

Acts 23:12-35

Outward Church: Unexpected Deliverance

Rev. Jonathan M. Romig / January 30th, 2022

There's something wrong with our youth; and I don't mean our teenagers. I mean the children. There's this thing that they are just addicted too. It gets in their brains. They always want to watch it, and sing it. That's right, I'm talking about the dangers of *Encanto*, Disney's newest adventure for the whole family. We watched *Encanto* a couple weekends ago and now we're listening to Surface Pressure and We Don't Talk About Bruno so many times.

Here's the plotline of *Encanto*. There's an amazing family where each member has been gifted with a superhuman ability—superhuman strength, the ability to grow flowers at will, talking to animals, churning up storms, and hearing really well. But there's also one family member, Mirabel, who doesn't have any superpowers, and is looked down upon. Oh, and they also have a magical house. And when that house begins to crumble, and the family members begin to lose their superpowers, the super strong or super gifted heroes aren't the ones that save the day. The one without all the powers, the ordinary one, she saves the day.

Deliverance comes as a surprise, from someone ordinary and unexpected. That's what today's story in Acts is all about, God's surprising deliverance coming from unexpected places. Paul is being held in the Roman barracks in Jerusalem, called the Antonia Fortress. He doesn't realize how at-risk he is, how forty assassins are conspiring to ambush him the very next day. This group of forty goes to the chief priests and the elders, members of the ruling council he argued with the previous day, and promise to kill Paul if they'll help put him in the right place at the right time.

These assassins are so serious, they've bound themselves by oath to not eat or drink until Paul is dead. They ask the religious leaders to request the tribune bring Paul out of the Antonia Fortress, across the court of the Gentiles on the temple grounds, to the "Chamber of Hewn Stone," which is where the Sanhedrin meet. In that approximately quarter-mile trip, they plan to ambush Paul's Roman guards and kill him. This will ultimately bring disaster not only on Paul, but all of Jerusalem as Rome will retaliate.

This is a pretty dire situation. Paul's at risk. The Christian movement is at risk. Jerusalem, the temple, and the people are all at risk. Who will rescue them? Will God deliver them? As we go through today's story, I hope today you'll reflect on your own life, and recognize some of the ways God has unexpectedly delivered you as well. Or maybe you feel like you need God to throw you the **life jacket**. The water is just too high. God brings unexpected deliverance **four ways**:

1) God brings unexpected deliverance through unexpected people.

Who are the people God works through in this story? First, we hear about Paul's nephew, his sister's son. Now we've never heard of her or her son in this story. Maybe they were estranged, or a part of the church, we don't know. But he overhears the ambush plans and goes to warn Paul. Paul describes his nephew as a "young man," which is the same word used for Eutychus who fell out of the window, and Paul himself when he watched the garments as the Sanhedrin stoned Stephen (Acts 7:58; 20:9).

Why does this matter? You're never too young for God to use you. You could be a teenager, a young man or woman, or even a child, and God can work through you. Maybe that's in a big amazing way that everyone hears about. But in our story, the commander (tribune) tells the young man not to tell anyone. He must have

spilled the beans at some points because we know it happened; but he didn't do it to go viral. He simply followed God's direction. God can use anyone, even the most unexpected.

One of the youth-ministry books I have tells the story of a young woman, a teenager, who challenged her church to love the "carnies" (carnival workers) coming through her town. So her church put on "an all-you-can-eat affair for over 200 carnies." The church didn't mention it was a church when it served this lunch, one of the toughest looking carnies, a guy with lots of tattoos, asked if it was a church. Then he said if lived there, he'd go to that church.¹ God works through the most unexpected, especially teenagers.

But there's another surprising character in our Acts story, and that's the tribune. Paul tells the centurion overseeing his imprisonment to take his nephew to the tribune. That's the same tribune who almost flogged Paul in the last chapter. The enemy of my enemy is my friend. Paul's oppressor has become his advocate, partially because the tribune knows how big of trouble he would be in if he'd successfully flogged a Roman citizen apart from due process.

Later in this passage, when the tribune writes to Felix, he seems to make himself sound better than he actually acted. He says the Jews were about to kill Paul, but he rescued him. He leaves out the part where he almost flogged Paul, a Roman citizen, because that would make him look bad. That could just be our modern translations. It's unclear in the original Greek.

But it's ironic that this man, the one imprisoning Paul, now orders two-hundred-foot soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two-hundred spearmen, a total of 470 soldiers, to go with Paul. He likely only had between 600-1000 soldiers stationed in Jerusalem, so this could be upwards of 50-80% of his forces. He puts himself at risk for the sake of Paul. God has provided amazing deliverance through an unexpected person.

And so, as we think about our own lives, and the challenges we're facing, or as we think about the church and our desire to share the gospel, let's be open to anyone God might bring along. It might really challenge and surprise us when someone we first doubted or opposed us turns into our biggest advocate. Maybe God will even give you an opportunity to be an advocate for someone you generally don't agree with. *God brings unexpected deliverance through unexpected people.*

2) God brings unexpected deliverance in his unexpected timing.

The centurion orders these soldiers to take Paul 35 miles away to Antipatris, and then all the way to Caesarea, about 60 miles total. And he sends them off in the "third hour of the night," or around 9:00 PM. 9:00 PM is a great time to travel 60 miles by foot or horseback! God delivers Paul in the middle of the night.

How might God deliver Westford in his unexpected timing, maybe in the night? How might God deliver our church in his unexpected timing, maybe in Covid? How might God deliver you from your sin or sickness in his unexpected timing? God can change your life anytime he wants. Monica went from working part-time at a non-profit to being hired as a full-time Bible teacher at Bradford Christian Academy in the space of one week. God can do anything anytime he wants when he wants. Just because you haven't seen that deliverance yet doesn't mean that God won't do it. Ultimately, he will deliver us all when we die or he returns, and it will be unexpected. *God brings unexpected deliverance in his unexpected timing.*

3) God's unexpected deliverance produces unexpected results.

The unexpected results are that the 40 conspirators all died from starvation! Actually, we don't know what happened to them. Jewish traditions says that "in the event a vow became impossible to fulfill, those under it were released from its terms (see Mishnah, Nedarim 3.3)."² So they probably didn't starve to death or die of

¹ Mike Yaconelli, *The Core Realities of Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan) chap 2, Kindle.

² ESV Study Bible – Acts 23:21 footnote (page 2135).

dehydration. But to understand the unexpected results, we have to go back to God's appearance to Ananias right after Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus.

Acts 9:15 (ESV)

But the Lord said to [Ananias], "Go, for [Paul] is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

God is actually allowing Paul to be imprisoned, and bound, so that he will have the opportunity to share the gospel message before Felix the governor, and eventually Caesar himself. And here's what Paul says later in the book of Philippians about his time in prison.

Philippians 1:12-13 (ESV)

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, 13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

Paul's imprisonment is for God's glory. Paul's suffering produces unexpected results, the opportunity to share Jesus with those in high positions of power and authority.

How might God use whatever you're going through to produce unexpected results? How might your suffering actually further the spread of the gospel message to those who need it? When my dad died, I told the doctors, the nurses, and everyone I encountered that my dad had gone to be with Jesus. When I talk about him still, I try to emphasize not just that he died, but that he is with Jesus. I told my Dentist that the other day and she didn't say anything. I think it made her uncomfortable. The gospel message can take a moment of death, and transform it into deliverance. *God's unexpected deliverance produces unexpected results.*

God brings unexpected deliverance **four ways**: 1) *God brings unexpected deliverance through unexpected people.* 2) *God brings unexpected deliverance in his unexpected timing.* 3) *God's unexpected deliverance produces unexpected results.*

4) Jesus is our unexpected Savior who offers you unexpected deliverance.

There's so many ironies to this story, but one of the great ones is that in verse twelve, the forty assassins bound themselves with an oath that led to Paul's rescue. In fact, this word for oath actually means, "to declare a curse!" It was like they said, "May I be cursed if I don't kill Paul."³ They were cursed, and God used their curse, to rescue Paul. These forty assassins are the **unwitting Christ-figures** of a story. They bare the curse so that Paul might live. And that's what Christ did for us, but not out of hate, but love for us. He has born our curse, not because he deserved it, but because he didn't, so that we could have eternal life. *Jesus is our unexpected Savior who offers you unexpected deliverance.*

So here's the question. Have you received your unexpected Savior? Do you believe? Jesus is calling you, beckoning you, bearing the wait of your curse so that you might go free! Will you receive his free gift of grace? Will you receive his pardon? Will you believe in your unexpected Savior? If not yet, I'm sure your small group would love to talk about it with you today. *Jesus is our unexpected Savior who offers you unexpected deliverance.*

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this sermon at Cornerstone Congregational Church in Westford, MA. You can listen to his other sermons at CornerstoneWestford.com or on [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com).

³ See John B. Polhill, [Acts](#), vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 472.

Discussion Questions

Upward – What does it say about God that He chooses to save people in unexpected ways? What instances of unexpected deliverance do we see other places in the Bible?

Inward – Have you ever experienced God’s unexpected deliverance? What do you need deliverance from today? Can you think of a time when you were at risk and didn’t realize it? (If appropriate, pause and pray with gratitude for God’s deliverance.)

Outward – Who might need deliverance in your life? Is there a way you could help in an unexpected manner? Are there people you have underestimated because you don’t expect them to be helpful? How could God enter into that situation and shake up your expectations?

Spiritual Exercises

Pray – Take time to pray about God’s unexpected deliverance in your life. Thank him for his deliverance of you and those you know who have also experienced his grace. Ask him if there’s any way you can be an instrument of deliverance. Confess anything you need deliverance from, and ask him to rescue you. End quietly, dependently, awaiting the Father’s deliverance.

Worship (Contemporary) – Listen to the song, “[Above All \[with lyrics\]](#)” by Lenny LeBlanc. Meditate on the unusual nature of our deliverance through Christ Jesus.

Worship (Modern) – Andy recommends we worship with this song as well, “[Too Good To Not Believe](#)” by Brandon Lake and Jenn Johnson. It includes lyrics for singing along or just thinking about what we’re saying (call back to our worship class last spring!).

Content Curation

Message – Our own Monica Romig recently gave a chapel talk at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary about [God’s deliverance of his people from Isaiah 66:7-14](#). This is a great way to dive deeper into the theme of God’s gracious deliverance of his people.

Book – As I’ve been leading us through the book of Acts I’ve been reading *Paul: A Biography* by N.T. Wright. It’s a very interesting and accessible overview of Paul’s life. If you want to review what we’ve been learning in Acts, it’s a great resource ([ChristianBook](#), [Audible](#)).