

A Perfect Plan

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[0 : 00] I think it's only on three occasions that I have travelled abroad. I'm not exactly a well-travelled person.

And it was a long time ago that I did go over to America to do some studying over there. It was just for a month and nothing really special.

But I did spend a lot of time planning the trip. We were going along with a few other colleagues. And we spent a long time planning the trip and felt that we were absolutely prepared for getting over to Jackson, Mississippi.

However, when the time came, it really wasn't that straightforward. It ended up being, in many ways, quite of an ordeal. We left our various homes.

We travelled to Aberdeen, where we were intending to get an early morning flight. That evening, I spent the night sleeping on the floor of my sister's home and got up early to get to the airport.

[1 : 16] When we got to the airport, there was some kind of delay with the flight. And it meant that we had to stay another evening.

We were put up in a hotel because of that. And then even the following day, there was numerous difficulties, problems with the bookings.

And it just all seemed just a bit difficult. Eventually, we got onto the plane. And after being away from home, which was the best part of three days, we were in the air.

And when we were in the air, I was watching the screen that was tracking the flight. And I realised that we were just, at that point, flying over the Isle of Skye.

And it struck me all this time. And my parents were nearer to America than I was. And they hadn't left the fireside. And then came the on-screen, or the on-flight kind of entertainment.

[2 : 20] It was a film. This was, you can tell it was a wee while ago. It was before you actually had your own individual screens. It was just a screen, one for all. And the in-flight entertainment was a film that was called The Perfect Storm.

The Perfect Storm. Some of you may be familiar with it. It stars my look-alike, George Clooney. And it's about some guys that are going out in their trawler, in their fishing boat.

And you see them all there, and they're saying goodbye to their loved ones and their families, just as we had done a few days before. And they're going off in this boat.

And we knew then that this was a film that didn't end well. Because none of them come back. And we're looking at each other, filled with a kind of sense of fear, as we're watching this film, The Perfect Storm.

When we read through Acts 27, we have there the showing of the perfect storm.

[3 : 35] However, it's somewhat different to the film. And it does end well. And it's at this perfect storm I want us to look at together this evening.

I want to notice, first of all, that there is a perfect plan. This is something that is clear, not just in this passage of Scripture, but something that's clear throughout the whole of Scripture.

That God has a plan. He has a plan for the universe. He has a plan for mankind.

If you like, he's got a macro plan. And that macro plan involves everything working to this one great day.

That great day when every knee will bow. And every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. That's the big picture.

[4 : 41] That's the big plan. But within that, God also has his micro planning. And you see that in all of the lives of the people that are recorded for us in Scripture.

And you see it very clearly in the life of Paul. If you look at the life of Paul, you see God's hand there working. You see God's plan unfolding.

You think of when he came to faith. He's told by God, look, I have a plan for you. And my plan for you is that you will go and you will take the gospel to the Gentiles.

That's the plan. For him to preach the gospel of salvation. And even if you go back to chapter 23, verse 11, you see that it's even more micro than that.

Because Paul is told there that God's plan for him is that just as he preached the gospel in Jerusalem, so he must preach the gospel in Rome.

[5 : 51] He has a plan. Detailed. Specific. For the life of Paul. And as we recognize that, we have to recognize that God has a plan for each one of us.

He has a plan for us as individuals. He has a plan for you as a congregation. And often what we will find is that often God's ways are not our ways, nor his thoughts, our thoughts.

His plans are different to ours. We all have our aspirations. We all have our ideas. We all have our plans for our own lives and so on.

There are things that we want to happen and wish to happen and are working to happen. But with God, you see, he doesn't have things that he wants. He doesn't have things that he wishes.

He has things that he has willed. His plan is determined. And his plan will come to pass.

[6 : 59] Do you remember when Paul went to preach in Athens? He preached a very powerful sermon there. And as he's preaching to the people in Athens, he tells them about this God that he worships.

But he tells them that this God is the God who has determined both their geography and their history. He has determined where they live.

And he has determined their lives. He is showing to them and telling them that God is the God with a purpose in their lives.

And that nothing happens by mere chance or mistake. That what we are doing as we experience things each day is we are watching the unfolding of the plan of God in our lives.

Knowing that everything is working up towards that great goal of every knee bowing, every tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord.

[8 : 06] Perhaps God's plan is seen most clearly in the life of God's Son. You go back to the Old Testament and you see all the prophecies about Jesus.

Read through Isaiah 53. Read through Psalm 22. And you see all that is being not just predicted, but all that was planned for the Son of God, the Savior.

And when you come into the New Testament, you read in various occasions of how people who were envious or jealous of Jesus wanted to take hold of him. They wanted to kill him.

And we're told they could not. And why? Because his time had not yet come. It happens over and over again. And then you come to John 17, when Jesus is giving what we call the high priestly prayer.

And do you remember how he prays? He says, Father, now glorify your Son as the Son has glorified you. But he is saying, the time has come.

[9 : 13] The time has come. This was the moment appointed by the Father. This was the moment planned from all eternity for Jesus to go and to suffer on the cross.

Now the more we recognise the fact that God has a perfect plan, the more we should be encouraged in our own hearts and souls.

Because it really is a tremendous thing. But only, only if you have a right view of God. I was saying to some of the men here earlier that I remember being with you a few years ago.

I think it was doing evangelistic services. And a number of you were giving your testimonies in the kind of after church fellowships.

And I remember six testimonies being given. And in five of these testimonies, there was the mention of one man, the late Reverend Douglas Macmillan.

[10 : 22] And Douglas Macmillan often would, when preaching, ask this question. What view do you have of God? Is he the God of the clenched fist?

Or is he the God of the open arms? If you have a view of God where he is the God of the clenched fist, then it will be of little comfort to you to know that he has the perfect plan that he will fulfil perfectly.

But if you have the view of God as the God of the open arms, the God of love, then it will be a tremendous comfort to you to know that he has got everything planned in the minutest detail.

You see, Paul knew the God of the open arms. And that is why when he wrote to the church in Rome, he could say to them, do you know, all these things are happening. And some of them are really difficult.

But we know that God makes all things work together for the good of those who love him, who are the called according to his purpose.

[11 : 37] All things. Not just some things, or most things, but all things. Is that something that you and I truly believe?

When you think of the things that we go through in our lives, when you think of perhaps the hassles at work, maybe the strains within the family, when you think of times of illness, the times of loss and bereavement, when you think that all you have been through together as a fellowship and a congregation, can you say, do you know what I believe?

That God makes all things, without exception, work together for the good of those who love him, for those who are called according to his purpose.

That everything, the good and the bad, the things that cause pain and the things that cause praise, that all these things are ultimately working towards that great goal of every knee bowing and every tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord.

He has a perfect plan. The perfect plan, however, does not necessarily mean that we will have a simple life.

[12 : 57] Paul's journey to Rome is in many ways a kind of metaphor for the Christian life. And you see that as you begin this journey with him at the beginning of chapter 27, there are some really good things going on.

It begins really with a great measure of success. And then as we go on, we're told about a particular kindness that is shown to Paul by the Augustan cohort named Julius.

And then we read of how he's allowed to go and have time with friends in that company of fellowship. These are wonderful things that are happening.

But then things take various twists and turns. He gets into the boat and they find that the various phrases that are used there, the winds were against us.

We were making slow headway. There were unexpected changes where suddenly he's been shifted from one boat into another. It talks about how they felt that they were in real difficulties.

[14 : 08] Speaks about how they felt they couldn't hold their course. Verse 9, it speaks about how they were in danger. Then there's the uncertainty of what's going to happen.

And it all builds up even to verse 20 when it speaks about them feeling like they're in darkness and in despair. Now, it's a lot like life.

And it's a lot like our Christian lives. Really great things happen. Times when we know such blessing. Times when we experience such kindness.

Times when we're in fellowship with God's people and we just know that love with one another and that nearness is to each other. There are times when it's absolutely beautiful.

It's the joy that's unspeakable and full of glory. It's the peace that passes all understanding. It's the love being lavished upon us and we know it. But there are times when we feel the winds are against us.

[15 : 13] There's times when it feels we're making slow headway. There's times when there's the unexpected changes. There's the difficulties. Times when we feel we can't even hold our course.

There's times when we feel that even spiritually we're in danger and there's uncertainty. And yes, there are even times when we feel like we're in darkness and in despair.

But all that is happening within the framework of God's perfect plan. It shouldn't surprise us.

The Lord warned us. He told us that as believers that following him would not be easy. When a would-be follower came to Jesus and said, Lord, I'll follow you wherever you go.

He stops and he says, ah, but remember the foxes have holes, the birds of air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. He's saying, look, it's not going to be an easy life if you follow me.

[16 : 19] He said, in this world you will have tribulation. It's not that you might have or possibly it will have. You will have tribulation. This is the way it's going to be. And there's particular difficulties that the Christian believer will encounter.

But then there are the difficulties that are just common to all mankind. They're the difficulties that we will all encounter. It isn't that the Christian will be exempt from financial difficulties or problems at

work or from illness or from grief or any of these things.

The things that are just common to fallen humanity. We will go through all of them together. But it's all within the framework of God's perfect plan.

It's all within the framework of that plan that is moving towards that great goal of every knee bowing and every tongue confessing. So a perfect plan doesn't necessarily mean a simple life.

But a perfect plan should bring to us a measure of a sense of peace. When we look at this passage you'd see a very stark contrast between those who were on the boat and the Apostle Paul.

[17 : 37] When you look at those who were on the boat it often speaks of fear. Fearing that they would run aground. That point of absolute despair where in verse 20 it speaks about how they just thought they may as well give up.

All hope had gone of them being saved. Again verse 29 it speaks about how they were terrified that they were going to dash against the rocks.

But Paul was different. Why? What was it that gave Paul a sense of peace? Again it's a number of years ago he was asked to conduct a wedding in a most unusual location.

It was to be held in the Isle of Rona and in a particular place called the Church Cave. Now the Isle of Rona is largely uninhabited now.

It's a wee island just off the Isle of Skye and as you would imagine the only way to there is by boat. And there are a few boats that are chartered that go over taking tourists and things like that.

[18 : 46] And there are just one or two houses now on the island mainly used for folk that go up there for a holiday. But anyway I was asked to go and conduct this wedding in the Church Cave.

It's quite a climb down to it. And a boat had been hired to to get me over there. But when the day of the wedding came it was a day of probably one of the fiercest storms that we had seen.

And it was impossible for that boat to get there. And so what happened was one of the local fishermen who had his Creole boat he said he would take me.

And so off we went in the boat. And it really was a matter it was like a roller coaster up and down up and down. But I remember just sitting there with that perfect sense of peace.

There was no fear not even a hint of seasickness or anything along these lines. And the reason that I had no fear was simply this I knew the guy who was the captain of the boat.

[19 : 55] And I knew he had sailed in that kind of weather plenty of times before and perhaps even worse. And I trusted him. I knew I could sit and even made a cup of tea and had it it was hard to drink it to be fair but the cup of tea while going over to the Isle of Rona.

If on the other hand instead of him taking me I had been simply told there's a boat you can sail it over to the Isle of Rona then I would have been worried then I would have been scared because then I would have been the one who was in control.

Hopefully you see the point I'm making. We can have a sense of peace even as we're going through the storms that are involved in the perfect plan of God because we know the captain in charge and we know he can guide us and sail us and navigate us through the storms.

If you and I were in charge it's then we should be frightened but when we have our captain Christ in charge then we can be at peace.

Within this passage here you see perhaps a couple of things that is creating that peace within the heart of the apostle. And the two things I think are God's presence and God's promises.

[21 : 33] During the night God came to Paul with an angel and Paul was very conscious therefore of the heavenly presence with him.

Do you know how often it is said in the Bible don't be afraid. I was doing an assembly for one of the primary schools just last week and it was being done on the subject of fear and the things that make us afraid.

And perhaps you've heard this many times before but apparently the words do not be afraid are said 365 times in the Bible.

And the moment I ask the children when you think of the number 365 what you think of they immediately said the number of days in the year. There is a fear not for every single day of the year. And more often or not when God says to us don't be afraid it is followed by that great statement that great fact don't be afraid because I am with you.

[22 : 43] I am with you. we sang in Psalm 23. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadows of death I will not be afraid. Why?

Because you are with me and your rod and your staff they comfort me. That awareness of God's presence makes a difference. It gives us peace.

But not just his presence but also his promises. Again I remember from when I was younger there was a book a daily readings book by Charles Spurgeon and it was called The Checkbook of the Bank of Faith.

Maybe some of you have it or remember it. But I'm not sure if you ever noticed the kind of subtitle to that book. It was The Checkbook of the Bank of Faith being precious promises arranged for daily use.

Now if there was a daily reading for each day of the year and each daily reading was bringing to us one of the promises of God in his word.

[23 : 50] It means there must be at least 365 promises in the word of God as well. So we have for every day a fear not and we have for every day a promise.

We have for every day the promise of the presence of God and that is where we find our peace. Our peace comes from knowing the presence of our God with us and the promises that our God has given to us. And then finally we see that this perfect plan it does not negate personal responsibilities.

you see there is a temptation for us to say well God has a perfect plan and he will see that plan unfold and he will fulfill his purposes and therefore all we do is we stand back and do nothing.

It's not the way it works. And we see that in this passage too. This God with his perfect plan and perfect purpose still expects Paul and others to fulfill their own personal responsibilities.

[25 : 07] They're expected to obey his commands. Again we don't have time we're just about out of time but look again at things at verse 31 and so on.

The commands that are given the instructions that are given by God he expects them to fulfill them to carry them out to the letter. He expects them to practice good sense.

Even in the midst of all this storm they are doing what any good sailor would do. They tie the ropes under the ship. They lower the sea anchors.

They try to run aground on an island. They have to remember to eat to keep up their strength. They try to lighten the ship so that it is not quite so much danger and so on.

There's lots of just things. It's just normal, practical, good and common sense. That is their responsibility. But there's also something else that is their responsibility.

[26 : 06] responsibility. You see often when we think of faith, when we think of trust, we speak of it as if it's just something that we either have or do not have.

And that's not the way the Bible speaks of faith and trust. Faith is something that we choose to exercise.

trust is something that we choose to give. We choose to put our faith in Jesus. We choose to trust him as our Lord and as our saviour.

And that's why here Paul is urging the people to simply trust. He is urging them to exercise faith both in the presence and in the promises of God.

He is telling them what God has said. He is telling them what God has promised and he is now telling them to exercise trust on what God has said and what God has promised.

[27 : 20] John Newton, the writer of probably one of the most famous hymns, Amazing Grace, he was a seafaring man and indeed he came to faith while caught in the middle of a storm.

But he, I know I recited a hymn this morning, but just one verse from a hymn that he wrote as well, it's called Be Gone Unbelief.

And this is what he says, Be gone Unbelief. My saviour is near. And for my relief will surely appear. By prayer let me wrestle and he will perform with Christ in the vessel.

I smile in the storm. His love in time past forbids me to think that he'll leave me at last and in trouble to sink.

sink. You see, we have much reason to exercise faith and to place our trust in Jesus Christ because his love in time past forbids us to think that he'll leave us at last in trouble to sink.

[28 : 41] you see, even if we feel that we have gone through or are going through the perfect storm, it's never a tragedy because our Christ is in control and because he will even make that storm blow us in the direction of God and he will make the events of the storm result in his glory and our good.

He makes all things work together for the good of those who love him and all things will work ultimately to that great day, that great moment that thrills and stirs the heart as we picture it, every knee bowing and every tongue confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God our Father.