

*Read also Isaiah 55:4-11*

One day a man was plowing in a field, and he plowed through a mouse's nest. It was disastrous for the mouse of course, so the man wrote a poem of apology:

But, Mousie, thou art (no thy lane) *not alone*  
In proving foresight may be vain:  
The best laid schemes o' mice an' men  
(Gang aft a-gley) *often go awry*,  
An' leave us nought but grief an' pain,  
For promised joy.<sup>1</sup>

Now that's not the most encouraging poem but it does speak to the mouse's reality, so I am sure if the little mouse survived, he appreciated Robert Burns' efforts. Notice it says "of mice and men;"

The best laid schemes o' mice an' men *often go awry*,  
An' leave us nought but grief an' pain, for promised joy.

Is that true? What do you think? On a bad day you might agree. I wonder how Paul would have described it.

We left Paul last week in Ephesus as he said goodbye to his friends to head to Jerusalem. He had anticipated trouble but felt certain of God's call. He wanted to go to there to deliver an offering of money collected from all the Gentile churches. Paul was very proud of this huge undertaking; in the works for several years. Paul even postponed his trip to Rome and Spain to personally deliver this gift to the Jerusalem believers, which exemplified the solidarity and unity of the Gentiles with the Jews.

But the best laid plans . . .

Things went well at first. Paul arrived in Jerusalem and the Jewish believers embraced him warmly. But then the faction of Jews who opposed him stirred up trouble because he was seen with a Gentile from Ephesus. He was assaulted and arrested. The Jewish believers failed to come to his defense.

The best laid plans . . .

Four times Paul is rescued from a hopeless riot. Each time the rescue comes from a surprising source. We join him at the fourth threat to his life. READ Acts 23:12-24

Extraordinary story. Can you imagine these details being important enough to be included in the Bible? Details of our lives are important to God. Impossible situations are not insurmountable to God. God watches over you constantly. Do you have this confidence? Trust it. Talk to the Lord all the time and you will gain His presence, like Paul.

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<sup>1</sup>"To a Mouse," by Robert Burns, 1786. Italics are translations of the original text which is in parentheses.

The night before Jesus stood by him and said, "Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome" (Acts 23:11).

God exercised direct intervention. Isn't that amazing? Paul's nephew being at the right place at just the right time – that's God's doing. And then that the chief of police cooperated and took action right away on behalf of a prisoner? Somehow God gave Paul good favor with him. See God loves these people; God has a plan to reach them.

Now they don't realize they are carrying out God's plan. But they are.

God has something in mind for you – something personal; God wants you to have the joy of seeing it come to pass. What God has in mind for you, if you take it seriously and keep up your courage, will happen. And, you too will be able to accomplish something for the kingdom.

When plans go awry do we truly have nothing but grief and pain as Robert Burns writes? We read in Isaiah:

- *See, I made him a witness to the peoples, and*
- *My word goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty but shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

So in God's hands, maybe we aren't limited. Maybe as we answer God's call on our lives, we will actually be a witness. That is your "first call," you know. Jesus said, "Go make disciples – in your neighborhood; then in the next town, and eventually in all nations. Are you willing to courageously do it?"

Paul, though, must have thought, *yikes, this is a very real threat*. Most of do not particularly fear physical persecution but we do have fears. Our fear plays out in this way:

- If I give too much time to Jesus or the church, I'll miss out on "real" life;
- If I immerse myself too much in God, I'll be a fanatic, unbalanced, or weird;
- If I give too much money I won't feel secure for the future.

Satan tempts us to worry about being too devoted. But the most meaningful life as a Christian is a life of devotion. Why? Paul tells us.

His call was great. Paul's call was, "You will witness to Jews and Gentiles and kings" (Acts 9:15). Paul really did witness to all those people. When he got the call, surely he thought, kings? I don't know any kings. But then he saw God work it all out . . . during this very trying period. Where "the best laid plans of mice and men had gone awry" . . .

- Paul witnessed to the Jews;
- He gave his testimony to the tribune;
- He witnessed to the Jewish council and high priest;
- He told his story to Governor Felix;
- He witnessed about God's greatness to Governor Festus;
- He stood before King Agrippa and Queen Bernice, with all eyes and ears on him;
- He witnessed to the Emperor of Rome

All these people listened attentively, openly, and with respect. Only God could have accomplished it; God says, "I want to have mercy on people. I want to turn them around – through you. That may surprise you. My ways are not your ways." (Ginger's paraphrase)

Jesus admonished Paul *take courage. I will take care of you.*

And indeed, Paul was taken care of. When forty men came against him, Paul received a personal escort by half the Roman garrison. That's God's protection!

Then when in prison for two years he didn't live in a jail cell, he lived in Herod's magnificent palace. God provides more than we can ask or think.

Hasn't God provided more than we can ask or think right here?

You are to witness to that. Who have you told? Have you told your neighbors? You know, one of Jesus' first miracles was simply to heal Peter's mother of a high fever. By that night people were coming to Jesus for healing. (Lk 4:38-40)

That's what Jesus has done here. We have a great task: to witness to Jesus Christ. As you tell it, sometimes things will go awry. But don't quit. When you are willingly available to God, God will use you. It's when we remove ourselves by saying no, or becoming fearful, or taking time out to serve ourselves that God loses out; the good things God does go ignored, and people's lives are lost.

Okay, so we can't just warm the bench. So what can we do?

One man named Gabe Lyons and his wife learned their unborn daughter likely had Down Syndrome. Most of those pregnancies are terminated, but the Lyons decided not to do that. Instead, they wrote a little booklet for parents. They told their testimony of their faith, and how their daughter blessed their life. They gave the booklet to their ob/gyn. It was eventually adopted by a national Ob/Gen Association to give out to parents who receive this news during pregnancy.

Sometimes the plans of mice and men go awry. Sometimes like that little mouse, our homes are upturned. The Lyons family was thrust into their call; it was unanticipated. But they let God guide them to allow God to witness through it.

Calls often require a daily renewal of two simple words: "Yes, Lord."

Are you saying "yes" daily? Listening, letting God use you even when life unexpectedly goes awry; believing that with God there is magnificent hope?

God will not force you, but He will find that person who says yes.

Martin Luther was a man who said "yes." At those times of danger he would say to his associate, Philipp, *let us sing the 46<sup>th</sup> Psalm.* It's the song we sang earlier:

A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing  
Our helper He amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.

God indeed prevails in all that comes against us, and Paul's devotion inspires us to press on to make a difference, right here where we live. As Theodore Roosevelt wrote:

"It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself for a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat."<sup>2</sup>

You are the bearers of God's cause. God is pleased for you to be a part of it so that you have promised joy!

AMEN

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<sup>2</sup> "Citizenship in a Republic," by Theodore Roosevelt, Speech at the Sorbonne, Paris, April 23, 1910