

THE LEAGUE OF FAR-FROM-EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMEN

A STUDY OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

WEEK 9 – Fellow Apostles, False Accusations, and Furious Adversaries – Acts 17-20

- **Paul's Conversion**

"Then he told me, 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and hear him speak. For you are to be his witness, telling everyone what you have seen and heard...' – Acts 22:14-15 NLT

- God chose Paul to be an ambassador for Him
- God had been sovereignly guiding Paul's life
- Paul's upbringing, conversion, and ministry were all a part of God's plan
- In Acts 22, Paul tells the story of his own conversion
 - He tells it in his own words
 - It is an almost word-for-word account of Acts 9

"As I was on the road, approaching Damascus about noon, a very bright light from heaven suddenly shone down around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' – Acts 22:6-7 NLT

- A bright light from heaven shone on Paul and those traveling with him
 - This was a divine encounter
- The voice speaking to Paul says that he is the one who Paul was persecuting
 - Paul was persecuting Christians, and therefore Jesus
- We know from this question that it is Jesus who Paul encounters on the road to Damascus
- Paul's response
 - "Who are you, lord?" – Acts 22:8 NLT*
 - When we read this, we know that Jesus, the voice speaking to Paul, is Lord.
 - But, Paul doesn't know it is Jesus. Even if Paul knew it was Jesus, he didn't believe that Jesus was Lord.
 - So, why did Paul refer to this voice as "lord"?
 - Paul was a Pharisee
 - He was a religious man
 - He knew that this encounter on the road to Damascus was divine
 - He just didn't know that this "lord" of whom he was speaking to was Jesus
- The Lord's response
 - "I am Jesus of Nazarene, the one you are persecuting." – Acts 22:8 NLT*
 - Let's put ourselves in Paul's shoes here
 - What was going through Paul's mind at this point?
 - He knew this was a divine encounter

- He knew that this voice speaking to him was a lot more powerful than he was
- He is told that this divine, powerful voice is the voice of the risen Lord Jesus whom he is persecuting by denying Him as the Messiah and killing Christians
- What would be going through your mind if you were Paul?
- Paul's second response
"What should I do, Lord?" – Acts 22:10 NLT
 - Why did Paul ask Jesus this question?
 - Was he submitting to Jesus in obedience?
 - Yes and No
 - Paul submitted to Jesus because he now knew that Jesus is the Lord
 - But, Paul had to have submitted out of fear and not out of obedience
 - Paul must have been scared for his life
- Jesus' second response
"Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told everything you are to do." – Acts 22:10 NLT
 - Jesus told him to go into Damascus
 - Paul was headed there to persecute Christians
 - Now, Paul had to have been thinking that a punishment awaited him in Damascus
- The words of Ananias
"For you are to be his witness, telling everyone what you have seen and heard." – Acts 22:15 NLT
 - This verse foreshadows the rest of his life
 - Paul's calling in life is told to him right after his conversion
 - As we have learned, we too have this same calling and it begins at our conversion
- **Leave Jerusalem!**
 - Paul is told by the Jesus to leave Jerusalem
¹⁷ *"After I returned to Jerusalem, I was praying in the Temple and fell into a trance. ¹⁸ I saw a vision of Jesus saying to me, 'Hurry! Leave Jerusalem, for the people here won't accept your testimony about me.'"* – Acts 23:17-18 NLT
 - Why did God ask Paul to leave Jerusalem?
 - It wasn't yet time for Paul to witness in Jerusalem
 - There would come a day when God led Paul back to Jerusalem
- **Go to Jerusalem!**
 - ²² *"And now I am bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. I don't know what awaits me,*
²³ *except that the Holy Spirit tells me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead."* – Acts 20:22-23 NLT
 - In Acts 21, Paul began his trip back to Jerusalem
 - His route took him to many places before stopping in Tyre
 - He stayed with fellow believers in Tyre
 - Opposition from his own
"These believers prophesied through the Holy Spirit that Paul should not go on to Jerusalem." – Acts 21:4 NLT
 - Is the Holy Spirit contradicting himself? No

- He was leading Paul to Jerusalem and Paul knew that he suffered wherever he went
 - Through the Holy Spirit, these fellow believers in Tyre knew Paul was going to suffer in Jerusalem, so they told him not to go
 - Their actions and words came from a human perspective and a desire to not see Paul suffer
 - Paul left Tyre and continued his journey to Jerusalem
- Warnings and pleadings
 - Paul arrived in Caesarea and met a man named Agabus
 - He prophesied to Paul

“The Holy Spirit declares, ‘So shall the owner of this belt be bound by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and turned over to the Gentiles.’” – Acts 21:11 NLT

- Agabus foretold what would happen to Paul
 - Paul already knew that he would suffer
 - This prophecy did not surprise Paul
 - The other believers reacted to Agabus’ words
 - They begged Paul not to go to Jerusalem
 - What’s going on?
 - They weren’t telling Paul anything he didn’t already know
 - They were confirming what Jesus had said
 - But they were unknowingly contradicting God’s will
 - Be careful not to let men’s counsel trump God’s
 - Weigh all advice against the Scriptures
 - Following God’s will won’t always make sense
- Paul was in good company
 - The resistance he faced was similar to that encountered by Jesus

From then on Jesus began to tell his disciples plainly that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem, and that he would suffer many terrible things at the hands of the elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of religious law. He would be killed, but on the third day he would be raised from the dead.

*But Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such things. **“Heaven forbid, Lord,”** he said. **“This will never happen to you!”***

*Jesus turned to Peter and said, “Get away from me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me. **You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God’s.**” – Matthew 16:21-23 NLT*

- The believers were speaking out against the will of God by trying to persuade Paul not to go to Jerusalem
- For the sake of...

*“Why all this weeping? You are breaking my heart! I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but even to die **for the sake of the Lord Jesus.**” – Acts 21:13 NLT*

 - Paul was willing to die, and not for just anything
 - He was willing to die for Jesus
 - What are you willing to die for?
 - Where does your meaning in life come from?
 - Where does your purpose in life come from?

“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” – Philippians 1:21 ESV

- Thy will be done...
 - Seeing Paul's determination, his friends changed their tune

"The Lord's will be done." – Acts 21:14 NLT

- Their discouragements turned to encouragement

- **Paul Arrives in Jerusalem**

- A warm welcome
 - Paul was greeted warmly when he arrived
 - He met with James and all of Jerusalem's church elders
 - He related all of God's accomplishments among the Gentiles
 - Paul did not take credit for his missionary work because He knew that everything that happened was of God
- A word of warning
 - James gave an account of God's accomplishments among the Jews in Jerusalem
 - But he also mentioned that there was a potential problem brewing
 - Paul had been accused of some serious crimes
 - He had supposedly been teaching Jews to:
 - Turn their backs on the Law of Moses
 - Not circumcise their children
 - Ignore other Jewish customs
- These were lies, but it didn't seem to matter
- A piece of advice
 - *"Here's **what we want** you to do."* – Acts 21:23 NLT
 - James developed a plan to reverse their negative perception of Paul
 - James is trying to prevent Paul's suffering
 - This was his plan, not God's
 - His desire was going to run into God's divine decree
 - James' plan did not work
 - He meant well, but it didn't turn out well
 - A mob was roused against Paul
 - He was grabbed
 - He was dragged out of the Temple
 - They tried to kill him
 - He was beaten
 - He was arrested
 - They screamed, "Kill him, kill him!"
 - James' plan only made Paul's suffering worse
 - The prophecy of Paul suffering in Jerusalem was coming to fruition
 - Paul's address to the crowd
 - Paul shared his testimony with the crowd
 - They listened until he repeated what the Jesus told him:

"But the Lord said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles!'" – Acts 22:21 NLT

- They immediately demanded Paul's death

"Away with such a fellow! He isn't fit to live!" – Acts 22:22 NLT

- Paul addresses the Sanhedrin
 - Again, things didn't go well
 - Paul had to be removed when a riot broke out amongst the Jews on the council
 - Paul ended up in prison
- A word of encouragement
 - The Lord appeared to Paul that night and spoke to him.

“Be encouraged, Paul. Just as you have been a witness to me here in Jerusalem, you must preach the Good News in Rome as well.” – Acts 23:11 NLT

- Are you kidding me?
- What is remotely encouraging about any of this?
 - Nothing
 - **BUT**, God was not done yet
 - God had a plan that Paul could not see
 - Paul was to be encouraged by God's sovereignty
 - **Don't judge the future will of God by present circumstances**

“The Lord is for me, so I will have no fear. What can mere people do to me? Yes, the Lord is for me; he will help me. I will look in triumph at those who hate me.” – Psalm 118:6-7 NLT

- Paul's trip to Rome begins
 - A devious plot

¹² *The next morning a group of Jews got together and **bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul.*** ¹³ *There were more than forty of them in the conspiracy.* ¹⁴ *They went to the leading priests and elders and told them, “We have bound ourselves with an oath to eat nothing until we have killed Paul.* ¹⁵ *So you and the high council should ask the commander to bring Paul back to the council again. Pretend you want to examine his case more fully. We will kill him on the way.”* – Acts 23:12-15 NLT

- A divine plan

¹⁶ *But **Paul's nephew**—his sister's son—**heard of their plan** and went to the fortress and told Paul.* ¹⁷ *Paul called for one of the Roman officers and said, “Take this young man to the commander. He has something important to tell him.”* – Acts 23:16-17 NLT

- What the Jews intended for evil resulted in good
- God used their plot to fast-track Paul's departure
- **His will can't be avoided or altered**
- Paul made it to Governor Felix safely
- Felix ordered Paul to be kept in prison until his accusers arrived
 - Paul was in the middle of God's will
 - But, it still required determination and faith
- **Paul's Determination and Faith**
 - Paul was an active participant in God's will
 - He was determined to glorify Christ at all costs
 - He trusted God with his life, but was willing to lose his life if necessary

- He was committed to God's plan
- And, he lived in obedience to Christ's promise

*"Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: **I am with you always, even to the end of the age.**" – Matthew 28:19-20 NLT*



HOMEWORK

WEEK 10: TO CAESAR YOU SHALL GO! – Acts 24-26:3

Begin the week by reading through Acts 24-26:3 and take note of any verses, words or phrases that jump out at you. Consider what events or circumstances are significant in these chapters. Use the space below to record your thoughts:

Read Luke 21:12-15. What does Jesus predict would happen to the disciples? _____

Now read Acts 23:23-35. What does Luke describe happening in these verses that fulfills what Jesus had said? _____

Take a look at Acts 24:1-10. What are the charges that the religious leaders level against Paul?

Look at verses 10-21. What was Paul's response to these accusations? _____

Read Acts 22:25-29. What do we learn about Paul from these verses? _____

Read Acts 16:37. What happened? _____

Why do you think we should see Paul's Roman citizenship as part of God's sovereign plan for his life? How would his citizenship impact his ministry and the spread of the gospel? _____

Look at Acts 26:30-32. Paul has just finished giving his defense before King Agrippa. But look closely at what the king says to Festus, the governor. How do these words reflect God's sovereign will and plan for the life of Paul? _____

Read Proverbs 19:21. Why should this verse provide us with comfort in the face of uncertainty? _____

Take some time to read the attached article by Matt Slick called, "The Sovereignty of God."

God's Sovereignty.

By Matt Slick

Sovereignty in relation to God means that God has the absolute right to do with His creation as He desires. Some verses that support this are as follows: Psalm 115:3, "But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases." Isaiah 46:10, "Declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, my purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure;" Dan.4:35, "And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, What hast Thou done?"

As you can see, God declares that He does what He wants in heaven and on earth. But, in light of this declaration, some of us might ask, "If God is sovereign and can do what He wants in the world, then why doesn't He get rid of sin? Why doesn't He heal all sickness? Why doesn't God save more people, or all people? Why does He allow terrorists to strike? Why do the wicked prosper? etc." We can ask more personal questions such as, "Why did my baby die? Why is it that when I pray for someone to be well, they stay sick or seem to heal naturally later? Why is it my friend (or me) lost my job and am having so much trouble finding work? Why am I still suffering from _____ when I ask the Lord to deliver me from it?" The questions can go on and on.

As Christians, we have to face the fact that these questions don't have easy answers. We are told that in spite of what we see, God is in control, that the answers are sometimes beyond us, that we need to trust God, that these things are the result of sin in the world and that God is letting it have its course, etc. Though these answers are all true, they do not always comfort because our pain sometimes over-rides our faith. In light of that, let me tell you a true story of suffering that was lessened by trusting in God and His sovereignty even though the prayer for healing was not answered.

A few years ago, my wife and I were expecting our second child. At six months, after one of the routine examines during pregnancy, the doctor discovered a problem with the baby. Our child, whom we named Jacob, had holoprocencephaly -- a chromosome problem that resulted in various deformities in Jacob's body. In short, Jacob could survive in the womb, but would most certainly not be able to survive outside it. Our son was going to die.

Abortion was not an option for us. Instead, we prayed and asked the Lord to miraculously heal Jacob during the remaining three months of pregnancy. We prayed and trusted God. Finally, when it was time for Jacob to be born, my wife endured the pains of childbirth and delivered Jacob into our hands. One half our later, the Lord took Him home. Jacob died in our arms.

After the funeral and after many tears, people came up to us and wanted to know how we were doing. We told them that in spite of the pain and the loss, we were fine. We had trusted

God and relied on His wisdom, not ours, to handle the situation. We knew that because God was sovereign, that He had allowed us to suffer this trauma. And, even though we did not understand why, my wife and I were able to trust God to know that HE understood why. We would simply find out when we finally went to be with the Lord ourselves.

Now, this is the thing that so many Christians need to learn as difficult as it may be to accept. God is sovereign. He has the right to take us at any time. He has the right to allow our children to die. He has the right to let sickness bring us suffering. He has the right to do with us as we will and to allow things to happen to us that we cannot comprehend and that we cannot explain. He owes us nothing. Yet, He loves us and is gracious. His grace and love to use are based upon His Son Jesus who died on the cross and rose again for our sins. It is because of Jesus and only because of Jesus that we receive any good at all from the Lord. It is not because we are good in ourselves or deserve some sort of compassion from God. We do not, not one bit. But, because of who God is, not because of who we are, God loves us and cares deeply for us.

Nevertheless, pain and suffering are a real part of our lives and we cannot help but wonder sometimes "Why?" The answer lies in God's all-knowing character who knows better than we do why things happen the way they do. These reasons He has not decided to reveal to us. Therefore, we need to trust God that He loves us and that even though we might suffer great loss, God is still in control. Sometimes, it comes down to trusting God beyond your ability to comprehend.

Do you trust God that much? Have you relinquished yourself, your life, your breath (as Jesus did) to the Father of Glory so that He might do with you as He wishes even if it means sending you to some place you do not want to go -- as in your own cross?

Faith in God is never misplaced. But, answers do not always arrive. Therefore, trust God in spite of what you see. Praise His name in the middle of your circumstances and bring glory to Him through Jesus.

Matt Slick is the President and Founder of the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry.