

## In Praise of Rome

[Acts 23:12-24](#)

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The Bible makes the claim, from its beginning to the end, that God loves the world. He created it and has not abandoned it. Not even the part of your world that frightens you the most.

\*\*\* Continuing in our series of sermons on the book of Acts, we have come to those chapters that describe Paul's imprisonment. Three times he almost lost his life to an angry religious mob. And three times he was saved by a Roman tribune named Claudius Lysias. The first time, when the crowd found Paul in the temple and dragged him outside to tear him apart, Lysias rushed into the fray and arrested Paul to save his life. The second time, Paul stood on the steps of the Fortress Antonia, and armed only with the gospel gave his defense to the crowd who again went after him. The tribune Lysias saved his life, again. The third time, Paul was being tried by the chief priest and elders. His words resulted in a violent brawl with Paul in the center. And again the Tribune rushed in, pulled Paul from the violence and secured him in the fortress.

Now we come to today's text, which begins with a conspiracy. Forty devout men make a religious vow to kill Paul before they eat or drink again. Then they convince the chief priest and elders to ask the Tribune to send Paul to them, planning to ambush him along the way and take his life. But Paul's nephew hears about this plot, and rushes to Paul and the tribune to warn them.

We don't know a thing about Paul's nephew. Until this moment, we didn't even know he had a nephew. But Scripture's silence about him is significant. It is as if to say that he lived as we do, for a purpose greater than ourselves. He, and we, show up in the sacred drama only long enough to do something wonderful. But the story isn't about the nephew, and it isn't about us either. The story is always about the salvation of God, of which the nephew, the tribune, and even Paul only have supporting roles.

You cannot enjoy the story of your life if you make yourself the star. The story will be too short, too painful, too uncertain or too inadequate. Even the apostle Paul was not at all convinced that the new churches he started would make it. His joy in life, our joy, comes from realizing that we are a part of a greater story of salvation that began before we arrived and will continue after our little chapter is over. In the story God is writing, there is so much mystery. Nothing is more mysterious than the way he uses strange people to bring about his salvation.

When the tribune Lysias hears about the religious conspiracy, he sneaks Paul out of town and sends him sixty miles away to the provincial governor in Caesarea. To keep Paul safe, he also sends along 470 soldiers. For one man! So for a fourth time in a couple of days, the Roman tribune has saved Paul's life.

Remember, this tribune is not a follower of Jesus Christ. He doesn't believe in Paul's message. He doesn't even understand it. He cannot figure out what Paul has done that is wrong. When he sends Paul to the Roman governor in Caesarea, he also sends a letter that says Paul has not broken any Roman laws. Whatever this is about, he assumes, it is some internal religious matter. The tribune respects the religious leaders of Jerusalem, but he refuses to allow them to kill Paul because it would be unjust. And his job is to uphold the law. So justice, in the story, comes not from the religious leaders, but from a Roman civil servant who is used by God, even though he is not a part of the church.

We tend to think that Rome was the enemy of the Early Church, but that is simply not true. Even when the church was being persecuted by some of the emperors, some of the time, the church thanked God for Rome. They were thankful for Roman roads, on which they walked to spread the gospel message. For Roman peace, which made it possible to travel safely. For the Roman language, which gave the various people a common tongue. For Roman justice, which protected the church's rights, as in this passage. For Roman culture and architecture..when the church eventually started to build buildings, they modeled their new churches on the Roman Basilica. But most of all they were thankful for Roman law. That is because from their Jewish heritage, the church had learned that the law was a grace from God. It created order and justice, which reflects the kingdom of God. So whether it was the ten commandments of Moses or the twelve tablets of Rome, the law was always perceived by the church as a blessing. Writing in the second century, the Early Church Father, Irenaeus, praised Rome, saying "The world is at peace. We walk the highways without fear. We sail where we will." In using Rome, Irenaeus said, God has illustrated "The whole world is his possession."

This same affirmation was central to what the Apostle Paul had been preaching. In his letter to the Colossians he reminds the church, "In Christ, all things in heaven and in earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers - all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together." That doesn't leave out much. In fact, it doesn't leave out a thing. You can't say, "Well, yes, but not my workplace. I'm the only believer in my office." No, the Bible is clear - all things have been created through him and for him. "But not my health. The cancer has taken over there." All things. "But not my ex-spouse." All things. "But not Kosovo, or Northern Sudan, or Iraq." All things were created through him and for him.

All things may not act as if they belong to God. But they do. All things are under his power. He has kept title on all of it. Rome belonged to God. So does our government. So does your boss, your parents, your children, your health, and the things that give you alarm. It is all God's. And we choose to affirm, not the world's rebellion, but the Lordship of Jesus Christ over it all to this day!

This is why the church has to stop dividing the world between things secular and Christian, if by secular we mean outside the realm of God's sovereign control, and by Christian we mean the only place God can do anything. I am about convinced that it is time to stop using the word Christian as an adjective. The Bible never does that. It only uses the word three times, always to refer to people, and never to things or even a religion. It doesn't call a college Christian, or a radio station, or a non-profit organization. Now there

are even Christian Yellow Pages. Really, now, how can the yellow pages be Christian? The term was first used in Antioch to refer to people who were Christ-ians, or people who were living in Christ. And to live in Christ is to discover that all things were created through him and for him. As soon as we designate only a small part of the world as Christian, we imply that the rest of the world is anti-Christian. But all things belong to him.

We tell a lot of jokes about lawyers, as if that were a non-Christian vocation. But there aren't Christian vocations. There is just the common vocation we all have to live in Christ. When men and women really devote themselves to the law, they are struggling to find order and justice. That always reflects some approximation of the glory of God on earth, and thus the practice of law is another way of practicing worship. Similarly, when others devote themselves to medicine, whether they realize it or not, they are the healing hands of Jesus. When teachers knock themselves out to guide their students into truth, they are leading young people to Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life. When parents take the time to love their children, they are implanting in young souls a thirst for the love of the Heavenly Father. So you are called not to hide in the protected subculture of the church, but to follow Christ back into Rome where he is at work, bringing about his kingdom.

Last week when I was in Israel for the two thousandth Pentecost celebration, I spent some time visiting a number of the mission projects we have been supporting with World Vision, a wonderful relief and development ministry. The director of this ministry took me to a small, ancient Palestinian village, that is now surrounded by settlements that have sucked away all the public water. So their crops have withered in the harsh desert sun. When the engineers working with World Vision began poking around in the village fields, they found an old Roman water system that was fed by an underground spring. Because of its age, the stones had cracked and the water was seeping away. By a rather simple repair costing only a few thousand dollars, this old Roman waterway was restored last year. When I saw the fields, they were again green and lush. Hope and self-sufficiency had been restored to the village. All I could say was, "Thank God for Rome." And, "Thank God for engineers." Because of them, poor people get water, too. Thank God the ancient engineers of Rome didn't join a monastery! When they built that water system 2,000 years ago, the Roman laborers probably thought it was just another day under the hot sun. But that is because they had no idea about the greater story of justice God was still writing. The mystery of their work's purpose wasn't clear for centuries. But I saw it two thousand years after those laborers were gone.

You may wonder if you are doing any good. You may despair of finding any lasting purpose as you drag yourself to work day after day. But like Paul's nephew and the Tribune Lysias, you were given your mission for eternal reasons. You don't need to see the reason today. What you need is to see Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today, and forever. Salvation is his business, and there is no place where he is not at work. "All things were created by him and for him. In him all things hold together."

Sovereign God, fill our eyes with a vision of Jesus, that like an anonymous nephew, or a dedicated ancient civil servant, we may find our place in your greater story of salvation on earth. Amen.