madness, actually.

[8 : 44] And if there was one thing that he wasn't known for, then that would have been bringing peace. Violence? Definitely. Corruption? Plenty.

He had thousands of Jews massacred in that same city of Caesarea to stop an insurrection. And he loved a bribe, as we'll see. So the Jews actually hated him.

But Tertullus tries to flatter Felix, and then he goes on the offensive in verse 5. This man is a troublemaker, stirs up riots among the Jews all over the world.

Which, when you think about it, actually, you know, he's kind of paying a compliment to Paul all over the world. Paul is spreading the word.

He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect, where Nazarene is as degrading a word as sect is.

Nazareth being where Jesus, of course, came from, and a poor town that people thought nothing

good had ever come out of.

[9 : 47] And he even tried to desecrate the temple. Examine him yourself, Felix, and you'll see that these charges are true. And then the rest of the Jewish delegation joins in and confirms that all of this was absolutely true.

So Tertullus is a dishonest lawyer who uses flattery and lies to try and get his own way. But fundamentally, he has nothing to substantiate what he is accusing Paul of.

And so he was probably hoping that Felix would perceive Paul as one of the many false messiahs and the revolutionaries that Rome would have probably actually been concerned about.

He describes him as an insurrectionist, being part of a sect, an unactual criminal, because desecrating the temple would have been something that even the Romans would have recognized as a valid accusation.

So lie after lie after lie. And now contrast this with Paul's defense. He opens with, in verse 10, I know that for a number of years you have been a judge over this nation, so I gladly make my defense.

[11 : 00] There's no lies. There's no flattery. Paul just tells it as it is. You've been a judge for many years. No one could argue with that. And that's because he has God on his side.

He's not looking to charm anyone, but he does defend himself. And he does it with the truth because he has nothing to hide. And so if you look at verses 11 to 13, he says, paraphrasing, First, it was only 12 days ago that I got to Jerusalem, so not nearly enough time to get a riot like the one that they're describing to you organized.

And then I quite simply didn't do any of it. And that is why my accusers are not even trying to prove it to you, because they can't. And then Paul goes on to explain that all he was doing in the temple was really things that his accusers would do in the temple themselves.

He, too, worships the same God as they do. Although, of course, Paul does it as a follower of Jesus. In verse 14, he calls it the way. And Paul himself was ceremonially clean in the temple.

So there were no crowds. There was no disturbance, or at least not until some men from Asia stirred up the crowds. But they, Paul points out, who started all of this, didn't even bother coming here to bring any charges.

[12 : 25] So what are we even doing here? Those who accused me in the temple, they're not here. Those who accused me in the Sanhedrin, they're here, but they have no evidence to support their charges.

But there are two verses in Paul's defense that I'd like us to focus on today. And it's verses 15 and 16. So even here, in such a short defense, Paul manages to profess his faith, as he's been doing all along in the previous chapters.

And he manages to challenge the complacency of those around him. And I hope also to challenge us today here, reading his words 2,000 years later. What he's saying in these two verses is that because he knows that there will be a resurrection, because he knows that this life is not the end of it all, but there is an afterlife that is either spent in God's presence or away from him, he strives to keep his conscience clear.

Before God first, and before man too. And so in other words, I strive not to sin. What a contrast with Tertullus.

Not only does Paul not lie, he doesn't even need to, because his conscience is clear. Because despite everything that he has been through because of these people and how much they hate him, he managed to be a witness of the gospel by behaving as he did.

[14 : 26] By not repaying evil with evil, but by always keeping his eyes fixed on the bigger picture instead. We are here only for a time.

And we are here to bring glory to God, not to repay evildoers with evil. And because of this, he can stand upright in front of everyone, including the governor himself, and declare himself a follower of the way with no shame.

If this isn't the perfect application of Peter's words in 1 Peter 3, from verse 14. But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed.

Do not fear their threats, do not be frightened, but in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

But do this with gentleness and with respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.

[15 : 37] So, friends, the first challenge that I would like us to bring home today is, Do I live like I actually believe that there will be a reckoning?

Do I live consistently with this idea that there will be a resurrection of what Paul calls the righteous and the wicked in verse 15? By which he means those who do and those who don't live their lives for Christ.

Because if we do accept the Bible as the word of God, then we do believe that we're here only for a time. Then we die. But also that then that is not the end of it.

Because the Jesus who died for our sins, as we'll be commemorating later during communion, he is coming back. And how can I believe that and yet still live like I don't?

Go about my life without thinking twice about my sin. I strive always to keep my conscience clear. Paul doesn't say, I always keep my conscience clear.

[16 : 48] I strive. Because Paul sinned, just like we all do. And God knows we're fallible. We're broken men and women.

And that is why we are saved by grace. But that absolutely does not mean, not for a moment, that we should not strive to keep our conscience clear. We should not strive to resist sin.

And so as we'll ask God for forgiveness, as we take the bread and cup later, can I challenge every one of us, me first, to pray about maybe those recurrent sins that are preventing us from keeping our conscience clear?

Maybe those ones that we've kind of gotten used to, to the point that they maybe go undetected, that we don't even feel the need to ask for forgiveness about.

The ones that we've learned to coexist with. And not only ask God to forgive us, but also commit in prayer to strive to resist this sin.

[17 : 50] And we'll all know what it is for each of us. So let's work with the help of the Spirit to be able to stand straight and say with Paul, I strive to always keep, I strive always to keep my conscience clear.

And as a result, our testimony as well, whenever we profess faith to our neighbors, it'll be so much more impactful, just like Paul's, because it'll be consistent with what we and what those around us see in our lives.

So after this, Felix, similarly to what he'd done with Paul when he was first sent to him, adjourns the proceedings. He just puts off having to deal with the situation.

That's why Felix, the non-committal governor. Now, there's a couple more things that is helpful to know about Felix, just for context. The first one is that he used to be a slave.

And it's through connections, mainly his brothers to, and his connection with the emperor himself. And through corruption, he managed to rise to the position of governor, despite his background.

[19 : 08] And then second, that his wife, Trusilla, she was the sister of King Herod Agrippa, and she was Felix's third wife that he'd taken away from her husband.

And she was Jewish. So as the passage, as the text tells us, he was well acquainted with the way. And he seems to be intrigued by it, at least up to a point.

He knows, just like Lysias, that Paul cannot be charged with anything, that those accusations really just don't stand. But he also will not free Paul and make his already rocky relationship with the Jews even more difficult, just for one man.

So the compromise that he comes up with is to put Paul under house arrest, but a very loose one.

Verse 23 says, he ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard, but to give him some freedom.

But then because he has Paul at his disposal, and he is intrigued by Christianity, he calls for him to talk about faith in Christ Jesus. We see that in verse 24.

[20 : 18] And now see what Paul talks about. Luke tells us of three topics. Righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come.

Ouch. I think we can assume that Paul talked about the righteousness that he has before God as someone who has accepted Jesus in life, Jesus in his life, which means he's talking about the righteousness that Felix and Rosilla do not have.

Self-control, very relevant to such a couple, considering the mess they've made of their marriages because of lack of self-control, not to mention killing hundreds of people who started an insurrection.

And then finally, the judgment to come. That judgment that he had already hinted at during his defense before the Jews, he now goes all in and makes the connection between the governor's sin and the final judgment, just in case he hadn't joined the dots himself.

So imagine that typical scene that you see in many movies when one of the characters, the character sleeps off a cliff and another one grabs their hand just in time.

[21 : 37] And so now there's two of them. One is dangling over a cliff. And you wouldn't expect the person dangling over the cliff to start bringing out, let's say their friends, all of their friends' flaws.

You'd think they'd focus on, okay, how do we get out of here, right? Not, you just are so noisy when you chew your food. Your jokes are so boring and your breath kind of smells.

You wouldn't want them to let go. And if they were enemies, and you see that in those movies as well, you wouldn't expect the guy who's about to die to talk about everything that makes the two enemies.

If anything, he'd be looking for some common ground and try and convince him that, you know, maybe we can try just a fresh start after this. Paul's life is literally in the hands of Felix.

And Paul is dangling over that cliff. And yet he just will not hold back. Because Paul's mission is to share the truth of the gospel and not a watered down version of it.

[22 : 40] No matter the circumstances. And so he talks to Felix and Rosilla about living according to the gospel, even though he knows very well that they don't.

To the point, verse 25, that Felix is afraid and asks him to please leave. Enough about judgment. And so it seems that after this, he mainly called him just because he was hoping to be offered a bribe.

So Felix has rejected the gospel. So here, Paul lived clearly according to Jesus' words in Matthew 10, 19 to 20.

But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time, you will be given what to say. For it will not be you speaking, but the spirit of your father speaking through you. And so here's the second challenge for us. We've got to stop waiting for the perfect situation to share the gospel. Jesus doesn't say, careful when you speak.

[23 : 50] Here's a list of boxes to tick before you do it. Do they like you? Tick. Do you like them? Tick. Have they ever shown any interest in the gospel before? Tick.

And so on. What we're called to do is trust the spirit to speak through us. We're not called to convert people to the gospel because that is not for us to do.

But we are called to share it. Paul shares the gospel here and Felix doesn't accept it. But he did share and boy, did he do it without holding back.

So do I wait for the perfect situation to evangelize? It's just the question that we want to ask ourselves. Am I obeying Jesus? Or am I making excuse after excuse for myself when it comes to sharing his word?

And this links back to that awareness of Paul as well that there will be a resurrection. And so this can be another good indicator of whether we live like we believe that.

[24 : 52] what is our passion like for those around us who have not found the way yet? Do we care at all? Because if we did we wouldn't want we wouldn't be waiting for the perfect moment.

So Felix leaves Paul under arrest for more than two years. He doesn't commit to the gospel in his personal life and he will not commit to the gospel by taking a position on Paul's fate.

Verse 27 says that to grant the Jews a favor he leaves him in prison. What a contrast for Paul all this time in the same city compared to the years of spontaneous traveling that he'd had so far.

And then Felix is succeeded by Festus who is very quick to take action as soon as he learns about Paul. And the same thing as before happens the Jews are still 100% committed to having Paul killed over two years later.

If anything they seem even more interested in making that happen. And so they want him to be sent back to Jerusalem so that they can ambush him. But just like last time their accusations will not convince the new governor either.

[26 : 12] There are very serious charges but there is still no evidence being given. Because there was nothing about Christianity really that went against Roman law. And so just like last time this governor will not commit either way.

He can't sentence Paul but he won't make the Jews unhappy either. And so when Paul is offered the option to go back to Jerusalem and basically be killed he appeals to Caesar as a Roman citizen.

And he is granted his request. So Paul is going to Rome just like God had told him he would. So let me conclude with Jesus' words in the Gospel of Matthew chapter 10 from verse 28.

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered so don't be afraid.

[27 : 21] You are worth more than many sparrows. Two thoughts on this for us to conclude. If you are in a situation similar to that of Felix and Festus if you've heard the Gospel but you are delaying your decision if you're not taking a stance if you're not committing delaying is rejecting in the here and now.

And rejecting is not being afraid of the one as Jesus calls him who can destroy both soul and body Satan. It's ignoring that resurrection that Paul was talking about.

So please pick up a Bible open it on one of the Gospels and read for yourself about the hope that Jesus offers. Come and talk to us we'd be very happy to help.

And for those of us who have committed by being made weary by the difficulties of life in a broken world who are struggling to see how any of this any of what we see around us or what is happening to us who struggle to see it fit within God's plan.

If we're feeling sent from post office to post office and then forgotten under a desk. I pray that the example of Paul and Jesus' words in this passage will be the encouragement that we need because God is executing his plan.

[28 : 48] God is sovereign. He might use the most improbable people and situations to carry out his plan but he is at work and if he cares for the sparrows then he cares for Paul and he cares for you and me.

Let's pray. Father thank you so much for the example of Paul.

Thank you for everything that we can read about how he interacted with those around him how he professed his faith how he shared the word. And we pray Father that we just like him will let the spirit work in us Father.

That we will be committed to the gospel and that that will be visible in how we go about our lives Father.

That we will be committed to resisting sin. And Father we also pray that we will be committed just like Paul to sharing your word Father. That we will live in accordance with the belief that there will be a resurrection Father.

[30 : 04] That there will be a reckoning and that we will show care for those who haven't accepted you yet. Father thank you so much for Jesus' reassuring words that whatever happens around us you have a plan.

We might not know what that plan looks like exactly but we are not forgotten. We are looked after by you Father. We thank you for all of these truths in Jesus' name.

Amen.