

Acts Series Part 62

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Date: 09 October 2011

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[0 : 00] I know where I want to get to, but I have no idea of how I'm going to get there. I wonder if you've ever felt like that, on the road, on a journey, on the road itself.

You know where you want to get to, but you have no idea how to get there. I wonder if Paul may have felt a little bit like that as he finds himself being encouraged by the words of Jesus.

That were delivered to him in a vision. As it's recorded in chapter 1, verse 11. The following night, Paul said, As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify.

And so from the very beginning, from Jesus himself, there is assurance. The final destination. The destination is Rome.

That is where he must get to. But there remains significant uncertainty as to how he will make it to Rome.

[1 : 15] That he will make it is clear. But how he will make it there is far from clear. Paul has to testify in Rome.

Last week we were highlighting, among other things, concerning this matter of testifying to Jesus, this aspect, the necessity of it. You must also testify in Rome.

And maybe as a brief aside before moving on to what will concern us this evening is to ask ourselves. I ask you as I would ask of myself. A week ago we were encouraged.

We were exhorted. We were reminded of this duty, of this necessity to testify concerning Jesus Christ. As you look back on the week that has gone.

How have you responded to that challenge? To that reminder? To that exhortation? Have you done so? Have you grasped the necessity of it? As is made clear in these words of Jesus to Paul.

[2 : 19] Well, that's just a wee reminder of what we were challenged concerning a week ago. And an opportunity to just examine ourselves. To see to what extent what we hear and what we understand then has an actual effect on the lives that we live.

Paul then, as we return to the passage, has to testify in Rome. This is his duty. But what about getting to Rome? Well, this, it would seem, is something that God would have to arrange for him.

Paul is imprisoned there in the garrison, the temple garrison in Jerusalem. He has no means to make it happen to get to Rome.

And God intervenes to secure that this journey at least begins. Of course, he will secure that the journey ends in the destination.

But the passage before us illustrates for us or presents to us the manner in which God ensures that that journey, at the very least, begins. The journey from Jerusalem to Rome.

[3 : 28] Verses 12 through to 31. We're told of this first leg of this epic journey. God takes charge of the travel arrangements. And he is not content with doing so in half measures.

As we have read, Paul will travel on this first leg with an escort that would suggest to any who were observing that this is royalty.

This massive escort consisting of something approaching 500 men to ensure his safe arrival at Caesarea.

As you watch dignitaries today traveling from country to country, even those of the big powers like Obama, I wonder whether even they would have such an entourage in terms of security staff and bodyguards.

Perhaps they do. It's certainly not visible for those of us just watching from afar. Well, I want to explore how God plays his part in getting Paul to Rome.

[4 : 34] Or certainly in getting Paul as far as Caesarea, which is the first leg of that journey. There is no doubt that God will get Paul to his destination.

But the manner that he does so is instructive and also encouraging for us. God uses means. We know, of course, that that is so. But here we find it illustrated very clearly.

God uses means. He uses people. It is God who is ordering events. It is God who has this purpose to fulfill. But in order to do so, he uses means.

He uses people who are largely or entirely oblivious to the fact that they are serving as God's instruments. We'll discover that certainly in this account.

Well, who are the people? Who are the means that God uses to embark Paul on this journey? That he must take part in because there is this imposed necessity of reaching Rome and having reached Rome, of testifying concerning Jesus Christ in Rome.

[5 : 45] Who are the people? Well, there are three folks that we can mention. One group of people and then two individuals. The first group of people that we want to notice are a Jewish death squad.

They are means that God uses to ensure Paul's journey to Rome begins. That's the first group that we'll just comment on very briefly. But then we have also a nameless nephew who is a prominent figure in this account.

And we'll spend a little bit more time thinking about this nameless nephew. Well, no doubt he did have a name, but nameless in the sense that we don't know what his name was. He too, a means that God uses to ensure that Paul's journey to Rome begins.

And then finally, we have a Roman commander who is also brought into the service of King Jesus. He is oblivious to this, but brought into the service of King Jesus that the travel arrangements that the Lord is making for Paul would proceed.

Well, let's think then of these three means that God uses. First of all, the Jewish death squad. We've read the passage. We can just remind ourselves there in verse 12 where it speaks about them.

[7 : 04] The next morning, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. More than 40 men were involved in this plot, and it goes on.

Now, as we think of their involvement in this, there is a delicious irony in the involvement of this Taliban-esque death squad. Their stated purpose is to snuff out Paul and, of course, consequently, any journey to Rome before it even begins.

And yet they become unwittingly responsible for this almost royal escort and also for effectively accelerating the journey or the beginning of the journey, certainly, of Paul from Jerusalem to Rome.

So, these men have a plan and there is an outcome to what they plan to do. The plan really doesn't require much explanation. The passage is clear in describing it to us, but simply to remind ourselves it's to secure Paul's presence before the Sanhedrin, or in any case to arrange that he would be summoned to the Sanhedrin.

And then, as he is being brought there, protected, of course, by the Roman soldiers, there would be these men waiting to ambush him and to kill him before he reaches the Sanhedrin.

[8 : 31] This is something that they have thought out, I don't know how carefully, but certainly very seriously. And a measure of their seriousness is the vow that they take. They vow that they won't eat or drink until they accomplish that which they have set out to do, to kill Paul.

Well, the plan unravels for reasons that we're going to notice in a moment, but it seems to have been ill-conceived and perhaps likely to have failed even in the absence of Paul's nephew.

Of course, we can't know that for sure. We can only speculate. It's certainly likely that the conspirators would have been killed or certainly arrested in any attempt.

You know, the journey that was going to be made from the garrison there in the temple grounds to the Sanhedrin was a very short journey. Paul would have been heavily guarded.

Evidence of that is seen in how he was guarded for the trip to Caesarea. And for a group of Jewish conspirators to kill Paul, perhaps they could have achieved that, but undoubtedly many would have died in the attempt, and others would have been arrested and possibly executed in due course.

[9 : 44] So this was a serious matter where their hatred of Paul was such that they were willing to put their own lives on the line to secure his death. But the outcome is, of course, failure.

They do not achieve their objective. They are not able to kill Paul. Another outcome, very much an unintended one as far as the conspirators were concerned, was that their attempt or knowledge of their attempt or intended attempt simply increases the urgency and the part of the Roman authorities to get Paul out of Jerusalem and on his way to Rome.

Of course, they weren't thinking of Rome as his final destination. This is in God's purposes. But in actual fact, this first leg of the trip to Caesarea is accelerated because of these men and their intentions to kill Paul.

Before thinking a little bit about what that means for us or how relevant this is for us, it is an intriguing aside that there is no record of forty or so zealots starving to death as victims of this ill-conceived vow.

Of course, if they had been true to their vow, then presumably they all would have starved to death. They had vowed that until they killed Paul, they wouldn't eat or drink. Well, it would seem that then, as today, people are very adept at wriggling out of promises that they make.

[11 : 16] And they, it would seem, found some get-out clause that allowed them to eat and drink, even though they hadn't fulfilled their intention.

What about today? Well, as we think of this incident so long ago, nonetheless, we can remind ourselves that today nothing has changed. There are those, like these men, who would deliberately and maliciously seek to oppose God's purposes and God's people.

You know, even today we have been thinking about and praying for Pastor Youssef there in Iran. And there we have a believer, a servant of God, whose life is in danger because of violent men who would wish to see him dead.

In this case, using a flawed judicial process to achieve their objective. And so, today we also have enemies of the gospel. The manner in which they demonstrate their enmity will vary from place to place, from circumstance to circumstance.

But today, all over the world, and in our own country also, there are those who deliberately and maliciously seek to oppose God's people.

[12 : 35] But just as was the case with these violent men in Jerusalem who wished to see Paul dead, so today the enemies of God are but unwitting instruments in the hands of a sovereign God.

As with Joseph's brothers of old, it can be said of the enemies of God today, You intended to do me harm, or you intended to harm the cause of Jesus Christ.

You intended to frustrate the purposes of God. You intended to do damage to the church of Jesus Christ. But God intended it for good to accomplish what has now been done, the saving of many lives.

As that was true of the brothers of Joseph. As it was true of these violent men seeking the death of Paul. As indeed it is true, though we are not able to see the outcomes in the full picture, but as we are confident it is true of those violent men in Iran who would seek the death of Pastor Youssef.

And of the enemies of the gospel in Scotland today, who would seek to stand against the things of God and frustrate the purposes of God. Isn't there a delicious irony?

[13 : 52] Isn't there an encouragement to know that though they are unwittingly doing these things, or unaware, it is the case that God uses them also as His instruments for the fulfilling of His purposes.

No one can frustrate the purposes of God. And so there is no need to despair. You know, we can look around us and see the cause of the gospel in our own day and generation.

Of course, we must do all that we can to protect what we know to be the truth and to defend the rights and the privileges that we have inherited from previous generations. And we must be rigorous in so doing.

But in our rigor and in our activity, let us never despair. When things seem to go against us, when decisions are taken that are very contrary to what we would have wished, when laws are enacted that grieve us, yes, we can be grieved, but we must never despair.

We must never despair because God is in control. God is working out His purposes even in these things. So we have then, in terms of the means that God uses to fulfill His purpose, in this case, the beginning of Paul's journey to Rome where he must testify to Jesus Christ, we have first of all this death squad.

[15 : 19] But we have also this nameless nephew who we meet and are introduced to in verse 16 of chapter 23. There we read, But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul.

And then it continues and the rest of the account is given to us. One commentator on this chapter suggests that this is one of the most tantalizing incidents in Acts.

Well, certainly tantalizing in regard to interest that we might have in the family of Paul. We are given a fleeting glimpse of one member of Paul's family.

And we know so little of Paul's family that if we would wish to know more, we are left somewhat frustrated by this glimpse of just one member, this nephew of Paul's.

As we enter into really the realm of speculation, it's been suggested by some that Paul, because of his stand for the gospel and his loyalty to Jesus Christ, found himself rejected by his own family.

[16 : 33] And it's been suggested, and it can only be a suggestion because we don't have enough to say more than that, that when he writes to the Philippians, and there he speaks of how he, he speaks of losing all things for the sake of Christ.

Some suggest that this included that family rejection of being disinherited by his family, losing all things because of Christ.

Well, maybe, maybe not. What is true is that we know almost nothing about Paul's family, but we are given this fleeting glance of this nephew, this son of Paul's sister.

But what can we say about him and the manner in which God uses him in fulfilling this particular purpose? Well, what I want to do is just to notice some truths about this land that are instructive and challenging for us.

The first thing that we can say about this young man is that he's in the right place at the right time. He's in the right place at the right time. And what do I mean by that? Well, he finds out about the plot, despite it being, one presumes, shrouded in secrecy.

[17 : 46] It may be that these men were very incompetent in bringing together their plans, but you would imagine that they would have made at least a serious effort to keep their plans secret.

Obviously, there was a sense in which they had to let certain people know. They had to go to the chief priests to arrange for this request to the commander.

And, of course, in all of these things, and you've got over 40 men, it only takes one careless word, perhaps, for the news to be published to those who maybe ought not to know about it.

But whatever the reasons, the fact is that this young man is in the right place at the right time to discover about this malicious intent on the part of these men.

Why was he in the right place at the right time? Might it have been that he moved in these circles of Jewish zealots, and yet he finds himself in this difficult situation, and loyalty to his uncle or a sensitive conscience carries the day.

[18 : 53] And so, though maybe he was part of this group, not perhaps of those who were going to kill Paul, but familiar with them, connected with them in some way, and so he knows about it, as he balances things, he recognizes that this is something he can't be part of, and indeed warns Paul about it.

What we don't know. What we do know is that God placed him what he needed to be at the time he needed to be to discover that this was being planned.

As I think about this incident, it reminds me, as I imagine, it reminds you also of Mordecai there in the book of Esther and how he circumstantially, we could say, discovers of the plot to kill King Xerxes and is able to warn King Xerxes and how subsequently that warning was used of God to grant to Mordecai himself a voice that was a significant one in protecting God's people in the right place at the right time, in God's place, in God's time.

But this young lad isn't only in the right place at the right time, but he does the right thing. Once he discovers of this plan, he needs to decide, what do I do?

What do I do with this information? Telling Paul, perhaps, involved some danger. When those who are found out discover that news had reached Paul, I am sure that one of the things they would have done would have been, well, how did Paul find out?

[20 : 29] How did the Roman commander find out? And they would have done all that they could to try and discover where the leak came from. We know how it is today when there's a leak in government and there's this great rush to establish, where does the leak come from?

And I imagine this young man, as he pondered, what do I do? Do I remain silent? Do I tell Paul? I imagine he was conscious of the possible danger that could follow from warning his uncle of this danger.

Was he afraid at that prospect? Well, we don't know, but it seems reasonable to presume that he would have been afraid. Might he have wondered, well, somebody else can warn Paul.

But maybe he knew there was nobody else in possession of that information who could have done so. Was he unsure as to what he should do? Perhaps he was. Everything suggests he was a young boy, a teenager perhaps.

The language that is used to describe him allows us to place his age at being anything from early teens through to possibly a young man. We simply can't tie it down more carefully than that.

[21 : 37] Though in a moment we'll see just a little hint or clue that would suggest that he was at the younger end of that possible or that range of possible ages.

We'll come to that in a moment. But all of these things, no doubt, would have been going through his mind as he finds himself in possession of this information but has to decide what to do with it.

But of course, ultimately, he does do the right thing. God places him in the right place. God places him there at the right time. God provides him with the information. But this young boy has to do the right thing.

He has to do the right thing. That's his job. That's his duty. And of course, he does so. As we think of ourselves, God will place you in the right place at the right time to do something that you need to do, whatever that might be.

And as with this young lad, the duty incumbent on you is to do the right thing. So he's in the right place at the right time. He does the right thing.

[22 : 41] But then also we notice, concerning this young man, that God opens the right doors for him. First of all, the door to the garrison to see Paul. Some who take the light in questioning the accuracy or the trustworthiness of Scripture accounts, such as this one, are almost mocking in reading this and saying, well, it's just not credible that this young boy could so easily have made his way into the garrison to warn Paul.

In any case, if he could do so, why couldn't one of the conspirators done so and just killed him there and then without all this grandiose plan? But of course, that is far from being the case.

He was a relative of Paul. He could have established, no doubt, his family connection with Paul. And it's not at all unlikely that he could have reached Paul. Certainly God opened the door that he would be able to bring this word of warning to Paul.

But then, having warned Paul, it's necessary for this news, this warning, to reach the commander. Ultimately, it's the commander who will be able to provide Paul with protection.

But that door is also open and this young boy is brought to an audience with the Roman commander to bring this news to him. As we just noticed, that encounter between the lad and the commander.

[24 : 06] We can just notice a couple of things that are of interest there in verse 19 we read. So he took him to the commander, that is one of the centurions who were guarding Paul, takes the young boy to the commander and we read there, the centurion said, Paul the prisoner sent for me and asked me to bring this young man to you because he has something to tell you.

The commander took the young man by the hand, drew him aside and asked, what is it you want to tell me? And while we don't want to read too much into what is said there, certainly the picture seems quite a tender one and that would suggest that he was a young boy.

This Roman commander, this military man, he takes him by the hand. You can't imagine him doing that to an adult. But there's this young boy, maybe he detects his fear, his nervousness, I don't know.

So he takes him by the hand so that they can speak in private presumably and says, tell me what you have to say young boy. And it's almost a tender moment, this hardened military man dealing with this young lad in this way.

And of course we see God involved in all of these things and in granting this reception that allows him to speak and to speak confidently. Indeed, the boy seems to have been emboldened because even in the manner he speaks to the commander, he doesn't simply, he doesn't simply describe the problem, he actually tells the commander what he should do.

- [25 : 28] Notice there in verse 21, having explained the danger, he says, don't give in to them. Don't give in to them. He doesn't just say, look, this is the problem, you know, you see what you can do.

He says, don't give in to them. Rather bold for the young boy to be telling the commander what he should or shouldn't do. But God opens the doors and allows this lad to bring this information to the man that needs to know about it.

So this nameless nephew is also an instrument in God's hands to get Paul on his way to Rome because it is this news that the commander receives that accelerates Paul's journey to Rome or certainly the first leg of it.

Well, what about you? What about me? God places us in the right place at the right time, perhaps to help somebody, perhaps to warn somebody, perhaps to say something that needs to be said that nobody else can say.

What will you do when you determine to do the right thing and when you take the first steps in doing the right thing as this young boy did? You'll find so often that God begins to open the doors that need to be opened that maybe you thought would be so difficult to go through or to be opened for you.

- [26 : 48] But then thirdly, we have one other person who is used by God as a means in the fulfilling of his purposes and it's the Roman commander.

Well, we've already encountered him in the reading and also as we've spoken about Paul's nephew. But what we can certainly say about him is that he was no friend of Paul.

In chapter 22 and verses 23 and 24, we remind ourselves of what he had done previously concerning Paul. If we read simply from verse 24, the commander ordered Paul to be taken into the barracks.

This is the same man. He directed that he be flogged and questioned in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. He's no friend of Paul.

It's also a little interesting reflection on human nature, how when he writes a letter to Governor Felix, he rather massages the truth of the incidents that had taken place.

- [27 : 48] You know, there we read of how he had been guilty of ordering that Paul be tortured and yet in the letter, this is really just a curious aside, notice what he says in his letter to Felix.

He says there in verse 27 of chapter 23, this man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, but I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen.

The order of events is rather conveniently massaged and he presents himself as the great defender of Paul when that was hardly an accurate representation of the events.

But that's an aside that simply reminds us of human nature and we are all, I think, willing to confess that we are guilty of, what shall we say, a favorable recollection of events when it suits our purposes.

But this man was no friend of Paul. He had no knowledge nor interest in the necessity of Paul reaching Rome and yet he too serves as an instrument of God in the fulfilling of God's purpose.

- [28 : 53] He receives the messenger, the young boy, he receives him very favorably. He believes the report as being credible, as being true and he acts decisively and with remarkable haste in securing Paul's exit from Jerusalem to Caesarea.

The reason for Caesarea as the destination is that it was the provincial capital. There was the governor Felix who had greater authority to hear and dispose of the accusations against Paul.

Caesarea was on the coast and, as I say, just not very far on the way but at least one step on the journey to Rome. So as we draw things to a close, the point is that this first leg of Paul's journey to Rome where he, in the words of Jesus, must also testify to Jesus is arranged.

It's arranged at no cost to Paul and with a quite spectacular entourage organized by the Roman commander. On another occasion we'll continue accompanying Paul in this journey but it is worth noticing, maybe to introduce a note of realism to this that having begun his journey things were far from being all plain sailing for Paul as he heads to Rome.

It's not a case that from here on God is opening doors left, right, and center far from it. Felix, who is mentioned to whom the letter is addressed, motivated by lucre and the hope of a substantial bribe keeps Paul languishing in Caesarea for two years before he himself is subsequently replaced by governor Festus.

[30 : 41] Well, that for another occasion. But, you know, the journey has begun but there is almost after the first step has been achieved frustrations and things don't go perhaps as Paul would have liked or as we might have imagined as God would order Paul's steps on the way to Rome.

What then is the lesson for us from this account? There perhaps are many but I think the big message is really an echo of the big message that we were reminded of in our consideration of Daniel.

The big message is the same. God is in control. Every twist and turn, every victory and setback, every open door and every closed door, every encouragement but also every frustration all serving the divine purpose.

As we appreciate that extent to which God is in control are we to then conclude that we can sit back and passively await the unfolding of the drama as directed by God?

Well, by no means are we to conclude in that way. We are not in the audience observing this drama. We are actors in the drama and we, like Paul's nephew, are placed in the right place at the right time and when we are, we must do the right thing and as we do, God will so use that faithfulness, that obedience, that doing of the right thing to further the purposes He has.

[32 : 14] So let us be encouraged by this in difficult times. Let us be reminded that we serve a God who orders all things and all things well and that all things do indeed work together for the good of those who love Him.

Let's pray. I was in the right like where the I had in