



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Acts 23:1–35

“Paul, the Council, and God”

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Now, we turn for our Scripture reading to Acts chapter 23, and we’re going to read the entire chapter. It’s a lengthy chapter and so I will not make too many comments concerning the text as we read it. Now, the apostle is before the council in Jerusalem, and he is going to make a brief appearance and then, ultimately, we will close the chapter with the apostle in Caesarea for further defense.

“And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, ‘Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day. And the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him to smite him on the mouth.’ Then said Paul unto him, ‘God shall smite thee, thou whited wall: for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law?’ And they that stood by said, ‘Revilest thou God’s high priest?’ Then said Paul, ‘I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people.’ But when Paul perceived that the one part were Sadducees, and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, ‘Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question.’ And when he had so said there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees: and the multitude was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both. And there arose a great cry and

the scribes that were of the Pharisees' part arose, and strove, saying, 'We find no evil in this man: but if a spirit or an angel hath spoken to him, let us not fight against God.' And when there arose a great dissension, the chief captain, fearing lest Paul should have been pulled in pieces of them, commanded the soldiers to go down, and to take him by force from among them, and to bring him into the castle. And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, 'Be of good cheer, Paul: For as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.'

And when it was day, certain of the Jews banded together, and bound themselves under a curse saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. And they were more than forty, which had made this conspiracy. And they came to the chief priests and elders, and said, 'We have bound ourselves under a great curse, that we will eat nothing until we have slain Paul. Now therefore ye with the council signify to the chief captain that he bring him down unto you tomorrow, as though ye would enquire something more perfectly concerning him: and we, or ever he come near, [that's an old way of saying "before he comes near"] are ready to kill him.' And when Paul's sister's son heard of their lying in wait, he went and entered into the castle, and told Paul. Then Paul called one of the centurions unto him, and said, 'Bring this young man unto the chief captain: for he hath a certain thing to tell him.' So he took him, and brought him to the chief captain, and said, 'Paul the prisoner called me unto him, and prayed me to bring this young man unto thee, who hath something to say unto thee.' Then the chief captain took him by the hand, and went with him aside privately, and asked him, 'What is that thou hast to tell me?' And he said, 'The Jews have agreed to desire thee that thou wouldest bring down Paul tomorrow into the council, as though they would enquire somewhat of him more perfectly. But do not thou yield unto them: For there lie in wait for him of them more than forty men, which have bound themselves with an oath, that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him: and now are they ready, looking for a promise from thee.' So the chief captain then let the young man depart, and charged him, 'See thou tell no man that thou hast shewed these things to me.' And he called unto him two centurions, saying, 'Make ready two hundred soldiers to go to Caesarea, and horsemen threescore and ten, and spearmen two hundred, at the third

hour of the night; and provide them beasts, that they may set Paul on, and bring him safe unto Felix the governor.”

You might wonder why so much manpower was expended to protect Paul but, obviously, the reason was that Claudius Lysias, who was the chief captain, realized that if something happened to Paul, and he was a Roman, that he would be ultimately responsible. So knowing of the conspiracy, he then made absolutely certain that there would be no successful attempt made on Paul’s life.

“And he wrote a letter after this manner: Claudius Lysias unto the most excellent governor Felix sendeth greeting. This man was taken of the Jews, and should have been killed of them: then came I with an army, and rescued him, having understood that he was a Roman.”

Now, as you can see, Lysias has not set the events in proper order, but he set them in the order that will look most favorable for him. This is just one of the incidental things that Luke is really giving us the true history of these matters.

“And when I would have known the cause wherefore they accused him, I brought him forth into their council: Whom I perceived to be accused of questions of their law, but to have nothing laid to his charge worthy of death or of bonds. And when it was told me how that the Jews laid wait for the man, I sent straightway to thee, and gave commandment to his accusers also to say before thee what they had against him. Farewell. Then the soldiers, as it was commanded them, took Paul, and brought him by night to Antipatris. On the morrow, they left the horsemen to go with him, and returned to the castle [or, the barracks]: Who, when they came to Caesarea and delivered the epistle to the governor, presented Paul also before him. And when the governor had read the letter, he asked of what province he was. And when he understood that he was of Cilicia, ‘I will hear thee,’ said

he, ‘when thine accusers are also come.’ And he commanded him to be kept in Herod’s judgment hall.”

May God bless this reading of his Word. Let’s bow together in a moment of prayer.

[Prayer] Our heavenly Father, we approach Thee through the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and we give Thee thanks for the privilege that is ours, the privilege of approaching Thee and the assurance that we are heard by the Trinitarian God in Heaven. We thank Thee, Lord, for the way in which Thou hast revealed Thyself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; one God subsisting in three persons. We thank Thee for the marvelous provision made for us by a God who elects a Son who carries out the work of redemption, a Spirit who applies the work of Christ to the hearts of men and women. And we thank Thee, Lord, for the whole church of Jesus Christ and we pray Thy blessing upon all of that body today, wherever believers may be. And we ask, Lord, that this may be a day of edification and growth for them. We are grateful for the privilege of life and ministry and testimony in our day. And we pray, Lord, Thy blessing upon the saints who are gathered here, upon the members of this church, upon our friends who are here and upon our visitors. We especially, Lord, pray that this may be a time of spiritual growth and edification for all of us. We give Thee an especial thanks for the Lord Jesus Christ, who loved us and through his atoning work has loosed us from our sins. We thank Thee for the blood that was shed and for the risen life of the Savior, now, who lives to secure the benefits of all that he purchased by dying for us.

We pray Thy blessing upon our country and our president, and we especially, Lord, pray Thy blessing upon those whose names are listed in our Calendar of Concern, so many have great need of the ministry of the Triune God. And, Lord, we pray for each of those names, and for the families represented and the friends represented, and we ask that if it should be Thy will, Thou wilt minister in courage and build up and support and comfort and heal, if it should be Thy will. We commit this

service to Thee. We pray that the singing of the hymns and our time of fellowship may glorify him, who is our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ.

We pray, in His name. Amen.

[Message] We're turning to Acts chapter 23, in the continuation of the exposition of Luke's history of the early church or from Jerusalem to Rome, so far as the progress of the testimony is concerned. And our subject for today is, "Paul, the Council, and God." We, with Paul, as we read Acts chapter 23, observe again the truth of Romans 8:28, that "God works all things together for good, to those who love him, to those who are the called according to his purpose." And when the apostle made that magnificent statement over which we have made so much, he was speaking about a divine continuing providence that guards God's own people.

To put it in the words of the Old Testament, for Paul did not invent that truth, the Psalmist in Psalm 37, verse 12 and verse 13, states, "The wicked ploteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth. The Lord shall laugh at him, for He seeth that his day is coming."

The apostle has defended himself in the temple area and he made three points. They were very simple points. He said, "In training, in blood, in zeal, I was what you are." Then he made the second point, "Only divine intervention can account for the change that has taken place in my life." There is no other satisfactory explanation of the things that have happened.

I always think of that old story, familiar to many of you, about the man who was preaching on conversion and he was giving a very lengthy treatment of the subject, far too lengthy, and, finally, an old man who was walking with a cane, felt that he had had enough. And so he got up and started walking down the isle. And he was walking down the isle, he was hitting his cane on the ground and he was saying, "I'm on my way to hell. I'm on my way to hell. I'm on my way to hell." I imagine the preacher was transfixed at that. When he got down to the bottom, in front of the pulpit, he said, "Halt! About face! Forward march! I'm on my way to heaven. Bang! I'm on my way to heaven. Bang! I'm on my way to heaven. Folks, that's conversion. Let's go home." [Laughter]

So the apostle asked them to consider his life before hand, then to consider the change that had taken place in his life and as a result of that, they would surely come to an understanding of divine intervention.

The third point that he made was, perhaps, a bit startling but, nevertheless, no doubt true to the apostle’s experiences and the apostle’s make-up and the apostle’s background. And it was simply this, “I was sent unwillingly to the Gentiles. It was God speaking to me and as a result of that, I have a ministry to them, which I would never have anticipated in all of my days, whatever happened.”

Luke’s theme, as one reads the last chapters of the book of Acts, seems clearly to put in a sense Jerusalem on trial. Ultimately, the issue was not “Did Paul defile the temple” but “Is Judaism prepared to tolerate Christianity?” That really is the issue, as Luke sees it. And it seems to me that this is really the ultimate aim of these chapters, through the end of the book of Acts. It’s to put that question to the reader and to see what kind of an answer one may draw to the question.

Incidentally, that is still the question that faces us. Now, it faces, of course, Judaism. Is Judaism prepared to tolerate Christianity, as set forth in the Word of God. The answer, down through the centuries, is pretty plain.

But, now, let us not think that this is a Jewish/Gentile question, because that question could be just as well put to the Christian church today. Is the Christian church prepared to tolerate the Jesus Christ of the Scriptures? For a long time, the Christian church adhered to the Jesus Christ of the Scriptures but, today, it’s not easy to find churches that adhere to the Christ of the Scriptures. I’m speaking of the large organizations primarily.

Not long ago, in *Time* magazine, the religion section was devoted to an interesting question, which indicates that this question is still alive. The title of it was “What Sort of a Jew was Jesus?” and Rabbi Harvey Falk has written a very interesting book in which he has sought to bring Judaism and Christianity closer together. He has set forth the view that the Pharisees were divided into two groups. There were the those who were the follower of Shammai, and there were those who were the followers of Hillel. And the Shammaites were the more difficult and restrictive of the Pharisees. And

they had such views as it was really impossible for a Gentile to be saved, unless he became a Jew. The Hillelites, on the other hand, were more tolerant and more moderate. And they believed that it was possible for a Gentile to be saved, providing he adhered to principles of moral law and to the Noahide general principles of morality. And, Orthodox Rabbi Falk has come to the conclusion and written a book, in support of the idea that Jesus belonged to that type of think represented by Hillel rather than Shammai. And that both Judaism and Christianity, in a sense, have misunderstood the issues of those who lived in the first century were facing and having one with another.

It’s an interesting theory, of course, but most of the New Testament scholars, whether Jewish or Gentile, would probably not be very responsive to it because Rabbi Falk ultimately avoids the question of the bodily resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. But Luke would have us realize that the ultimate question is, the Messiahship of the Lord Jesus Christ and his bodily resurrection from the grave.

Now, the apostle is going to appear before the council. The church, you’ve probably noticed, has begun to fade from the scene, in Luke’s account in the book of Acts. In fact, the last reference to the Church, and even then the term is not used, is in chapter 21 in verse 18. The last mention of the term church in the book of Acts is in chapter 20 in verse 28. And there are 28 chapters in the book of Acts and so, you can see, that the last fourth of the book contains no reference to the church, specifically.

The question then is, what will Israel—Jehovah is theirs, the Messiah is theirs, the Word of God has been given through them to us—what will they do with Jesus Christ’s chosen vessel, the one we know as the Apostle Paul? That’s the crucial question that Luke will deal with over these last chapters. To put it another way, does Pharisaic Judaism find its fulfillment in Christianity? In other words, can we really say that the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ is the true fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament? Christians in ancient times, at least, and in the days of the Reformation and in the hearts of the orthodox, even to this day, have affirmed that it is true that the things that the apostles preached find their fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth. That’s really the

question. The council has already passed on Christ and rejected Him. The council has passed on Stephen and, as a result, rejected him. One other chance will now come and, in that sense, Israel's supreme hour has been reached, as Christ's chosen vessel the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, is to stand before them.

Now, we read as they gathered together, the apostle “earnestly beholding the council, said, ‘Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.’” Ananias was the high priest at the time. He was the son of Nedebaeus. He held office from the years forty-seven to the year fifty-nine. He was deposed by Felix, later, and in 66 A.D. he met his death by assassination. He was a notorious character. He was notorious as a glutton, a thief, a rapacious robber, and a quisling in the Roman service, according to New Testament scholarship. Paul's answer to this man, I think, must be understood in the light of some of this. When Paul said this, Ananias thought that he had lied. What he did was to turn to one of the attendants and say, “Smite him across the mouth.” Now, that was regarded in Judaism as a very severe personal affront. The Lord Jesus referred to that when, for example, he said, “If someone smite you on the cheek, turn the other cheek.”

Now, the apostle did not do that in this instance; and there is some reason for thinking that it's possible that the apostle lost his temper in this instance. On the other hand, this was a time of great tension; and we who have had any experience at all with legislatures and congresses know that it is possible for great tensions to arise in legislative gatherings. It's not infrequent, I should say, for us to read in our newspapers about Senators or State Representatives throwing a few punches at one other in Austin. And the same thing transpires in our legislative assembly in Washington, DC from time to time. So here is a time of tension and when Paul says he's “lived in all good conscience before God until this day” the high priest says, “Smite him across the mouth.” And Paul replies, “God shall smite thee, thou whited wall: For sittest thou to judge me after the law and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law?” It was specifically stated in passages like Leviticus chapter 19, that an individual who stood before a court of law was to be judged justly on the issues. And the high priest has violated that.

Now, when Paul says, “God shall smite thee,” did he really lose his temper? Christians tend, at times, to say immediately, no, without thinking. Now, let us remember that it is possible for an apostle to lose his temper. And the fact that the Apostle Paul was a great man is not affected by the fact that he lost his temper one time. So when we look at an incident like this, we should avoid immediately saying, no, it couldn’t happen to an apostle. An apostle is simply a man, a special man, specially chosen for a particular task. But apostles were not sinless. Evidence the Apostle Peter; he certainly was not a sinless man. So we shouldn’t say immediately, no, Paul could not lose his temper. As a matter of fact, I don’t think that he did in this instance. I think that, rather, what he was saying was “this is what God’s decision is upon you, Ananias.” And, in calling him a “whited wall,” he was laying stress upon the hypocrisy that characterized this man. A whitewashed wall that was an ancient figure used often in ancient life, a wall that is tottering, about to fall down, what do you do with it if you don’t have the time or the money to fix it? Well, you whitewash it. And so it looks good, even though it’s about to collapse. So it became a beautiful figure for hypocrisy. And so Paul, when he replies, “God shall smite thee, thou whited wall,” is talking about the hypocrisy of this man, Ananias.

Now, when he said this, then those that stood by thought, here is occasion to criticize Paul. So they say, “Revilest thou God’s high priest?” because the Old Testament also stated that you were not supposed to do that. And the apostle knew that Scripture for he said, “I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people.”

Now, there are different ways in which a person might understand this. After all, there is some indication that the apostle had eye difficulties. We know that from the Epistle to the Galatians and several other incidental references. It’s possible that he really did not see clearly who was standing before him. We don’t know how big the gathering was or anything like that. So it’s possible the apostle did not see that he was the high priest. And, furthermore, we don’t have any indication of how Ananias was dressed upon this occasion. He, perhaps, did not have the robes of the high priest that would have marked him out for special attention. So it’s possible that the apostle did not really understand that he was the high priest, this person who had said the things that he had said. So when

he says, “I knew not, brethren, that he was the high priest,” it may be an honest confession, now, of not knowing he was the high priest.

On the other hand, many New Testament scholars feel that it was an ironic accusation of him that he knew he was the high priest, but he was so different from what a high priest should be in Israel, who should be a model of fairness and equity. Moses sets that out very plainly in the Law that he speaks in an ironic way, and, in effect, says, “I didn’t know, brethren, that such a person as this man was the high priest. How could a person like this, so wicked, so notoriously evil be a high priest in Israel?” And many of the finest New Testament scholars feel that that is probably the way in which we should understand that. But let’s say, immediately, that we cannot be absolutely certain. Paul does not explain everything that transpires in the gathering as he faces Ananias before him.

We go on to read, “But when Paul perceived that the one part were Sadducees, and the other Pharisees,” perhaps, I’m only saying perhaps because I don’t know about this, perhaps having realized that he’s made a comment, “God shall smite thee whited wall,” which he knows has lost him the case before them, looking out and perceiving the Pharisees and the Sadducees there and knowing there was a severe division concerning them and a division that touched the very point at issue, he thought, “Well, I’ll practice divide and conquer, and see what happens.” So he cries out, “I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee: Of the hope and resurrection from the dead I am called in question.” Very true. It was the hope of the resurrection as elucidated in the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus that was really the issue.

Now, the Pharisees believed in the minutia of the oral law, one point against them. The Sadducees accepted only the written law, a point for them. The Pharisees believed in the doctrine of predestination. The Sadducees believed in the doctrine of free will; a big point in the favor of the Pharisees and against the Sadducees. The Pharisees believed in angels, spirits, and the resurrection; the Sadducees did not. The Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the dead; the Sadducees did not. So here is the point that divides these two and it’s the point at issue. Did the Lord Jesus Christ, as the Messiah of Israel, rise from the dead?

So when Paul called out, “I’m a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question.” Well, it’s obvious that when he said something like this that there’s going to arise division between them. You may remember that when the Lord Jesus was here in his encounters with the Jewish leaders in the last days of his last week upon the earth; some of these same types of discussions arose. One of the things that the Sadducees had taunted the Pharisees with was a little example, no doubt thought up by original thinking Sadducees, in order to embarrass the Pharisee concerning the resurrection. So certain of the Pharisees came to the Lord Jesus and they told him their little example. “Master, Moses wrote unto us, if a man’s brother die, having a wife and he die without children, that his brother should take his wife and raise up seed unto his brother.” That’s the Old Testament law. “There were therefore seven brethren. And the first took a wife and died without children. And the second took her to wife and he died childless. And the third, and so on, through the seventh. Therefore,” and here’s the question. It must have embarrassed many a Pharisee. “Therefore, in the resurrection,” which the Pharisees believe, “Whose wife of them is she? For seven had her to wife.”

Now, the Lord Jesus is faced with this question and so, he replies this way. “The children of the world marry, and are given in marriage; but they, which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage. Neither can they die anymore for they are equal unto the angels and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection. Now that the dead are raised, even Moses showed at the bush, when he calleth the Lord the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the covenant keeping God who fulfills His promises. For He is not a God of the dead, but of the living; for all live unto Him.”

Now, who do you think would approve this statement? Well, the Pharisees. Now, the scribes normally were Pharisees; the priests were normally Sadducees. So we read, Luke chapter 20, verse 39, “Then certain of the scribes answering said, ‘Master, thou hast well said.’” And they thought, “We’ve finally got the answer for those Sadducees when they pose that example for us that has embarrassed us for so long.”

Well, you can see the division in the assembly over the question of the resurrection, and Paul’s bringing up the issue on the basis of the fact that he was a Pharisee. It was not really a clever rouse unworthy of an apostle; but, rather, he pointed to the precise point at issue. The result is there arose a great cry, and the scribes that were of the Pharisees arose and strove, saying, “We don’t find anything wrong in this man. After all, a man so sound on the central truths couldn’t really be bad at heart.”

So we read then, finally, after the dissention, the chief captain, fearing that Paul would have been pulled in pieces, commanded the soldiers to go down, take him by force from among them, and they brought him back into the barracks.

Now, the interesting statement is made in verse 11, “And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said,” giving him a nice wonderful three-point sermon, “Be of good cheer, Paul: For as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou also testify of me at Rome.” The worst fears of Paul seem to be coming to pass. He had been insulted. He was frustrated. He evidently had been, to some extent, abandoned by the church. We read that when Peter was in prison, the church had prayer meetings to pray for him. We don’t read of anything like that when Paul was taken prisoner. I’m not saying that did not happen. We don’t really know that. But we don’t have any record in the book of Acts for it. And you can understand how the apostle might have been very discouraged, because he was told that he was to minister the Word of God to the Gentiles. And he hasn’t really finished his task. He wants to go to Spain. There are lots of other things that he has upon his mind, expressed in his epistles. And it looks as if, maybe, he’s come to the end of his ministry. And so the Lord stands by him and says first, “Be of good cheer, Paul. Remember, Jewry and Rome, both Jews and Gentiles, all stand under the Lord God. There is no unfinished life for a faithful man.”

John Wesley, the great Arminian, once said, “I am immortal till my life is done.” That was a true scriptural expression. For the individual who is in the service of the Lord God, you can be sure that that individual will finish his task. It may be finished at year 29 or 30; as Robert Murray

McCheyne of Dundee in Scotland; or, it may be finished at 80, as in the case of many others. But it will not be an unfinished life. The God of the eternities is the God of this very hour.

When I think of something like this, my mind always goes back, it seems, to Jacob; and I think about the experiences of Jacob. And, particularly, the thing that came from his mouth when he was really suffering. He said, “All of these things are against me.” Now, mind you, there was a famine in the land. Jacob had great promises; but there was a famine in the land. Furthermore, Simeon was now a prisoner in Egypt, so far as he knew. He had lost Joseph; he thought Joseph was dead, Joseph the son of Rachel, his beloved wife, the other son Benjamin. Simeon is now in Egypt and the prime minister there is holding him, and the prime minister also now is insisting that Benjamin come. And so, Benjamin, the young son of Rachel his beloved, now both appear to be gone. Simeon is gone, Joseph is dead. I can see how the old patriarch says, as the incidents of all of these things come together, it’s not so much one thing, it’s when everything seems to come together and it’s all bad that we are often troubled. And Jacob replies, “All these things are against me.”

But, listen, at the very moment that Jacob uttered, “All these things are against me,” actually, everything was working for him; for Joseph, the son that he had thought dead, was not only alive, he was the prime minister of Egypt, the greatest kingdom of the earth. Egypt was the place that had the grain that could solve their problems of food. In addition, Joseph the prime minister was the beloved son of Rachel, and Joseph the prime minister was longing not only over Simeon and his brethren, you know, he loved those brethren so much that when finally, as he was getting ready to reveal himself to them, he couldn’t stand it any longer. He had to go into the next room and weep so openly that he could be heard over the palace where he lived. But, in addition, in a heart longing for Jacob and a heart longing for Benjamin, this is the person who is the prime minister of Egypt. The very time when Jacob says, “All these things are against me,” is the very time when all these things were working for his ultimate blessing and good. It’s no wonder that later on he speaks about, “The God who fed me all the days of my life.”

You know, if we understand the providence of God, and understand how God controls the affairs of human lives, and our lives, in particular, it's amazing, really, that we can be disturbed about things. Paul was, no doubt, disturbed. And I can just imagine that when they get together in heaven, they have a few words about this and they usually wind up by saying, “You know, we certainly were stupid children in those days, not knowing fully the marvelous providence of a supreme and sovereign God.”

Now, the Lord also says, “Paul: as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem,” that would seem to me to be indication that God approved of the apostle's testimony that he had given in Jerusalem. And then, finally, the third point comes: “So must thou bear witness also at Rome.” In other words, “Don't worry Paul. I'm going to stand by you. I'll be with you. You will accomplish the task that I have given to you.”

Characteristic of the servant of God is that term witness. Notice it. Every Christian is a witness; every Christian should be a vital witness. After all, in the final analysis, who can testify but Christians? Who knows the greatness of the love of God and the gift of Christ for sinners? Who knows that but those who have experienced the deliverance that comes from the forgiveness of sins? Who knows the cleansing that the blood of Jesus Christ gives but Christians? And who has felt the stirring and the impulse of the life of Christ within us, in the Spirit, except the Christians?

We are the ones who are able to witness. And we are the ones called upon by the Lord God to witness in his strength and to realize that as we witness, we give a message that God stands behind and controls affairs in such a way that it is effective. And our work is never unfinished. We may not find a great deal of reception. Our Lord did not find reception. He was crucified. Stephen did not find reception. He was stoned to death. Paul did not ultimately find reception, if we can believe tradition. He, too, was put to death. And the other apostles shared similar fates. And down through the years, the faithful of God have often shared that kind of reception. But those lives were not unfinished; they were finished and they were fruitful; and God had blessed them.

It's easy to be like Andrew. It's amazing that we so often neglect our opportunities, looking at it from the human standpoint. When Andrew came to the understanding that Christ was the Messiah, he went to his brother Peter. “We've found the Messiah!” And John says, he brought him to Jesus. The greatest thing that one person can ever do for another to bring him to the Lord and that's what he did. May God help us to do that. May God help us to pray like the Psalmist, “O Lord, open Thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Thy praise.”

The remainder of the chapter is devoted to the deliverance of Paul from the plot that was made against him by the forty Jewish men. Incidentally, every Roman magistrate, before whom Paul appeared, saw him innocent. Gallio, Lysias, Felix, Festus, sometimes God uses strange instruments. You'd never think, would you, that the apostle would be delivered from the plotters, by a youth, a little boy. Evidently he was little because Lysias took him by the hand and drew him aside to talk to him. Typical kind of a response that an older person would take to a very young man; took the little boy's hand and said, “Son, what do you have to tell me?” And he had been standing at a very propitious place somewhere, we don't know where. And he was Paul's nephew. We don't read anything more about him. We don't read anything about Paul's sister in Jerusalem. But here is a little boy, and he overhears that there are forty fellows who have taken a vow upon them to kill Paul. He says, “That's my uncle.” And so he went to the centurions, who immediately took him to the chief captain, and he unfolded the story and the apostle is delivered by a chance hearing of the plot by a youth.

You see, God does control all the experiences of life. Paul was not saying anything contrary to his own experience, when he said, “He works all things according to the counsel of His will.” That's the truth of the Word of God. That's not Calvinism as over against Arminianism. It's God's Word. “He works all things according to the counsel of His own will.” If you disagree with it; don't say that's Calvinism. Give me some better exegesis of the Word of God. “He works all things according to the counsel of His own will.” It's dishonest to hide behind labels and not face what

Scripture says. That’s all we ask of people; that’s all they should ask of me. What does the text of Scripture say?

Now, the remainder of the chapter is devoted to the journey to Caesarea, the encouragement that Paul received was immediate because when the word came to him from his own nephew, and he managed to escape to Caesarea, he no doubt thanked the Lord for the encouragement that had come to him.

Now, as I close, let me just suggest a couple of things to you. So far as unbelievers are concerned, you can see that Jerusalem, as constituted in Paul’s day, is weighed in the balances and found wanting. The theocracy has denied Christ and in denying his Messiahship, they have denied themselves. They’ve said, “We have no king but Caesar,” which was contrary to their own word. And in denying him, they have denied themselves; and as a result, they perished as a nation in seventy A.D. when the Romans took the city.

There is no hope for anyone, except in the conversion that comes through faith in the Lord Jesus, who has offered the atoning sacrifice for sinners. If you, by God’s grace, have come to see yourself as a sinner, under divine guilt and condemnation, the only release for you is found in the forgiveness of sins that has been won and purchased by the blood that was shed on Calvary’s cross. We invite you, as an ambassador of the Lord Jesus Christ, to come to him and receive as a free gift the salvation that he offers to all sinners. For believers, what a magnificent illustration of the providential presence of the overruling God; what one Bible [teacher] called, “The supernaturalism of the natural.” I think of those many stories in the Word of God in which God’s providence is evident. There was the case of Esther and the deliverance of Esther and Israel and Mordecai, by the fact that King Ahasuerus one night couldn’t sleep. One of my Bible teaching friends calls it “royal insomnia.” And so what would you think a person would want to do in order to fall asleep late at night? You can’t go to church. [Laughter] So what do you do? Well, you call for the political records of the kingdom. Can you imagine reading the annals of the Congress of the United States? That would put anybody to sleep.

So Ahasuerus called for them and he found in there that Mordecai had done a very noble thing in the past. And he said, “What’s been done for Mordecai?” You know the story. Haman, a wicked man, who wanted to do away with Mordecai and all of the Jews, had already made his plans. As a matter of fact, Haman as affairs developed recognized that what was going to happen, he thought, was that he was going to succeed. And so he had even ordered the gallows be constructed, upon which to put Mordecai, and made arrangements for the extermination of the Jews. Well, because of royal insomnia, because of the fact that Ahasuerus couldn’t sleep one night, just that incidental thing, like Moses’ tears, which saved him as a little baby. The result was Mordecai was delivered, honored and Haman died on the gallows he had constructed for Mordecai. How suitable! How fitting! No wonder Jewish people celebrate that great event.

I had a friend, he is now with the Lord. His name was Tom Olsen, a well-known preacher of the Word. He was particularly known, about 30 years ago, for the fact that he was a memorizer of the Word of God. Mr. Olsen, it was said had memorized the entire New Testament. He was a Bible teacher; he was associated with a number of Christian men and the Laterno Company particularly. He was related to some people who were related to that particular organization. He spoke in Dallas Seminary Chapel about thirty-five years ago, when I was there. And in the course of it, and the course of his message, he stopped and he said, “I often wondered what I would do if I were held up by someone.” He said, “Finally, I was held up. I was held up by four men. One man put a gun up against my heart. Another fellow shined a flashlight in my eyes. And third man went through my pockets. And a fourth man stood watch.” And he said, “The fellow going through my pockets came across a little book and he pulled it out and he said, ‘What’s this?’ And I said, ‘The Bible.’ And he dropped it and all four of the men fled.” And he said, “a text of Scripture came, immediately, to my mind; The wicked flee-eth when no man pursueth. But the righteous are bold as a lion.” So the providence of God delivers the saints of God.

Now, I don’t often do this, and I know it’s kind of late, but we started a few minutes late this morning. I’m going to read a few words from a well-known interpreter of the Word of God. And

they have to do with the providence of God. And I think you'll understand what this is, and the blessing of it, if you'll just listen carefully to what this marvelous interpreter of the Word of God has said. He entitles the paragraph, “Without Certainty About God's Providence Life Would Be Unbearable.” Hence appears the immeasurable felicity of the godly mind. Innumerable are the evils that beset human life; innumerable, too, the deaths that threaten it. We need not go beyond ourselves: since our body is the receptacle of a thousand diseases in fact holds within itself and fosters the causes of diseases a man cannot go about unburdened by many forms of his own destruction, and without drawing out a life enveloped, as it were, with death. For what else would you call it, when he neither freezes nor sweats (he shouldn't have said that; a good interpreter would have said perspires) without danger? Now, wherever you turn, all things around you not only are hardly to be trusted but almost openly menace, and seem to threaten immediate death. Embark upon a ship, you are one-step away from death. (We would say, embark upon a plane and you are one-step away from death.) Mount a horse, if one foot slips, your life is imperiled.”

Now, that may be something ancient, but that's very modern. I was reading this week a chapter from a book by a Baltimore pastor and he said a good friend of his who was pastor of a church in Baltimore was mugged a few a short time back one summer night as he was walking his dog. He said his assailant took his watch and his wallet; and then, in order to let him know who was running the show, threw him on the ground and kicked him a few times in the ribs. He said he met his pastor-friend a few days later, and he was bruised and sore and still feeling the emotional effects of the violence. And he said he was so happy he was going to go to Wyoming to spend a month in the Grand Tetons, and get away from that life in Baltimore. Six weeks later, he said, I met my pastor friend again and he had his arm in a sling. And I said, “What happened?” He said, “Well, I was riding in the high country, on a horse, on a trail in the Wyoming Rockies, you don't think anything can happen to you in that beautiful country. He said, suddenly my horse reared back, spooked by a shadow, threw me on the ground and I broke my arm. And he commented, it's safer to walk on the

streets of Baltimore at night than in the mountains of Wyoming in daylight. That wilderness has twenty different ways to kill you, he said.” [Laughter]

Now, this individual speaks about that and he says, “Mount a horse, if one foot slips, your life is imperiled. Go through the city streets, you are subject to as many dangers as there are tiles on the roofs. If there is a weapon in your hand or a friend’s, harm awaits. All the fierce animals you see are armed for your destruction. But if you try to shut yourself up in a walled garden, seemingly delightful, there a serpent sometimes lies hidden. Your house, continually in danger of fire, threatens in the daytime to impoverish you, at night even to collapse upon you. He talks about his field, he goes on to talk. I’ll skip some of it. He says, “It really, in the light of divine providence, a man’s soul is found when he knows that his heavenly Father so holds all things in His power, so rules by His authority and will, so governs by His wisdom that nothing can befall except He determine it.” He goes on to cite a number of the promises of God. He will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. Under his wings will he protect you, and in his pinions you will have assurance; his truth will be your shield. You will not fear the terror of night, nor the flying arrow by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at midday. And, finally, in another paragraph, summing it up, sort of, he says, “Whence, I pray you, do they have this never-failing assurance but from knowing that, when the world appears to be aimlessly tumbled about, the Lord is everywhere at work.”

In short, not to tarry any longer over this, and for you as well as for me as a reader of John Calvin, if you pay any attention, you will easily perceive, Mr. Calvin says, “that ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries. The highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it.” “Behold, He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.” And those of us by the grace of God who have come to know him, have the greatest assurances and the knowledge that he always stands by.

May God help you to know that in your experience. And when the experiences come that trouble you and disturb you and upset you and throw you; to know that he stands by. What an encouragement that is!

Shall we stand for the benediction?

I apologize for keeping you ten minutes over. Ordinarily, I only keep you five. [Laughter]
Let's close with the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for the privilege that we have to read and ponder the Word of God. Deliver us, Lord, from the lack of trust and faith that so often characterizes us. Help us to remember that Thou dost stand by us constantly.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.