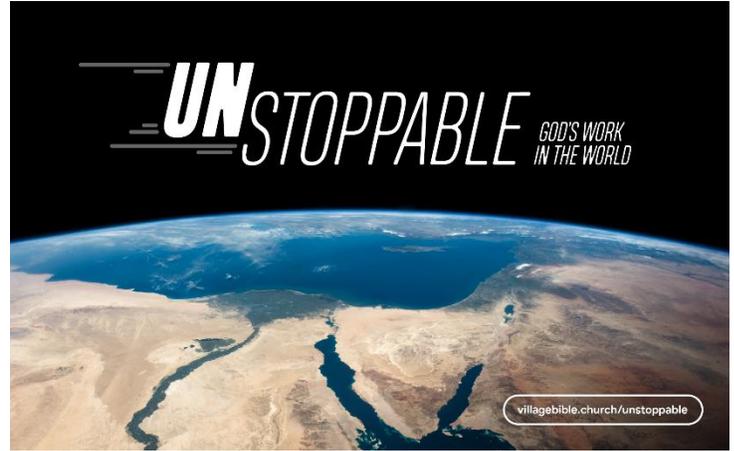




VILLAGE BIBLE CHURCH SUGAR GROVE CAMPUS

UNSTOPPABLE: God's Work in the World

**Real Life Footage: God's Providence—
Acts 23:12–35**
Jeremy Anderson | February 24, 2019



If you've been here at Village for some time, you know we've

been on quite a journey through the book of Acts. This morning we find ourselves in Acts 23, verses 12-35. As I was preparing this, I asked myself, "How should I introduce a message from a book that's mainly a bunch of stories?" Then I thought, "In our day and age, we watch a lot of TV. We watch Netflix, Amazon Video, whatever it may be, and there are always new episodes coming." So as a culture, we're familiar with the idea of a new episode, a story continuing on that will be released sometime in the future. We watch one episode, and we're often left with a cliff hanger, wondering what will happen next. Then the next week we pick up where we left off.

In some ways, our journey through Acts has been like this. We've seen little episodes week to week of things that are going on. Each week as we finish up, we should be left with a desire to know what will be coming next. Luke is chronicling the history of the early church, the acts of the apostles and the acts of the Holy Spirit. The young church has been established and is growing in the region of Israel and throughout Asia Minor. There are things we're learning every week and we're seeing God work in some crazy ways.

So I thought, here's the important thing. If you were watching a TV show and just went to Season Three and pulled up Episode Six and you just watched that episode, you might be wondering who the people were, what was going on and how in the world did they get there. That's why I think it's important to give a little context. Some of you may be picking up with us for the very first time this morning and you're wondering where we are and what we've been learning.

To give a little context from the last couple weeks, if we were to go back to Acts 21, we would see that Paul was on his third missionary journey. God had put it on Paul's heart to head back to Jerusalem, along with some companions. These men included leaders and representatives of many of the churches throughout the region of Asia Minor. Their plan was to get to Jerusalem before the Day of Pentecost, because that was the end of a festival, and there would be many people in the city. Paul's desire, as always, would be to preach to the Jews the gospel of Jesus Christ and the hope that is available because of His resurrection from the dead.

Later in Acts 21, we saw how the group finally arrived in Jerusalem. They met with the leaders of the church there and shared with them the testimony of what God had been doing through their ministry to the Gentiles. This caused the leaders to respond with worship, because so many people had come to faith in Christ.

Then on the heels of that conversation, the leaders explained to Paul that some of the Jewish Christians were concerned that Paul might have lost his zeal for the law and traditions. They had heard rumors that Paul had been teaching that the Old Testament was obsolete and that new believers should leave it behind. The leaders realized this was not in fact true, but they advised Paul to put the minds of these Jewish believers at rest. They proposed that Paul participate in a Nazirite vow along with some other men, just to demonstrate his unity with the Jewish Christians and that he was not asking people to forsake the whole law. Paul

agreed to their plan. As he was finishing his vow, some Jews who were not believers decided to stir up the crowds and eventually grabbed Paul and started beating him. The riot that followed caught the attention of the Roman guards, so they got involved.

Thinking Paul was responsible for the riot, they arrested him. They then planned to beat him until he told them what he had done to cause this commotion. But before they could start the flogging, Paul asked them, "Is it legal to beat a Roman citizen?" That immediately changed the whole situation. The Romans then called a meeting of the Jewish Sanhedrin and brought Paul before them to discuss what should be done. The Sanhedrin was a council made up of the Sadducees and the Pharisees. Paul was permitted to give a defense before the group, so he told them, "I'm on trial for my hope in the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Well, the Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection from the dead, whereas the Pharisees did, so this caused an argument in the room. Apparently, it got violent enough that the Romans feared Paul would be torn in pieces. That must have been a meeting not to be forgotten.

The Romans then took Paul away again which is where we pick up the passage this morning beginning in Acts 23:12. It's important to understand the context and we may refer to some of these events later as we read through this passage and spend some time discussing it. So let's see what Luke has recorded for us in these verses:

¹² When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. ¹³ There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. ¹⁴ They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul. ¹⁵ Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. And we are ready to kill him before he comes near."

¹⁶ Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. ¹⁷ Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him." ¹⁸ So he took him and brought him to the tribune and said, "Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you." ¹⁹ The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, "What is it that you have to tell me?" ²⁰ And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more closely about him. ²¹ But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in ambush for him, who have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they have killed him. And now they are ready, waiting for your consent." ²² So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, "Tell no one that you have informed me of these things."

²³ Then he called two of the centurions and said, "Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night. ²⁴ Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor." ²⁵ And he wrote a letter to this effect:

²⁶ "Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings. ²⁷ This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen. ²⁸ And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council. ²⁹ I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. ³⁰ And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him."

³¹ So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. ³² And on the next day they returned to the barracks, letting the horsemen go on with him. ³³ When they had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul also before him. ³⁴ On reading the letter, he asked what province he was from. And when he learned that he was from Cilicia, ³⁵ he said, "I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive." And he commanded him to be guarded in Herod's praetorium.

I had told a friend I was preaching on Acts 23:12–35 and he said, "Ooh, that's a tough one. There's not a whole lot there. It's kind of just a story." In some ways he's right. There are no commands. There's nothing that says, "All believers should do this." There are no clear exhortations or encouragements for believers. There's no clear doctrinal teaching, as Paul gives us in his letters, that says, "This is what we should believe and how we should act."

What Luke has given us in the book of Acts is a story. As a historian, he chronicled the events in the early church for his friend Theophilus. We might ask ourselves, "What do we do with a passage like this? What do we do with stories that don't seem to direct our lives?" Remember, Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16–17, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work." Thus, we know there is a purpose for this passage beyond just our coming together to have "Big Church Story Time." It is designed to edify, train, and equip us to do the good works God has called us to do.

Why does Luke go into such detail? I think he wanted to fill in the gaps. If all he wrote was, "Paul came to Jerusalem, he encountered some trials, then he moved on to Caesarea," we really would have a hard time understanding that. How did Paul get there? Why did he go? When did he get there? What was going on there? Details are important to stories.

My wife would tell you that I'm not a detail person when I tell stories. She gets aggravated when she asks, "How was your day? Anything exciting happen?" I'll mention something that happened and she'll want to know more. I'm thinking, "That's all I've got." "Well, how did they respond? How did you respond? What were their words, their tone of voice? What was your tone of voice?" "I don't know!" Apparently, I didn't pay enough attention. She likes the details. She comes from the Pilkington family and when they tell stories, you grab a cup of coffee and sit down, because you'll be there for a while. They are detail people. I'm not. So it's a good thing Luke is telling this story and not me, because you would have had a much different tale.

I think Paul shares what he does not just because he's a detail guy. After all, he could have shared even more details. He could have added in the sights and sounds. "It was late at night, the wind was gusting and you could hear the clinking of the soldier's shields as they marched with Paul." Maybe the wind gave Paul goosebumps. But do we need to know that? I think the details Luke shares were chosen because he believed God's work would be more clearly seen through them—and we would agree.

As you look back on the events in your own life, there are some important details that showed you how God was working. It could have been events, people you've met, conversations you've had. You can look back and say, "Yeah, God clearly worked there."

Over the last few weeks, some of middle school leaders have been working with one of the students in their small group. They've come to me to share what's going on and they've said, "We want to help this family out; they're going through some tough times." They've talked to the student's parents and to other people who were connected in some way, and they have asked, "What strategy would best help in this situation?" So they asked me to set up a meeting to discuss the steps that should be taken to actually meet some needs. We found out that someone had prayed only hours before, and there were other kinds of provisions that we hadn't planned, so we could see how God was at work in ways that normally would not have taken place. There were some business events unrelated to the church that put us in contact with an organization that would be critical in helping to meet the needs of this family. It was so clear that God was putting everything together, and we could see it in the details. It was such an encouragement to all of them to see how God was working and how they got to be part of what He was doing.

We see in this story how God was working in the details of Paul's life, what I'm calling "Real life footage of God's providence." But before we jump in to that, I want to stop and put us on the same page about what we mean when we talk about God's providence.

First, we'll see here that God was not working through miracles. He easily could have teleported Paul out of the situation. We saw Him do that with Philip earlier in Acts. He could have acted miraculously, but He didn't. When we speak of God working providentially, we are seeing Him sovereignly ruling over the everyday experiences and working through natural means to carry out His will. As you probably noticed when we read through our story, Luke doesn't say, "And God caused this to happen, which caused this to happen."

In the same way, we can look back in our own lives and see where He was working. It wasn't that we were given a supernatural sign on our bedroom wall that said, "This is God and I am working in this way right now." We see His hand and His faithfulness when we look back at the events in our lives.

Think of the book of Esther. That's a whole Bible book in which God's name is never once mentioned, but we clearly see how He was working to preserve and protect His people. That's what we're going to talk about this morning: the way God was working in the details of Paul's life through His providence.

The providence of God completes His will.

God works through people, events and through natural means. He puts people in positions to do specific things. I'm sure that at some point you've experienced that. You've said something like, "Wow, it was such a God thing that I was there at that particular time to help in that particular way." Or maybe someone else was there to help you. God truly does sometimes work in spectacular ways.

But at times we might think God is like a genie—He's here for us to bring Him our wishes and dreams. We tell Him, "This is what I want to see happen. This is what I want to have changed." But that would imply that God's providence is designed to work out our will. But that's not what the Scriptures teach. Rather, they teach that God is always working out His will.

Paul later wrote to the church in Ephesus that God *“works all things according to the counsel of His will”* (Ephesians 1:11). He doesn't say God works most things according to the counsel of His will, or some things, or things in certain people's lives. Rather, Paul says God works out all things according to the counsel of His will.

As we look through Scripture, we see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Solomon—and many, many more—and we should notice that the people themselves were not the highlights of their stories. They were simply characters in the stories. The Hero of the story, and the main focus throughout all of Scripture, was God. God worked through those people to carry out His will and His desires.

I would say that each of us in this room believes in the providence of God to some degree. If we didn't, I don't think we'd pray. Why would we pray, if we didn't believe God had the sovereign power to answer our prayers? If we believed God wasn't capable of working providentially in our lives to respond to our prayers, then why would we present them to Him in the first place? To some degree, each of us believes in the providence of God. The question is: how far do you take that? How much providence do you believe God really has? Does He work just in response to our prayers or is He working even before we pray? Sometimes we come to God in prayer essentially saying, “Here's my list. Here's what I want to see done.” We see God as being outside our lives and we're asking Him to enter our lives to accomplish what we think needs to be done. “God, let's work in accordance with my will.” But really what our prayers are supposed to do is to help us work in accordance with God's will. God is at the center and we're on the outside. He's working out all things according to His will and we're the ones who need to be brought in line with Him. That's what happens through prayer.

I'm not saying it's wrong for us to bring our burdens and present our requests to the Lord. We absolutely should do that. The Scriptures tell us we should do that. But we need to do it in a way that demonstrates our trust in God. “Lord, even though I might be going through this difficult time, or there's this situation I want to see changed, I need to trust You. You might be working in a way I'm unaware of. So while I would like this to change, maybe it's Your will that I stay in this situation for a period and I need to learn to trust You. I need to follow You in that.”

So we need to be careful as believers that when we look at a passage like this, we can think how easy it is to see God's providential protection of Paul. There was a murder plot against him. Forty Jews planned to assassinate Paul at such and such a time and in such and such a way. We can see, though, how God arranged for Paul's nephew to hear about it and pass the information up the chain all the way to the tribune, so Paul was able to be relocated safely. And we should praise God for His providential protection of Paul. But we should also realize that God's providence did more than just arrange for Paul's protection. It was also God's providence that Paul was put in a place where he needed protection.

We tend, especially with a narrative passage, to see it as an isolated event separate from everything else that was going on in the book of Acts. We then ask, “What do these 20 verses have to tell us?” We can look at it like this, but we should also say to ourselves, “Step back.” Instead of having tunnel vision, we need to see the bigger picture. This will help us see how God is working in different ways. Some of you might be saying, “Jeremy, I'm not sure I'm with you on the idea that it was God Who put Paul in that situation where he needed to be protected.” Let's look at that. I don't want to just say it—I want to show you why I'm saying it.

We're currently in Acts 23:12–35, but if we step back to look at the larger picture, we can see a little more. Back in Acts 21, Paul was on his journey back to Jerusalem. En route he and his companions stopped along the way. Their travels were different from ours.

Some of you may have traveled over 20 miles to get to church this morning. That's a half hour, maybe 40 minutes, and then you're here. But when they journeyed, it wasn't like that. They couldn't hop on a plane and travel around the world in a matter of hours. The journey for them to return to Jerusalem took months. It was truly a journey and it required many stops along the way.

As they stopped, they would find believers and would spend some time in fellowship with them. They might stay for weeks at a time. Often when these believers heard that Paul was going back to Jerusalem, they would warn him. “Why are you going back? You will only have trouble there.” They were aware that whenever Paul was around Jews, the Jews did not receive his message very well. He was beaten and stoned within an inch of his life. He had been arrested and chased out of town. Nothing good seemed to come of his interactions with the Jews. The believers couldn't understand why Paul wanted to go back to the Jewish headquarters, especially during one of their big festivals. They were sure he would only encounter trouble and they urged him not to go. But Paul told them, “God is calling me to go, so I'm going.”

One of the people he met with on his travels was a man named Agabus. I'm not sure I'd want that name. Agabus prophesied to Paul by taking Paul's belt and saying, “Whoever owns this belt, when he gets to Jerusalem, he's going to be bound by the Jews and

handed over to the Gentiles.” So we see that before Paul got into the trouble we’re reading about now, he had been warned that it would happen. Therefore, we need to ask if Paul’s situation was a surprise to God. No! It absolutely was not. And if you look at the last verse we read last week, Acts 23:11, Paul had already had his meeting with the Sanhedrin, he’d been taken out after almost getting torn to shreds, and then what does it say? *“The following night the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.’”*

By looking at a little more context, we learn that at the very least, God’s plan for Paul was that he would be in Rome where he would testify about Jesus Christ. If God says, “You’re going to do this,” I think it’s safe to say it’s going to happen. We also know God warned Paul earlier through Agabus that there would be hardships in Jerusalem. Was God just acting in response to evil things that were going to take place? Or was God perhaps using those evil things—the plots of the Jews and their hatred of the gospel and Paul’s ministry—to put in motion His plan for getting Paul to Rome? After all, the uprising was what caused Paul to be put into Roman custody. Paul might have been thinking, “If I’m supposed to go to Rome and right now I’m nowhere close to Rome but have been taken into Roman custody—hmm. Let’s see what’s going to happen.”

We begin to see how God works providentially even through evil things. We might not expect our bad experiences or circumstances to be part of His plan for us, but these Scriptures indicate that He does work this way. If you think about your own life, I’m sure you can look back and realize that during your bad experiences, you could only see how terrible they were. You hated them and wanted them to be over. But now that you have a better perspective, you can look back and see how it was all for the best. These things were hard, and you wanted them to end, but now you see how God was working in them to bring you where you are today. It was for the best. In that sense, you can be thankful for even the hard things.

It’s one thing for us to look at our own lives, but Scripture also provides some very clear examples which are more important. Go all the way back to Genesis. Near the end of Genesis we read the story of Joseph, with which you’re probably familiar. He was given a coat of many colors as the favored son, he was sold as a slave in Egypt and so forth. But if we pay attention to the details given to us in this story, we can learn something. Joseph had an older brother named Reuben, who defiled his father’s marriage bed—which cost him his birthright. According to their customs, this meant Jacob could give that birthright to whichever of his other sons he chose, so he gave it to Joseph, Rachel’s firstborn. That effectively gave Joseph the responsibility of manager over his father’s household. His duty was to watch his brothers and report to his father about what they were doing. We can sometimes think Joseph was just being a tattletale, but he was actually doing what his father asked him to do.

On one of his trips out to the field to see how his brothers’ work was coming along, so he could report back to Dad, the brothers saw him coming. They decided they were done with him, so they thought, “We’ll kill him. Okay, maybe we won’t kill him; we’ll just throw him into a pit.” While Joseph was in the pit, some traders came by on their way to Egypt. The brothers thought, “Aha. We can profit from this.” So they sold Joseph to the traders. Can you imagine being sold by your siblings? When Joseph arrived in Egypt, he was again sold to Potiphar as a slave. He was put in charge of everything in Potiphar’s household except for his wife. Later she falsely accused Joseph of attempting to rape her, which landed him in prison—another evil thing that took place in his life. But the Scriptures tell us the Lord was with Joseph while he was in prison and he prospered there. He was given leadership in the prison, where he came into contact with the Pharaoh’s cupbearer and baker. He interpreted their dreams and the cupbearer returned to Pharaoh’s service.

Some years passed and then Pharaoh had some dreams that concerned him. The cupbearer then remembered, “This happened to me. I know a guy who interprets dreams.” Joseph was brought out of prison and was able to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams. He told him there would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh said, “Wow, what a genius. Clearly, we’re going to put you in charge.” So Joseph was put in charge of the plan to store up food during the seven years of plenty so there would be food during the famine. But the famine was so widespread that guess who showed up in Egypt? His brothers. You know the story. Eventually Joseph’s entire family was brought to Egypt, where they settled in Goshen.

When Jacob passed away, the brothers became afraid that Joseph might repay them for what they had done to him. They decided to lie to Joseph, telling him Jacob had requested that Joseph forgive his brothers. But look at Joseph’s response in Genesis 50:20: *“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.”* All those evil things the brothers had done, and all the other unjust experiences Joseph had gone through as a result, were truly evil. But Joseph told his brothers, “God meant all these things for good.” He did not say, “God used these things for good,” as though God was just working good out of a bad situation. Rather, God meant it for good, so the family of Jacob would be preserved. Eventually his offspring became the nation of Israel and through the nation of Israel would come Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

God worked through evil means to put Joseph in a position of leadership through which God would carry out His own will. Sometimes He works the same way in our lives today. God definitely put Paul through some pretty bad experiences, but it was to work out His will.

The providence of God confronts our comforts.

We need to change our thinking from the idea that we are at the center of the universe and realize that it is God's place. His will is the greatest good; our comforts are not. When our hard times come, we can stand and say, "I can trust the Lord." We see how the providence of God confronts our comforts. The bad experiences we encounter in our lives are not things that somehow have slipped by God. It's not that He's juggling so many things that He drops things here and there.

If that's our perspective, then our prayer before God is usually, "Get me out of this situation! How did this happen? Fix it!" But when we understand the providence of God, we can understand that even the bad things—evil things people do to us or the other terrible circumstances we may endure—come stamped, sealed, and delivered by God. Nothing sneaks by Him. He rules sovereignly over all things. We need to understand that our comforts are not the end-all be-all. God is not a means to the end of our comfort. Rather, we need to change our thinking to realize that God is the end-all be-all. He is the greatest good. Even if that means that in this life we are going to suffer greatly, it doesn't mean God is not good.

If you read the testimonies of missionaries and Christians around the world who have been persecuted and even martyred for their faith, the reason they could endure is that they understood that God is the greatest good. Their prayer is, "Do whatever You will with me, because You are good."

If your life is ever on the line and all you would have to do to live is to deny Christ, knowing the truth that God is sovereign and good will give you the courage to refuse to deny Him. As Paul said, to lose our lives is gain (Philippians 3:7-8). This is not the end—God is the end. When we realize this, we not only become more like Jesus, but we also experience His blessings in a deeper and richer way. When we see God for Who He is, the completion of His will is our greatest desire.

When we enter His story, it doesn't mean we'll be comfortable. God will call us—even as Americans with all the comforts and freedoms we enjoy—to do things that are uncomfortable. We will be called out of our comfort zones to address situations—with family, friends, people in this church, neighbors—that are hard to deal with. They might be awkward and not fun. Or maybe someone will have to address a situation with you. Don't complain about it. Instead, trust God. He may well be working through those bad situations to carry out His will, just as I'm sure many of us have experienced in the past. Yet how blinded can we become when we're there again. It's almost like we forget what's happened in the past and once again wonder, "What is going on? Why is this happening?" His methods are often very different from ours.

Honestly, if we were allowed to play the role of God, we would probably—like Bruce Almighty—just click "yes" as the answer to all the prayers, because that would be the easiest thing to do. We probably would have zapped Paul out of Jerusalem. But God has chosen to work in ways that are different from ours. God's plan in this story was not very good to Paul, in the sense of being comfortable or pleasurable. Can you imagine being beaten, or having people plot to assassinate you, or being taken into custody and falsely accused of things? We would certainly feel sorry for ourselves and wonder why God didn't give us a break. But God was working through all these things.

God's timing is also different from ours. We're like little kids; we want things now! I don't have any children, but I was one once and remember how I was back then. If you know something good is coming at the end of the day, how does that day go? It is the longest day of your life. It's never going to end. You start complaining to Mom or Dad, "Can't we do it now? Can't I have it now?" They say, "Just wait. It will come. Be patient." As a kid, that drives you nuts.

Here's the deal. We are all little kids to God. We go before Him and say, "Come on, God, now! Why aren't You moving faster? Why don't You bring this about now?" Our timing is different from His. Maybe we have to wait more than a day. Maybe it's two years or five years, and we're saying, "Come on, God, now." But God says to us, "Just chill. Trust Me; My timing is different."

Then on the flip side, God might sometimes be in more of a hurry than we are. We lose a job and think, "I wasn't ready to lose that job yet." But God was ready for that to happen, because He had somewhere else He wanted to put us. Or we might not have been prepared for that medical diagnosis. You fill in the blank. God moves you a little faster than you'd like to move. His timing is often different than ours, but we need to still trust Him in that.

The providence of God calls for our action.

The providence of God doesn't give us an excuse to kick back and relax, just assuming He'll do everything. Rather, it calls for our action. When Paul found out about the plot to murder him, he didn't sit back in his cell and say, "Son of my sister, why do you worry about these things? Why did you even take the time to come over here and tell me? Don't you know that God is in control of everything? He's going to take care of it. Watch the game with me." That's not what Paul did. Instead, he called to the centurion. "Hey, Centurion, come here. Can you take this kid to the tribune and tell the tribune he has something to inform him about?" Paul put a process in motion.

Here's the deal. Paul had no idea what the response would be. The tribune could have said, "Okay, great. Since I wouldn't be the one to put Paul to death, that would solve our problem. Let's just move on as planned." Paul did not know the outcome when he took action.

Just because God is sovereign and His providence is real doesn't mean we sit back and wait for God to do some miraculous thing, like maybe sending a golden plate down from heaven with some instructions on it: "Do this! Thus says the Lord." That would be nice, but that's not how God works. Sometimes we need to take action and do something.

We read in Proverbs 16 that man plans his ways, but it is actually God Who is directing his steps. So we should do something, and if God slams the door in our face, that's fine. That wasn't the right door; turn to the next door. God will direct us as we move. God's providence calls for our action. Why? Because God works through humans, through the events of our history and the events of our lives. He doesn't intend us to sit back and do nothing. Rather, He has chosen to work through us.

God has put us in the game. If you're in the game, you have to do something. In the world of sports, if you get put in the game and you just stand there doing nothing, you'll be benched or worse. God bless this kid who was on my team a couple years ago. When I put him in the game, he had no idea what he was supposed to do. The temptation was to take him out of the game—he wasn't helping anything. When God puts you in—do something. Act.

I just happened to stumble across something from John Piper. If you're taking notes, write on a vertical line: **APTAP**. Piper says the A is Admit. When we're doing things for the Lord, we have to recognize that in and of ourselves there's nothing we can accomplish. I need to admit that on my own, I can't get up and preach this sermon in a way that's going to be effective and meaningful for the church. I can't do it; I'm stuck.

Admit it. John 15 says we can do nothing apart from Christ. You're serving in children's ministry, or as a host for a Mom Village table, or you're serving in student ministry or as a small group leader. Maybe you're an elder. Name the ministry you're involved in—you can't do it! Admit it. Humble yourself. "I can't do it."

Then, P for Pray. "Lord, I can't, but You can. Help me, Lord. Help me get up in front of the church and be able to speak clearly. Help me not to shake myself off the stage because I'm scared to death. Help me stick with the truth You've taught me. Help me minister to these people who are going through a difficult time. Lord, You have to do this."

Then, T for Trust. Trust in the promises of God. The Scriptures are full of promises. Cling to the promises that He will act, He will provide. Don't just say, "Hey, I acknowledge that. I believe it." Rather, cling to it and trust it.

It's like when I was a little kid and my Dad would take me to Sunday school class. I didn't know those teachers and quite honestly, I was scared of them. No offense to you Sunday school teachers out there, but I would have been scared of you. But Dad said, "You have to go to Sunday school." I'm thinking, "No!" What did I do next? I clung to my dad's leg. He would have to go with me to Sunday school and I was okay with that. That's what you need to do with the promises of God. You need to cling to them. Trust them. Believe them and live your life in light of them. Believe God will follow through.

The next A is for Act. Admit you can't do it, Pray, surrender to the Lord in Trust—and then you do it. You believe God is going to do what only God can do.

And finally, T, Thank Him like crazy for how faithful He is and for all He's doing. Thank Him for helping you minister to that family. Thank Him for helping you reach that kid. Then when you hear their story about how they're learning to trust, thank God for that. "I can't do these things. I can't change hearts—but You can. Thank You for using me. Thank You for letting me be part of their story. Thank You for letting me be a welcoming face to visitors who come to our church." We can't just sit back—we have to do something.

The providence of God champions peace and confidence.

I admire Paul. We read what happened to him and many of us would be freaking out. “What is going on? God, You called me to go to Rome, but now I’m in prison and these people want to kill me? What in the world?” But Paul didn’t freak out. “Okay, nephew, go share this news.” Paul didn’t freak out because he truly trusted in the providence of God. He trusted that God was in control. He told the people on his way to Jerusalem, “I am ready to die for the sake of Christ.”

When hardship comes, we too can say, “I can trust the Lord. I can glorify Him in this.” When that great scenario in your life comes—maybe you get a promotion or you’re excited about some life transition—you can say, “Bless the Lord.” No matter what, we can have peace and confidence that the circumstances we face in our lives are not some surprise to God. They’re not out of His control.

We don’t serve a god that’s frantically responding to the evil things that are happening, as if the world is crumbling around him and he’s beginning to lose it. Rather, we serve a God Who is good, Who is powerful and Who is in control. When God is working in your life, when He’s challenging you, this gives you peace, because you can say, despite what’s going on, “God is good.”

Throughout this past week as I prepared for this sermon, I’ve learned this is probably more for me than for any of you. Even last night as I was talking with Bri, there are some things going on in our lives for which we have no answers. But isn’t it interesting how in God’s providence, He arranged so that this week I would be responsible to preach on His providence at the same time as certain events were going on in my life—so I would be the first person to learn what I was teaching? How could I preach something unless I believe it?

God knew I need to believe what I speak, that I need to own this truth about His sovereignty. As I talked with my wife, I realized I didn’t know how our situation was going to work out. I didn’t have any answers. What is God doing? I felt as though I was frantically grabbing for anything solid. Yet God said to me, “I’m in control. Trust Me. Trust Me.” I can tell you that last night, as I was talking with my wife, I was truly stressed. But when you’re stressed, you can find peace when you realize, “God is bigger.” I needed to admit, “God put us here and gave us this—how foolish we would be not to trust Him in it, even though we may not always know what that next step will look like.”

Some of you guys may be thinking about serving in the ministry and you’re scared. Trust God. Go have a conversation. Follow God and trust Him. I had to say that to myself: follow God and trust Him. He is in control and that’s why we can have confidence. It’s not because we know everything the future holds, but because if God has brought us here, He’ll bring us through.

Bri jokes, “If I was born to be shot, I’ll never be hung.” That sounds morbid, right? But her point is this that if God is calling me to something, that’s what He’s going to provide for. That’s what He’ll equip me for and that’s where He is going to be good. Trust Him. Have confidence.

I don’t know what you’re facing right now. I know there are people here who are rejoicing. Now is a great time in their lives. Praise the Lord. He’s brought you to a good season. Use this good season to praise Him. Use this good season as a testimony to other people about God’s faithfulness.

For some of you, however, you’re in the toughest time of your life right now. God has put you there. Find peace. Find confidence that He’s got you. Trust Him. There’s great peace in surrendering everything to the Lord.