

## ***Discipleship and the Sovereignty of God***

*Acts 25:1-12*

As you may be aware, much of the social media world is obsessed with how often men think about the Roman Empire. If you were so inclined you could watch thousands of TikTok videos where women ask their men, “How often do you think about the Roman Empire?” Some of them say, “Never.” Others say, “Not too often. . . maybe 3 or 4 times a week.” At that point the woman starts laughing and asks why they think about the Roman Empire. The man might say, “Swords. . . roads. . . Julius Caesar. . . glory. . .” I asked a buddy of mine who’s in the Army how often he thinks about the Roman Empire; he said, “I picture my head of Russell Crowe’s body a couple times a day.” [That’s a reference to the movie *Gladiator*; and I think he was kidding.]

If you read the gospels and the book of Acts, you can’t help but think about the Roman Empire. First and foremost, the Romans were the ones who perfected the art of crucifixion. As a way of inflicting the maximum amount of pain and humiliation and as a deterrent to crime, the criminal was stripped naked, nailed to a cross, and left there to die by asphyxiation. The person’s body was normally left on the cross to be eaten by birds and insects.

Acts 2 makes reference to the Romans when Peter addresses the crowd on the day of Pentecost and says this:

22 “Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— 23 this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

The lawless men were Roman soldiers. Luke 23 tells us that Pilate “delivered Jesus over [to the Roman soldiers] to their will,” i.e., the will of the Jewish people. But did you notice how Peter framed up the will of the Jewish people and the lawless crucifixion by the Romans? He said that Jesus was “delivered up according to the definite plan and the foreknowledge of God.” Peter understood that the animosity of the Jews and the brutality of the Romans fell within the sovereignty of God. Their motives and their actions brought about the will of God, namely, that the sinless Son of God pay for the sins of the world.

Early in the book of Acts Luke establishes that ***God is sovereign over the Roman Empire***. God is not intimidated by their power. He is not surprised by their brutality. He is not scrambling to figure out Plan B when they kill his Son. The Romans, unbeknownst to them, carried out the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. Somehow their actions fell within the sovereignty of God.

And the rest of the book of Acts illustrates that ***Jesus’ disciples live their lives as if God is sovereign (because He is)***. Today’s passage illustrates how Paul did this.

Let me remind you of the context. The Holy Spirit had made clear that it was the will of God for Paul to go first to Jerusalem and then to Rome. Since he was a disciple (a follower/apprentice of Jesus) doing the will of God mattered more to him than anything else. Paul lived to do the will of God as best he understood it.

We saw last week that while Paul was imprisoned in Jerusalem the Lord Jesus appeared to Paul gave him this assurance (in Acts 23:11):

11 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."

Throughout chapters 23 through 28 Paul does and says things that make clear that he believed God would somehow get him to Rome. If you've read these chapters, you know that some wild things happened to Paul - plots to assassinate him, seemingly endless hearings/trials, a shipwreck, a snake bite, etc. But through it all Paul lived as if God were sovereign over the Jewish authorities, over the Roman Empire, over the wind and the waves, and even over a poisonous snake. He lived this way because God **was** sovereign over all those things.

We'll have to think carefully about what this means and what it doesn't mean. When I talk about the sovereignty of God this morning, I'm not talking about it in some highly technical sense. I'm talking about the sovereignty of God in a very practical, street-level sense: God is sovereign in the sense that nothing is outside of his control; he works all things together for our good and his glory. God is moving all of history toward his goal of "redeeming a people for himself and (eventually) making all things new" (see EFCA doctrinal statement on God).

This doesn't mean that our actions don't matter; they do. And we are responsible for what we do. This doesn't mean that we can always understand how God is sovereignly working out his purposes. This doesn't mean that we always avoid tragedy and heartache. But it does mean that he is moving all of history toward his purposes and therefore he can be trusted.

Let's first consider how Paul lived his life as if God were sovereign. Then we'll consider how we might do the same.

### ***Paul's discipleship and the sovereignty of God (Acts 25:1-12)***

Paul had been under house arrest in Caesarea for two years (two years!). He had survived one assassination plot already (Acts 23:12ff); he was about to face another. Here Luke tells us that a man named Festus was appointed as the new governor of Judea. Since the Roman capital of Judea was Caesarea, that's where Festus lived.

1 Now three days after Festus had arrived in the province, he went up to Jerusalem from Caesarea.

Being new to Judea, Festus went to Jerusalem to become acquainted with the most influential Jewish leaders there. These authorities tried to exploit the situation by requesting that Festus bring Paul back to Jerusalem so that he might once again face accusations before the Jewish council there.

2 And the chief priests and the principal men of the Jews laid out their case against Paul, and they urged him, 3 asking as a favor against Paul that he summon him to Jerusalem—because they were planning an ambush to kill him on the way.

They apparently thought that their best chance of assassinating Paul would be to overpower a small Roman guard along the way instead of storming the prison in Caesarea. But something about their request didn't sit quite right with Festus:

4 Festus replied that Paul was being kept at Caesarea and that he himself intended to go there shortly. 5 "So," said he, "let the men of authority among you go down with me, and if there is anything wrong about the man, let them bring charges against him."

As we've already seen several times in Acts, Paul is once again protected against an assassination plot by the Romans.

6 After he stayed among them not more than eight or ten days, he went down to Caesarea. And the next day he took his seat on the tribunal and ordered Paul to be brought. 7 When he had arrived, the Jews who had come down from Jerusalem stood around him, bringing many and serious charges against him that they could not prove.

One of Luke's objectives in recording how Paul defended himself against accusations was to show that Christians are NOT a threat to a stable society. If you keep reading in chapter 25, Festus comes out and says that Paul was innocent. We can infer what these "many and serious charges" against Paul were by what Paul says next.

8 Paul argued in his defense, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense."

The accusation "against the law of the Jews" was that Paul went around Asia Minor telling Jews that they no longer needed to keep the Law. In 24: 14, Paul defended himself saying, "I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets. . ." He differed from the Jewish authorities in that he believed that Jesus was the fulfillment of what was taught in the Law and the Prophets; but he belied it all.

The second accusation was "against the temple." They accused Paul of desecrating the temple by bringing a Gentile therein. But that simply wasn't the case. He had been seen walking with an Ephesian man named Trophimus, but he had not taken him into the temple (see 21:29).

The third accusation was the most serious, but it also provided a strategic opportunity. The charge “against Caesar” was probably the charge that because Paul was teaching that Jesus was King, he was “fomenting civil unrest designed eventually to lead to a popular uprising against Roman imperialism” (Gooding, p. 467). Later in Acts 25 (in verse 26) Festus tells King Agrippa that in his opinion Paul was innocent of these charges (“I found that he had done nothing deserving death.”)

9 But Festus, wishing to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, “Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem and there be tried on these charges before me?”

If “doing the Jews a favor” kept them submissive to Roman rule, it seemed like a smart move. But notice that Festus doesn’t **command** Paul to go up to Jerusalem for trial; he **asks** Paul if he’s willing. Again, apparently he sensed that the Jewish authorities had ulterior motives by wanting him tried in Jerusalem.

10 But Paul said, “I am standing before Caesar’s tribunal, where I ought to be tried. To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you yourself know very well.

Paul tells Festus that he was already where he ought to be tried: in Caesar’s tribunal. The irony of ironies was that ***being imprisoned by the Roman Empire was the safest place for Paul at that moment in his life***. Paul understood that if he weren’t in Roman custody, he most likely would not make it to Rome. In a very bold move, Paul says this:

11 If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar.”

Paul isn’t asking for mercy; he just wants justice. Even in our legal system a court decision at one level can sometimes be appealed to a higher court. In the Roman system, a citizen could appeal to Caesar for a ruling. You were taking a risk to do so because emperors could be ruthless and fickle.

Remember that Paul was under no illusions that the Romans were particularly committed to justice; after all, the Romans crucified Jesus even though Pilate said three times that he was innocent and had done nothing worthy of death. But Paul knew that God wanted him to go to Rome and that appealing to Caesar would get him there. We aren’t told exactly what Paul was thinking. But Luke makes clear that God made good on his assurance to Paul in 23:11 that he would testify in Rome.

12 Then Festus, when he had conferred with his council, answered, “To Caesar you have appealed; to Caesar you shall go.”

After consulting with others, Festus pronounces, “Paul is going to Rome.” God sovereignly used Festus to accomplish his will for Paul. It turns out that Festus was sovereign in Judea; Caesar was sovereign in the Roman Empire. And God was sovereign, period. If God wanted Paul in Rome, nothing could stop him from getting

Paul there. And for his part, Paul's words and actions suggest that he understood that very well.

### ***Our discipleship and the sovereignty of God.***

To clarify what we're talking about here. . . First, we're talking about a mindset that is unique to disciples of Jesus. If you are a disciple of Jesus, you want to do the will of God more than anything else. Jesus died for you, so you want to live for him.

That changes the questions you ask when you find yourself in difficult situations. It's okay to ask "Why, God, is this happening to me?" But God doesn't promise to answer that questions. Perhaps a better question for a disciple to ask would be, "God, what is your will here?" Once you discern his will, then you ask the sovereign God of the universe for all the grace you need to do God's will. And then you walk into your days by faith.

### ***Jesus' disciples live their lives as if God is sovereign (because He is).***

Let me give you a fresh example of what I'm trying to say. This past week was rather demanding for me spiritually and emotionally and physically. The temptation was to be overwhelmed and anxious. "Am I going to have what it takes to do everything God has called me to do this week?"

It was actually humorous when I stopped and thought about it in light of today's passage. Here I am, convinced that God was sovereign over the Roman Empire. But I'm wondering if he really is sovereign over my schedule. I thought about it and concluded that since the things on my schedule were God-given opportunities, surely he will give me the grace to his will.

Long story short, each day I asked God for enough grace for ***that*** day. And Brenda prayed for me. And quite a few of you prayed for me. And I got some advice/counsel throughout the week. In other words, I employed the ordinary means we all have to seek God's grace. And I walked into each day by faith, believing that "God's got this." Even though this past week was demanding, it was ***one of the most satisfying weeks in memory***. God showed me that I can live my life as if he is sovereign (because he is).

What is the most challenging situation in your life right now? What seems daunting or out of control? Maybe it's a relationship or a decision or a health issue. My encouragement to you is to discern, "What is the will of God here?" And then use ordinary means to seek all the grace you need to do his will. Pray, go to Scripture for wisdom and perspective, ask others for advice and prayer, walk into each day by faith, believing that nothing in your life is beyond God's authority.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, be reminded that Jesus lived his life with the conviction that his heavenly Father was sovereign. Hebrews 12:1-2 says this:

1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Jesus fearlessly pursued the will of God, namely, that enduring the cross as a sufficient sacrifice for our sins. He believed that God would give him the grace lay down his life. And he believed that God would raise him up on the third day!

Let the bread remind you that his body was broken for us. Let the cup remind you that his blood was shed for us. If you trust in Jesus alone as your Savior, we invite you to celebrate the Lord's Table with us here today. After a few moments of silence we will eat and then drink together.