

Sermon 71, The Reign of Christ Over Enemies, Pt. 3, Acts 23:12-35

Proposition: Christ reigns, even over the Jews' plot to kill Paul.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the passage before us is rich in adventure — 200 horse, 270 foot, a night march, a suicide pact, and more. But though the adventure is exciting, it's not the point. Luke is not some early version of Alexandre Dumas or James Patterson. He's not writing to excite us. He's writing to reassure us regarding the Kingdom of God. His book is here to give us certainty regarding what we've been taught about Jesus. In particular, we see that this exciting night escape affirms all over again that Jesus reigns. He even reigns over those who are openly, explicitly, and violently opposed to His reign. His Kingdom cannot be thwarted, not even when 40 men get together and make a suicide-murder pact. That's the good news that Luke has to share in this passage. We'll see other things as well: that the reign of Christ makes use of unlikely means. He is perfectly capable of co-opting good Jewish boys, Roman legions, official communiques, and due process of law to serve His people, and thus to advance His reign.

I. Christ's Program: Paul Is Going to Rome, v. 11

In order to fully understand the rest of the chapter, we have to understand what the Lord was saying when he stood by Paul's pallet in the prison cell. Yes, He was giving Paul an "attaboy." He was affirming that Paul had manfully and rightfully testified about Him before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. But the comment about Rome was not just a command to Paul — "Keep up the good work when you happen to find yourself in Rome." It was a promise to Paul: "I will get you safe to Rome." In other words, whatever the plans of the Sanhedrin, of the Roman officials, of Paul himself, they matter little. They are simply factors caught up in the greater plan of Jesus Christ for His servant. Paul is going to Rome, and no one can stop it.

In other words, Jesus reigns, also over the movements of His apostle. The promise of a successful trip to Rome has been made. We will see the reign of Christ over enemies, over Roman justice, over Roman injustice, over the folly and hypocrisy of governors and kings who are wrongfully married to beautiful but stolen women, and over nature itself in the long narrative

about the shipwreck. We have five chapters of obstacles to this promise coming right up. Luke is going to show us, though, how God overcomes all of these obstacles and brings Paul to Rome.

Remember, this is a common technique in Biblical narrative — the pattern of promise and fulfillment. It is most clearly seen in the Pentateuch, as God promises a seed to the woman and then we see all the ways in which that promise is challenged and set at risk. Abraham is promised a seed, and then his wife is stolen by an evil king — twice. And so on. That is the pattern. Well, Luke makes use of that same pattern here in Acts, and particularly in this final section where we follow the trials and tribulations of Paul. The idea of going to Rome was first introduced in 19:21, where we get a tiny window into Paul's plans: "Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome" (Acts 19:21). This decision was the decision of the Holy Spirit, and therefore, the rest of the trip back to Jerusalem, where he was taken into Roman custody, and brought by the Romans all the way to the Imperial capital, is all part of the plan. Paul may not have known it was part of God's plan (though the text makes it sound like he has some inkling of it). But God knew, and the rest of Acts is the story of how God's reign brought Paul safely to where he needed to be. Despite the opposition, Jesus wins because He's in charge. That's the message this morning.

II. The Enemies' Plot, vv. 12-15

The story fast-forwards to the morning after Paul's experience of the risen Christ standing by his bed and promising him that he would testify in Rome. That very next morning, the plot thickens: More than forty Jews, apparently local to Jerusalem or at least present for this plot, have gotten together and sworn to kill Paul so quickly that they will not need to eat or drink before they have safely bumped him off.

This sounds incredibly extreme and even absurd to us. This is the stuff of late-night TV, and not on the good networks either. This is B-movie stuff at best. And yet, this kind of melodrama is not reserved for the opera stage and the fevered brains of SyFy channel writers. It happens in real life too.

The forty adversaries, rather like the forty thieves encountered by Alibaba, actually attempt to enlist the highest officials of Judaism in their plot. What's worse, of course, is that they aren't turned over to the authorities for doing this. Instead, Luke strongly implies that from the High Priest on down, Palestinian Judaism is rotten. First-degree murder, and conspiracy to commit murder, are not only tolerated by the authorities, but actually participated in by them!

Of course, Luke has already made it clear several times that the highest authorities in Judaism are more than willing to commit murder to sustain their own position in society. Jesus of Nazareth is Victim No. 1 in this regard. But to see it still happening, decades later, is rather shocking. But it's not particularly surprising. The servant is not greater than his Master; if they persecuted Jesus, they're also going to persecute Paul and every other servant of Jesus.

III. The Enemies' Plot Foiled, vv. 16-35

But the enemies' plot does not succeed, for it is a plot against the reign of Christ and thus, however much temporary success it achieves, it can never prosper permanently.

A. Through Paul's Nephew, vv. 16-22

The first agent of the enemies' downfall is Paul's nephew, the son of his sister. Luke relates at length how the message came to Paul, then through the centurion to the tribune. The goal of this longer narration is to enjoy the suspense: Is something going to happen to the nephew? Is his message going to get to the one who can do something about it? Paul is not going to be able to save himself. Maybe the centurion will fail to get the message to the tribune! But no, it all works out. The tribune gets the message. Again, Luke is continuing to use that Genesis format of stating the promise, and then recounting how God providentially overrode all plots and obstacles and threats that stood in the way of its completion.

B. Through a Night Ride, vv. 23-24

The tribune gets the message, and he really gets it. Immediately he sets up a night ride with 70 horse, 200 foot, and 200 spearmen. This is a large force — perhaps half the garrison at the Antonia Fortress in Jerusalem. Why so many? Because the Roman state is determined to protect Paul. Because the commander wanted to keep his men in top form. Because a show of force like this would help the occupied people of Jerusalem to remember their place and know that they don't have a chance against the might of Rome. Anyway, even though the hour is late, the tribune shows resolution and activity. He doesn't say "I'll deal with it tomorrow." He says "Let's go now."

He's moving Paul up the chain, sending him to the provincial governor to render a verdict on whether to keep him in custody, punish him, or let him go.

Now, it's important to recognize that this was not the only option. He could have let Paul go and said "Take care of your own security, friend." He could have redoubled the guards around his cell in Jerusalem. He could have arrested the conspirators and made an example of them for causing trouble in Judea. But he doesn't do any of these things. Why does he decide to forward Paul to the governor of the double province of Syria-Palestine? The final answer, brothers and sisters, lies in the providence of a good God who has promised to bring Paul to Rome. God is at work. Just in the reversal of *Roe v Wade*, this was something that no human being could guarantee. It was something that only the Almighty could do through His overruling providence.

C. Through a Written Declaration of Paul's Innocence, vv. 25-30

Along with the night ride to Caesarea, where he will get to testify before the governor, Paul is accompanied by a letter from the Jerusalem tribune to the governor of the province.

This letter doesn't mention a few embarrassing details, especially that Claudias Lysias was ready to whip Paul before he found out that the apostle was a Roman citizen. But in any case, the letter's main point is clear enough: Paul was the victim of a Jewish riot, but he was guilty of nothing but raising awkward theological questions. He is simply participating in an intra-Jewish debate, though with such vigor that his compatriots want to kill him.

Paul is innocent. Just as Pilate found no fault in Jesus, so Claudius Lysias finds no fault in Paul.

D. Through Due Process of Law, vv. 31-35

The section winds up with a statement that the tribune's orders were carried out to the letter. God's plan to bring Paul safely to Rome is well on its way. God works through the Roman state and through due process of law. One final question from the governor establishes that he, Felix, is indeed the best person to try this case. Paul is from the province of Cilicia, but that is not where the crime was committed. Also, Paul has lived much of his life within Felix's province and therefore it is all the more appropriate to try the alleged crime in the jurisdiction in which it was committed.

So Jesus reigns over His enemies. Those who want to kill Paul are stopped. Those who could kill him — the Romans — instead protect him from his Jewish enemies. Luke doesn't record for us whether the forty Jews starved to death in their homes, full of rage against an absent Paul. One can only hope.

Anyhow, the Kingdom is worth trusting in. It's certain that Jesus reigns; just look at how He delivered Paul from his enemies and brought him safely into the governor's custody in Caesarea.

How can we apply this passage? The major application is to submit to Christ, because He reigns. Obey Him in everything. That means putting away your sexual sins, your economic sins, your relational sins. It means zealously pursuing holiness. It definitely means that you should not take wicked oaths and vows to destroy the lives of apostles. It means that we should value and support due process of law.

Jesus reigns. He reigns over wicked people, and He uses good people and laws to carry out His will. Believe in Him, obey Him, submit to Him. He is your King. Amen.