

FOILED AGAIN!  
Acts 23:12-35

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The story of this world is a story of plots and counterplots.

Last weekend Ruth and I traveled to Fayetteville, North Carolina to be with our son, David Winne, a captain in the U.S. army and a decorated Ranger, serving as an EOD (explosives ordnance disposal) expert. By "explosives ordnance disposal" it means he earns a living disarming bombs: all kinds of bombs. Those involved in EOD have a brief five-word motto:

**INITIAL SUCCESS OR TOTAL FAILURE**

If one is in the infantry and one takes a shot and misses, one can take another shot...and another...and another. But with EOD, there are no "second shots." One mistake and...you're dead. But the good news is that our son gets what they call "hazard pay" – top pay – for what he does.

Anyway we went to visit him. While there, we visited a museum dedicated to paratroopers, noting their work going back to WWII. There was also a part of that museum that was given over to what they called "the ghost army." This army was the army of fake inflatable tanks and other armored vehicles. The U.S. army used thousands of these during WWII to deceive the enemy into thinking they had a large ground force at some locations when in fact they may have had no ground force at those location. It was all part of what warfare often becomes: a game of deception.

In our text this morning we see that this kind of thing goes way back. For in the case before us, we learn of 40 men who had made a vow to neither eat or drink until they had killed Paul. And so that they would not need to wait long to eat or drink they devised a deceptive plot that was to be carried out that very night: ask to have Paul brought a second time before the Jewish ruling council so as to further examine Paul, and while Paul is being brought to the council, attack him and kill him. That was the plot; that was the scheme.

And it likely would have worked except for this kid...this youth or young man...a nephew of Paul's who quite fortuitously overheard the plot.

Wasn't Paul **lucky** his nephew overheard what he did?

Many years ago, before I was a pastor, I was asked if I might give a sermon. I gave it on the story of Esther as taken from the book of Esther in the Bible.

In that sermon I talked about

- how **lucky** it was that Esther had been chosen to replace Queen Vashti
- how **lucky** it was that Mordecai, her uncle, became known to Haman, the king's right hand man
- how **lucky** it was that one night Mordecai happened to overhear a plot by two men to assassinate the king
- how **lucky** it was that on a night when the king was having trouble sleeping he had the chronicles of the nation's recent history read to him and that included in that reading was the account of Mordecai reporting the plot to have the king assassinated

On and on I spoke about how the book of Esther – the only book in the Bible to **not even mention the name of God** – was such a wonderful story of how **lucky** the Jewish people were to have had such a long history of fortuitous events take place.

And then, of course, I said at the end, "**But LUCK had nothing to do with any of this.** Rather, we see in the story and book of Ruth, **the clear hand of a SOVEREIGN GOD.**" And so the book of Esther is a kind of apologetics case, similar to what we might put before an atheist today, whereby we can show the sovereign hand of an unseen God in the creation of this perfectly balanced ecosystem that has the stamp of his SOVEREIGN HAND written all over it. Indeed, God's hand is so clear that the apostle Paul in Romans chapter 1 says,

*"For what can be known about God is **plain to them**, for God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been **clearly perceived**, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse" (vss.19-20).*

So, back to Paul and this plot against him, it wasn't LUCK that Paul had a sister,

who just happened to live in Jerusalem,  
and who had a son,  
who just happened to be, on a certain day,  
in exactly the right place, to overhear a plot  
to kill his own uncle.

**No, it wasn't luck. It was God's decree.**

Christian brother or sister, may I encourage you this day to clean up your language? You say, "Ah, but I never cuss or swear. You can ask my family members. I'm careful in what I say."

"Well, that's good," I say. "But your language still needs to be cleaned up. For at times you speak of luck, or how lucky you have been, or how lucky someone you know has been. And every time you do that, you are implying that GOD and GOD'S SOVEREIGN HAND is impossible to see. Clean up your language. There is no LUCK for any of us."

Someone says, "What about the flip of a coin? Isn't that all luck?"

### Proverbs 16:33

You who know me well, know that I have used this verse for some 42 years now, not only to help resolve conflicts between Ruth and myself but also in giving direction to others who may have conflicts in their marriages.

Some years ago I brought this verse to the attention of a woman who was having severe marital problems. I offered the verse as a suggested way to resolving conflicts between her and her husband. She was in a bad mood when I spoke with her and so with a real SNARL in her voice she said, "Are you telling me God cares about the flip of a coin?"

I said, "No, I don't think God cares about the flip of a coin. But **if by the flip of a coin** a problem can be resolved between you and your husband, **then I believe God cares INFINITELY about the flip of a coin.**"

So, Paul's nephew was at just the right place at the right time. And learning of this plot against Paul he told Paul. Paul in turn asked a centurion to take the boy to the tribune – likely the exact same tribune who had overseen the arrest of Paul and was amazed to learn that Paul was not an Egyptian, that Paul could speak Greek, and that Paul was a Roman citizen. So the boy reported to the tribune about what he had heard. And with that, the tribune devised **his own strategy** to counter that of those who were plotting to take

Paul's life: at 9 pm he would have Paul transported by 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen to the barracks in Caesarea – the principle Roman city in all of Palestine – so that Felix, the governor, might deal with his case.

Plots and counterplots

Attempts to deceive and now another plot against Paul foiled.

Foiled again!

Next Sunday, Lord willing, we'll go to chapter 24 to deal with Paul's defense of himself before Felix.

But for today, let's spend the rest of our time considering **our enemy's many plots against us**. Most likely you already know that there is a battle raging for your soul. You may think to yourself, "But I have given my life to Jesus. I have already **CROSSED OVER** (to quote John 5:24) from death to life. I am **SAFE** in the arms of Jesus."

Well, I'm not going to argue with you about any of that. But I would have you see that while your eternal state may now be truly set and secure, you are being a bit naïve if you do not at least consider that you – like all of us – are still very much in a battle...in a war.

Let's look at three passages...

1. 1 Peter 5:8-9

This is **NOT** a passage aimed at unbelievers. This is a passage directed towards those who are believers. A simple reading of the greater context will show you this. So when we read of this one who goes around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, he is **not** going after the unbeliever but after the believer. It is the believer who offers the tasty meat.

I have recommended this book to many: John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides. If you want a great read, a truly **exciting** true-story page turner of a book...read John Paton's autobiography. Learn of how he, as a Scottish Presbyterian went with his wife to minister to the cannibals on the islands that were then called "The New Hebrides Islands." Today the islands are known as Vanuatu. Various warring cannibalistic groups were on the island. When Paton's wife died

one night he knew he needed to secretly bury her body knowing that if the islanders learned of her death or the place of her burial they would dig her up and eat her.

After learning the language of the people and speaking to them over the course of many years about Jesus, one of the chief's finally decided he might consider becoming a Christian. But he wanted to understand why it was that while warring against another of the tribes God did not help him and his family. He said, "When so many children are being killed why does (he) not send one of them for food to me and my family? They are as tender and good (to eat) as young fowls" (p.210-211). And that, Paton added, was from a man who was on his way to becoming a Christian!!!

Well, brothers and sisters, according to Peter, YOU are the ones that our enemy thinks taste pretty good, maybe as good as "young fowls." Why don't you turn to the person next to you and say, "I bet **you** taste pretty good to eat!"

(Oh man...it was a rumor among those in the early Roman Empire that the Christians were believed to be cannibals because they supposedly ATE the body and DRANK THE BLOOD of their Savior, Jesus of Nazareth. So that was the rumor. And now I'm having you turn to each other and talk about eating each other...wait until a rumor about this gets into the community!)

But **Satan is out to devour you**. Sure, your destiny may be set because of Jesus' death on your behalf, but that doesn't mean your life and witness can't be destroyed while you are very much still in this world. Just think of that LONG LIST of Christian leaders here in the U.S. that have been brought to nothing (you know the names: Jimmy Swaggart, Bill Hybels, Ravi Zacharias...you know the list of names), aren't these but few of those whose only remains are a heap of bones?

Back to John Paton...while working to level a site upon which to eventually build a church building, he found a mound of human bones. When he asked one of the cannibalistic chiefs what was with all the bones, he simply said, "We don't eat the bones."

Well, bones are all that is sometimes left after Satan gets a hold of a Christian man or woman. They started out so strong, so confident, so ready to conquer the world for Jesus, and now they're just a pile of bones. Sure, they may yet be saved, but what can anyone say of their life today?

## 2. Ephesians 6:10-18a

If we are going to fight against this enemy (with his many schemes or plots to destroy us) we need to be fitly suited up in armor.

That armor **begins** with the belt of truth that goes around our...to use the King James Version English...**around our loins, our genitals.**

Now that speaks volumes in and of itself. For of all the things to mention **FIRST**, isn't it interesting that Paul would start with something having to do with sex?

Now, if you don't understand Paul, you might likely think he was really **HUNG UP** over sex. After all

- It seems like Paul wasn't married (encouraging others to be single as he says he was in 1 Corinthians chapter 7),
- When Paul mentions what is **evil** in 1 Corinthians 6:9 the first thing he mentions is sexual immorality. Only later does he mention things like drunkenness, anger, thievery and such. But the first thing out the gate in his mind was sex outside of marriage.
- And then here, sure, Paul will go on to talk about a helmet of salvation or a breastplate of righteousness or a shield of faith. But the first thing? A belt of truth around one's loins.

What's going on here is **NOT that Paul was hung up over sex**. Rather, it is that he saw **the Christian community was being destroyed by sexual impurity**. And in that sense, not much has changed in 2,000 years.

You warn people based upon where you see them likely to fail.

To one child you may say, "Not don't drive too fast," while to another Child you may say, "Be careful who you choose as friends." To one person you may warn of one thing and to another another thing. But to the Christian community at large Paul saw that **SEX** and **SEXUAL PURITY** were a special challenge if they were going to stand fast against the devil and his many schemes to see Christians destroyed.

So in regards to that he told young Timothy, "FLEE SEXUAL LUST." He didn't say that to Timothy about murder, or rage or drunkenness, or lying.

And again, even after 2,000 years, we see that little has changed. So, church, **gird your loins with truth**: be honest about your own sexuality, your lusts, your own desires, and your own need for purity.

3. (From the same text) Ephesians 6:17b

Today's Heartbeat article deals with, among other things, the need to teach people how to handle the word of God.

When Paul wrote here of the Christian's armor, it has often been pointed out that every part of this armor, except one piece, is of a defensive sort: a belt, a breastplate, a helmet, a shield, and so forth. The **only offensive armament** mentioned is the sword, which is the word of God. And as noted in today's Heartbeat article, it is here that the modern church is doing a **TERRIBLE JOB – a TOTALLY UNACCEPTABLE JOB** – by not instructing people in the scriptures and how to handle those scriptures.

Listen, when Jesus was being tempted by the devil, what did he do? (He quoted scripture) That's right: he quoted scripture. He quoted from the Bible. And he could only do so because he was **well acquainted with the Bible**.

Someone was talking to me a few months ago about my playing the trombone. They asked me, "How do you know what to play? You have no music in front of you." I said, "There can come a point in playing an instrument that you become so familiar with it that **if you can THINK IT you can PLAY IT**." The instrument becomes an extension of oneself.

So too, that is how the scriptures are to become: extensions of ourselves. But if a church is not **HELPING** one become well acquainted with the Bible (and the modern church – I don't want to get upset but this truly makes me upset...it really does)...if one isn't being pushed to **USE** the Bible, to **FIND** Bible passages, to **READ**, and **STUDY** and **MEMORIZE** scripture, then at best all we are teaching young Christians to do is to hunker down and hope the enemy will

stop attacking. Hunker down, hold up one's shield, and hope and pray someone or something will come along to get the devil off the attack.

And all the while, they likely have a sword with which they could do our enemy REAL HARM.

It is like that account of Christian, in *The Pilgrim's Progress* when he faced Apollyon – another name for the devil...

Let me read it to you, and with that we will be finished for this morning...

We pick up the narrative at the place where Christian has been speaking to Apollyon, a dragon like creature, for some time...

pp. 62-63

Satan is a deceiver, a liar, a roaring lion that is out to destroy you, your life, your witness and, if you are married, your marriage.

How are you doing in fighting off his fiery darts, my friend?

Use the Word of God to fight him off!

Let's pray that in our lives he might be foiled...and foiled again!