

# Paul and Providence

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[ 0 : 00 ] We come this evening to the second of our studies in the life and work of the Apostle Paul. Please turn in your Bibles to Galatians chapter 1, verses 15 and 16.

Our subject this evening is Paul and Providence. When I was 10 years old, my Latin master gave our class an excellent piece of advice.

He said, boys, when you're writing an essay, there are three things you need to remember. Begin at the beginning, go on to the end, and then stop.

Now that's good advice not only for essay writers, but for preachers. I've heard preachers who didn't begin at the beginning. And I've heard some preachers who didn't go on to the end.

And I've heard many, many preachers who, when they reached the end, obviously, were unable to stop. Now this evening, we're beginning at the beginning with Paul.

[ 1 : 24 ] And in Paul's case, it is the beginning. For as he reflects on his own life, he begins with his conception in his mother's womb.

That is the beginning. And the words before us this evening, when it pleased God, and here is our text, to set me apart from my mother's womb.

Please disregard the translation in the body of the NIV text, and take the more accurate translation in the margin. God, who set me apart from my mother's womb.

Now this word which Paul uses here, to mean to set apart, is a particular Greek word which means to appoint or separate for a special purpose.

To appoint or separate for a special purpose. It was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, for example, of the firstborn.

[ 2 : 35 ] The firstborn was to be separated or set apart. It was used for the first fruits. These two were to be set apart for a special purpose.

It was used of the Levites. They were to be set apart to God. We find the same verb used in the New Testament in Acts chapter 13, verse 2.

The Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. Set apart for a special purpose.

It's used again in Romans chapter 1 and verse 1. Paul, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God.

That's the word which Paul uses here. God set me apart for a purpose from my mother's womb.

The Hebrew word which it translates is the verb *parush*.

[ 3 : 44 ] What scholars suggest is connected with the word Pharisee. The Pharisees were the *parushim*. The set apart one. The separated one.

And if that's the case, Paul may in fact be making a play on words here in this passage. He was, of course, as we shall see, born a Pharisee.

But is he perhaps saying, In a deeper sense, in a divine sense, I was indeed a Pharisee. God's Pharisee. God's set apart one. As Paul looks back over his life, he sees that God's hand has been upon him from the moment of his conception.

And since that is the case, we ought to be able to trace God's hand in Paul or Saul's early life.

I refer to him throughout as Paul for the sake of convenience. Even in his pre-conversion days, in his early days, in his childhood days, we should be able to discern the fingerprints of the great potter.

[ 4 : 56 ] As he prepares and shapes this vessel for his purpose and his glory. Since God set him apart from his mother's womb.

And indeed, we can see that. For the purpose which God had in mind for Paul was to create and shape a man who could relate to three nationalities.

Greeks, Romans, and Jews. He was destined to take the Jewish faith to the Greeks and the Romans.

And so it was necessary that he should be able to understand and communicate with these three very different races and cultures. And in Paul, God designed such a man.

Philip Schaff writes, Paul combined in himself the three great nationalities of the ancient world. and was thus endowed with all the natural qualifications for a universal apostleship.

[ 6 : 08 ] So this evening, I want to look in some detail at the background and early life of the apostle. It's a little bit more of a lecture, though I expect it will end up as a sermon before we're finished.

But please don't feel that you have to get all these details down. I give them to you for the sake of completeness and for the sake of those for whom they may be of interest and value.

We don't know for certain the date of Paul's birth. There is quite a strong tradition in the early church that he served God for 35 years and died in Rome in 67 AD at the age of 68.

That is a tradition. But not all traditions are unfounded and there may well be a stratum of truth in that. If that was the case, he was born in 1 BC, three or four years after our Lord and Saviour.

He was converted about 32 or 33 AD and died in 67. To set his life in the context of world history, he lived during the reign of five Caesars or emperors.

[ 7 : 29 ] He was born during the reign of Augustus. He grew up during Tiberius and Caligula. He spent his middle age in the emperorship of Claudius and he was an old man during the reign of Nero.

So these five emperors were reigning in his lifetime. When Paul was a middle-aged man, the Roman legions invaded Britain and the city of London was founded as a Roman city.

And in his old age, he may have heard of the revolt under Queen Boadicea against the Roman power. So that puts him in his context on a world stage.

The Roman writers, Seneca and Pliny, were his contemporaries. Libby, Ovid and Strabo died in his youth. Philo of Alexandria was 20 years older than Paul and Josephus, the Jewish historian, was about 30 at the time of Paul's death.

So he was contemporary with these great figures of classical history. Now this evening, I want to look with you first at his Greek background, then at his Roman background, and lastly at his Jewish background.

[ 8 : 50 ] To see how in all of this, God had set him apart. And God was preparing him, even though he didn't realise it, for the work to which he would later be called.

And then at the end, we seek to apply it. He was of course born in Tarsus, the capital city of the province of Cilicia.

He himself describes it as no ordinary city. I suppose we all feel that about the city or place where we were born.

I certainly do. But Paul wasn't being unduly biased here. Tarsus was indeed a very important and ancient city. It had been a notable city from ancient times.

It was the city through which the great trade route from Syria to Europe passed, from the east to the west. Just north of Tarsus there was a huge range of mountains, the Taurus Mountains.

[ 9 : 53 ] And the only way through those mountains was by one little, narrow, chiseled gap the size of a wagon called the Cilician Gates.

and it was just behind the city of Tarsus. So all the land trade from the east to the west passed through Tarsus.

It was a great metropolis. They had a magnificent artificial harbour which served ships from Egypt and the Near East. The Roman orator Cicero had been pro-consul there in 50 BC.

Julius Caesar had visited it. Mark Anthony and Cleopatra had had a romantic rendezvous there which you can read about in one of William Shakespeare's plays.

Tarsus was also a university city. One of the great universities of ancient times. Not one of the top three but certainly a leading university.

[ 11 : 02 ] The citizens of Tarsus were known throughout the ancient world for their interest in learning. It was a centre of Stoic philosophy. The tutor of the emperor Augustus had been a famous Stoic philosopher called Athenodorus and he had been a native of Tarsus and a governor of the city.

And Paul shows a knowledge of Stoic philosophy. There was a theatre there where the Greek plays were performed. There was a stadium where there would be running and wrestling and chariot racing.

It was a centre of Greek culture. The main industry in Tarsus was the production of a material called Cilicium named after the province.

It was a woollen material made of black goat's hair and it was used for tents for soldiers capes and for other waterproof heat retaining coverings.

And many of the citizens were engaged in the manufacture of the Cilicium and then of the making of this material into garments and tents and so on. Now we know that when Paul met Aquila and Priscilla of Torrent we read because he was a tent maker as they were he stayed and worked with them.

[12:32] And that word tent maker almost certainly refers to someone who makes woollen goods from this material. Now Paul could obviously work with his hands of this material.

He was able to make the goods himself. But we shouldn't think of him as an artisan, as a humble workman. He was a citizen of Tarsus.

And the Greek records tell us that every citizen had to have 500 drachmas worth of property before he could be enrolled as a citizen.

So Paul must have belonged to a well-to-do family in the upper levels of society. property. And the picture I have is that his father was possibly a manufacturer of woollen goods, perhaps employing several men, but ensuring that he and his son could take part themselves in the practical side of the business.

There was a requirement among the Jews that every rabbi had to learn a trade and be able to earn his living with his hands.

[13:47] A regulation which I am devoutly thankful has last. We don't know how long Paul spent in Tarsus. He studied in Jerusalem from the age of 12 or 13, but he may have travelled there somewhat earlier.

He says in Acts 22 verse 3, I was born in Tarsus, but brought up from an early age in this city, that is in Jerusalem. At whatever time he went to Jerusalem, his years in Tarsus among the Greeks were certainly very formative years.

They left an indelible stamp on his personality. Gresham Machen says Paul uses the Greek language in such masterly fashion that he must have become familiar with it very early in life.

He spoke Greek, in other words, like a native. It's also probable that he spent a number of years as a grown man in his native city before his conversion.

I think we can conclude that because he almost certainly never met the Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh. And it's my persuasion that this almost certainly implies that he wasn't in Jerusalem when the Lord Jesus was preaching and ministering.

[15:18] I just cannot conceive of Saul of Tarsus being the man he was with the interest he had, being in a small city at the same time as Jesus of Nazareth and not going to hear him or debate with him or have something to do with him.

But whatever the details of his time in Tarsus, his debt to his native city was immense, for it almost made a Greek of him. He spoke and wrote Greek with great freedom and elegance and power. He was familiar with the Greek poets, able to quote them from memory in the midst of an extemporary address. I have my own view on when he studied the Greek poets, perhaps that could come up in discussion.

His very illustrations and metaphors in his letters tell us that there was something in him that responded to the Greek games, to the running and the fighting, the stadium.

he writes as someone who had watched these things, who had enjoyed them and taken a delight in them. Although he read the scriptures in Hebrew, the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, the Old International Version, was his Bible.

[16:43] And he was able to quote from memory large sections of the Word of God in Greek. Greek. So that's Paul's early Greek background.

It was God's purpose that the gospel should go to the Greeks. And here he was preparing a man who could take the gospel to the Greeks and who could understand the Greeks in a way that the Palestinian disciples could not and who could communicate with them and talk with them in their own language and on their own terms.

Set apart for a purpose from birth. Let me say a word about his Roman background.

In the world at this time, Greek thought and culture were of course predominant. But political power and military power rested in Roman hands.

A Roman empire with a Greek culture. There was one tense occasion when Paul was in danger of a flogging in Jerusalem. And on that occasion he claimed Roman citizenship.

[18:02] And he was questioned by the garrison commander. Acts 22:27. The commander went to Paul and asked, tell me, are you a Roman citizen?

Yes, I am, he answered. Then the commander said, I had to pay a big price for my citizenship. But I was born a citizen, Paul replied.

I was born a Roman citizen. That is to say, his father had been a Roman citizen before him. Now, a century after this, Roman citizenship was given more or less willy-nilly throughout the empire.

It didn't mean much. But at this period, it was quite exceptional for Roman citizenship to be given to a Jew. And especially to such a strict family of Jews, such a non-conformist to Roman ways family of Jews, as Paul's family was to be, as we shall see.

We don't know how Paul's ancestors became citizens of Rome. We don't know why they became citizens of Rome. They must have rendered some outstanding service to Rome.

[19:19] F.F. Bruce suggests that there may have been a connection with their family business. He writes, a firm of tent makers could have been very useful to a fighting pro-consul.

You see, they were in the business of military supplies. And that's a possible reason why Paul's grandfather or great-grandfather or someone in his ancestry was granted Roman citizenship.

But at any rate, his citizenship was to prove of great value in the spread of the gospel. And we need to remember that Paul was a Roman citizen.

He had a very clear, distinct identity and status as a Roman citizen. We only know one of his Roman names, the last. Every Roman had three names.

For example, Gaius, Julius, Caesar. And Paul would have had three names as a Roman citizen. Marcus, Fabius, Paulus. Paul, perhaps chosen because it sounded like Saul, his own Hebrew name.

[20:28] But at any rate, he had a clear identity and status in the society and world of that day as a Roman citizen with a Roman name, a Roman passport. They carried documentary proof of their identity in a little wooden tablet.

And Paul would have carried that with him. And this was to prove very significant. He had various rights and privileges. He was exempt from certain cruel and humiliating punishments.

He was protected against summary execution. And above all, above all, as a Roman citizen, he had a right of appeal to Rome.

And we can see here the marvelous complexity of God's sovereign plan. He intends one of his servants to go to the capital of that great empire and preach the gospel there and have access to Caesar's household and to appear before the nobility and the senate of Rome as a Roman citizen, a Christian preacher.

And so apparently generations before, some obscure Jew in Cilicia had been given Roman citizenship so that years later in God's providence, his descendant could say, I appeal to Caesar and could go with the gospel to the capital city of the world.

[22:01] And when he got there, he wouldn't be an alien, he would be a citizen, set apart for a purpose from birth.

And then we come thirdly to his Jewish background. This, of course, is by far the most important of all. He gives us his natural and spiritual pedigree in Philippians chapter 3, circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, in regard to the law, a Pharisee.

Nothing could be stronger or more emphatic than Paul's Jewishness. This is the very essence of the man. This is the core of the man.

He was a Jew from the cradle. He was a Jew through and through, a Jew first, last, and always. Let's note some of those phrases.

He was of the tribe of Benjamin. Benjamin was regarded as the most Jewish of all the tribes, the tribe with great honor.

[23:23] The holy city lay in the territory of Benjamin. The temple lay in the territory of Benjamin. If you were of the tribe of Benjamin, then you were a Jew of the highest pedigree.

The most famous Benjaminite in history was of course Saul, the first king of Israel. And many of the young boys of the tribe must have been named after their famous ancestor.

Saul of Benjamin. That's who the apostle was. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews. And what does that mean?

Well, it means more than to say that his family was intensely Jewish. The word Hebrew seems to be used as a technical term in the New Testament.

And it is usually contrasted with the word Hellenist. For example, in Acts 6 verse 1, we are told that there was a complaint or a dispute between the Hellenists and the Hebrews.

[ 24 : 40 ] These were two groups in the early church. And the distinction was probably linguistic and cultural. The Hebrews were Jews, but they attended synagogues where the service was conducted in Hebrew.

and they spoke Aramaic. The Hellenists were Jews, but they attended synagogues where the service was in Greek.

And Greek was their mother tongue. So there were nationality problems in the early church as well as in the church ever since. The Hellenists and the Hebrews had difficulties here.

Paul was a Hebrew. In other words, he was born into an Aramaic speaking home. His father and mother spoke Aramaic in the home.

They taught their children Aramaic. Now there were only two kinds of people in Jews in Asia Minor who spoke Aramaic.

[ 25 : 41 ] There were those Jews who had just recently emigrated from Palestine and hadn't had time to learn the language. So they had to speak Aramaic.

Now Paul obviously wasn't in that category. His family were Roman citizens. They lived in Tarsus for some time. And people who had been away for some time and still spoke Aramaic were the exceptionally strict, conservative, traditional Jews.

The Jews who refused to adapt to the culture, who preserved their Orthodox and Palestinian ways. And Paul was undoubtedly from such a strict conservative family.

His mother tongue was Aramaic. Perhaps you remember how it was of use to him when he faced a lynch mob in Jerusalem in Acts 21.40.

When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic, Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense. When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet.

[ 26 : 55 ] So they thought this was some foreigner, some heathen they were going to destroy. But when Paul spoke to them in Aramaic, for a time at least, they became quiet. They didn't stay quiet, but they were quiet when he began to speak to them.

And isn't it significant and moving, and we think more about it tomorrow, that the risen Lord when he met with him on the Damascus road, spoke to Paul in his mother tongue.

In Acts 26, 14, giving his testimony, and you can tell what it means to him. He says, I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, Saul, Saul.

So he spoke to him in the language of his mother, the language that he learned as a child when he wanted to call him to himself, a Hebrew of the Hebrews.

In regard to the law, he says, a Pharisee. In Acts 23, 6, he says, I am a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees.

[ 28 : 06 ] I use the New International Version in my own ministry, but this is one case where its translation is just inexplicable to me. The NIV quite wantonly and without any good reason translates, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee.

Well, it's a small inaccuracy, but surely a completely unnecessary inaccuracy. The text says, I am the son of Pharisees. His family had been Pharisees for at least several generations.

Christians. I am not going to go into a history of Phariseeism, you will be relieved to hear, but Paul's description of it later on is completely accurate.

In Acts 26, 5, he says, according to the strictest sect of our religion, I lived as a Pharisee.

He must have been an exceptionally promising boy, for he was sent to Jerusalem, I suppose him some sort of scholarship or bursary to receive the best possible training.

[ 29 : 15 ] In Acts he says, under Gamaliel, I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers. We know that Paul had a married sister who seems to have lived in Jerusalem, and it's possible that the family had a home in Jerusalem as well as in Tarsus.

So Paul was sent there, perhaps the sister was older than he was. We read later of her son coming to warn Paul at a time of crisis in his ministry. Perhaps he went and stayed with his married sister, we don't know.

But the important thing is that he studied under Gamaliel. Gamaliel, perhaps the greatest of the Jewish rabbis. In Acts 5.38, we are told that he was honored by all the people.

He was generally regarded as the last of the true Pharisees. The Jewish Mishnah says, after Rabban Gamaliel, Torah ceased.

So Gamaliel, the last and the greatest of the teachers, and Paul sat at his feet. He got the best teaching available in the world for any Jew.

[ 30 : 27 ] That was no accident. God. And in that teaching, his mind would be saturated with the Old Testament. He would learn it almost off by heart.

We, in our modern age, have no conception of the power of memory. We don't use more than a fraction of our memories.

We're bombarded by information. We are trained to forget. forget. We are actually trained to forget. We read the newspapers, we watch the television, and we practice forgetting.

In the ancient world, the powers of memory of the people were phenomenal, as they still are in some pre-literary peoples. And Paul would have arrived at a knowledge of the Old Testament.

It's hardly an exaggeration to say that he would almost have known it, word for word. He would be given the highest regard for God's holy law.

[ 31 : 32 ] And more than that, the rabbis taught their pupils to debate. They trained them in logical and persuasive argument.

They turned them into apologists and controversialists. They taught them how to anticipate objections and answer objections. knowledge. How did Paul get on in his studies?

He tells us in Galatians 1.14, I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews of my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

God's God's God's God's preparation has been in creating an intellectual genius of the first rank.

And I have no hesitation to say that spirituality and Christianity apart, we must recognize that here in Paul we have one of the very greatest minds which has ever been seen on this planet, if not the greatest.

[ 32 : 44 ] That certainly was the view of Alexander White. Listen to what he says. It's most suggestive. White writes, perhaps the finest mind that had been born among men since the beginning of the world.

There was a deep harmony pre-established from all eternity between the work of Jesus Christ and the mind and heart of Paul his apostle.

No other subject in all the world but the divine person and the redeeming work of Jesus Christ could have offered an outlet and an opportunity and an adequate scope for Paul's magnificent mind.

God was selecting a man to explain the person and work of his only son. Now what sort of a man do you think God would have created and shaped and selected?

God set me apart from my mother's womb. And isn't it a fascinating, I hope you haven't got lost in all the minutiae and the details of all this. I apologize if it's a worrisome thing.

[ 34 : 00 ] It's not worrisome to me. It's fascinating to me. I could go on about it all night. I'm not going to. But it's fascinating. It's fascinating to just every detail being woven together.

The more you learn, the more you're led to worship. And you see how perfect it all was. And how unusual it all was. A Roman citizen in a Greek city in a strict Pharisee home sent to study under Gamaliel, an intellectual genius.

A man whose body was toughened by physical work. A man who had Roman citizenship. a man who could move freely in the world. Greek, Roman, and Jewish background.

God's providence in the life of Paul. God who set me apart for a purpose from my mother's womb. it's a fascinating study.

[ 35 : 04 ] And as we read it, we think of it, we marvel at the way in which God was planning, God was directing, and God was governing before Paul knew him, before Paul knew anything of Christ, before Paul became a Christian.

But is this study any more than an interesting curiosity from the past? You may ask, well, what is the point of it? Very interesting to hear all this about Paul.

It's a nice fossil that we have taken out from history, and we've examined it, we've looked at it, we say it's very interesting in its shape, or are we just to put it away? Now, we know more about the background of Paul's life.

We can see the way in which God, by his providence, shaped Paul and prepared Paul and directed Paul for his life's work. You see, the practical question now arises, is such divine activity an exception?

Are we to understand that God, in a few rare instances, takes a personal interest in the life of peculiarly important people?

[ 36 : 18 ] Are we to think that God, as it were, took Paul's life under his own control and said, now this person is unusually important, I will look after this myself, but that the rest of humankind are left apart from this activity.

This marvelous providence in Paul's life, is that the exception? Or is that the rule? Is that an example, do you think, of what God is always doing?

What God is everywhere doing? Is the experience of Paul, in this instance, normative for us? Are we entitled to say that God set me apart?

Are you entitled to say that God set you apart for a purpose from your mother's womb? Or would that be presumption? The scriptures have no doubt as to the answer.

The scriptural teaching is beautifully summarized for us in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. I'll be quoting from the catechism over the next few days, not because I give it a reverence equal to scripture, but for two reasons.

[ 37 : 36 ] The first is that it very often epitomizes and summarizes the teaching of scripture and the second more practical reason is that when I was a small boy we had to learn the whole Shorter Catechism off by heart and in our Sabbath school you got a Bible if you repeated the Shorter Catechism from beginning to end without mistake.

I've got the Bible still, but I don't think I could repeat the Catechism from end to end. However, a lot of it is still there. And the Catechism says this summarizing the biblical teaching, God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful, preserving, and here's the phrase, and governing all his creatures and all their actions.

Governing all his creatures, not just Saul, all his creatures. and all their actions. Not one hair from our heads can be lost without the knowledge of God.

Not one little sparrow can fall to the earth apart from the plan and purpose and providence of God. All his creatures and all their actions. And to me, here is the true practical value, the pastoral value of this study. Not just that we should marvel at God's plan for Paul, but friends that we should learn to marvel at God's plan for us, for you and for me.

[ 39 : 24 ] Not just that we can trace the fingerprints of the potter in Paul's life, but to reflect and to consider and to remember and to think how those fingerprints may be discerned in our own experience.

There's nothing more beneficial for our spiritual health than to reflect upon the providence of God in our lives. And I would recommend, if you haven't read it before, that you read an excellent work by John Flavel.

It's called The Mystery of Providence. You will find it very easy to read, to understand, you will find it enjoyable and stimulating. It's in his six works, but I think it's published as a separate work.

It's published as a paperback book. Buy it and read it. You will be blessed by it. God has separated you from your mother's womb.

If you're a believer, he has set you apart for a purpose. God has designed your body. Some of you may have added a bit to that.

[ 40 : 37 ] That is not the divine responsibility. But God has decided what height you should be and what strength you should be and what color your eyes should be, what your physical strength should be, what your physical disabilities and weaknesses should be.

God has shaped our minds. whether we've keen minds or minds that are less able, whether we've retentive memories or porous memories. God has decreed our personalities, the sort of people we are.

Are we shy? Are we outgoing? Are we timid? Are we hopeful? That's all part of God's providence and God's shaping. God decided who your father should be.

God decided who your mother should be. God decided when you should be born. God decided where you should be born. God decided how many people there should be in your family. God overruled in all the early experiences and all the later experiences of your life and of my life. It is all part of making us what we are.

[ 41 : 45 ] the providence of God. My friends, aren't we often discontented with ourselves, with our bodies, with our minds, with our personalities, with our gifts or lack of gifts?

We look at other people. We are envious. We say, if only I was like that person. The Apostle Paul says, Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, why did you make me like this?

It's a wicked thing to do. It's a blasphemous question and yet, don't we sometimes ask it? Oh God, as we look at some awful weakness in ourselves or some perceived failure, God, why did you make me like this?

It's under God's control. God has directed the paths of our lives. If we have success or lack of success, God has decreed it.

Happiness or sorrow. health or sickness, wealth or poverty, wide opportunities or narrow opportunities, great appreciation from people, or lack of appreciation from people.

[ 42 : 57 ] God has determined the number of days you and I shall live on this earth. And God has decreed the day you shall die, the moment you shall die, and the way you shall die.

God has decreed it. We may not be able to trace all God's reasons and all God's purposes, of course we're not able to trace them all yet, but they are there.

They are there. An old Scottish commentator, James Ferguson, writes, the Lord, by his working in us, and particular acts of providence towards us, is often making way for some hidden design and purpose of his about us, which for the time we are ignorant of, only when it appears by the event.

Now, some of you this evening may find that hard to believe. It may grate upon us.

It may sound very grim, very theoretical, problems of God, ruling you the world. There may be people here tonight, there are people here tonight who are suffering and suffering greatly.

[ 44 : 30 ] And there are many of us who have bitter, bitter regrets for the things that you have done and the people you have been.

And there are perhaps some of us who look back over what seemed like wasted years, barrenly, lost opportunities, what we had hoped to be, what we had intended to be, but haven't been.

We think of irreparable damage done, a sense of despair almost dripped, that we've missed, that we've gone astray, that somehow we've slipped out of God's providential, sovereign control, that there's a black hole into which we have fallen, that though God is sovereign and though God's providence extends over all things, in this particular instance, God is nowhere to be found.

We can look back at things and say, you're not seriously telling me that God's providence was overruling in that. Friends, I say to you that you must reflect on who was speaking these words. And think how daring was this statement. How outrageous in a sense was this statement. Here is this man who says, God set me apart from death.

[ 46 : 03 ] And if we had said to him, well, Paul, we understand what you're saying, how have you lived since birth? Did you then live a godly, obedient, tranquil life if you say that God set you apart?

Well, he would have had to answer no, I didn't. I was a violent, angry, cursed man. Friends, this man had murdered believers.

He had caused them to be put to death. His hands were red with the blood of God's saints. That's the sort of man he was.

That's the life he had left. Those are the things he had done. And Paul is not being fatalistic. Paul is not excusing himself to his dying day.

he bore a grief and a pain and an anguish for his sins. Think of what it must have been like for the new convert to go back to the Jerusalem church and the widows and the orphans.

[ 47 : 21 ] His husbands and fathers he had murdered. and Saul had to go to them and said I did. I'm a Christian now. Please forgive me.

And Barnabas put his arm around him and said brethren forgive me. You remember Ananias. Oh I love that first word of Ananias. Brother soul.

Brother soul. And to the end of his life have you ever thought why did he have that burden for the poor of Jerusalem. Everywhere he went.

He was always collecting money for the poor of Jerusalem. Appealing to his new convert. Give to the poor of Jerusalem. What was so special about the poor of Jerusalem?

He had made them poor. He'd murdered the providers in those households. they were poor because of him. So Paul isn't sliding out of his responsibility.

[ 48 : 23 ] Paul isn't saying oh well it was all predestined it was all in the hand of God. I can't blame myself. No no. Paul is angry. Paul is sorrow in his heart.

And yet yet he can bear to say that somehow in his marvelous mercy and providence God was able to bring good even out of that evil.

Isn't that wonderful? God was able to bring good even out of that evil. Out of his very sin had come good.

An awareness of the grace and mercy and love of Christ. This is a faithful sin worthy of all acceptance that it was sinner.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save and in his mercy. Please don't twist the stuff and don't misunderstand it. Don't turn it into something that it's not.

[ 49 : 22 ] But in his sovereign mercy God was able to bring good out of the sin of which Paul grew. He was able to use it in his minutes.

He was able to say to people I don't care how bad you are. Jesus can save you. I don't care what you've done. Jesus can forgive you because I know he forgave me.

That was a dark and terrible preparation. But it was a preparation. It was a preparation.

And I don't know what lies behind you this evening or what thoughts are going around in your mind. But I say this to you my friends with great gladness and joy and confidence.

I do know that whatever it is God can bring good out. Whatever it is that troubles you this evening God can bring good out.

[ 50 : 31 ] Even if it makes you more humble, more patient, more thankful, more worshipful for your sake. You see there's this idea common among Christians that God is as it were one narrow straight line for our lives and one false step and we've blown.

Have you come across that idea? And God's just sitting up in heaven, a great deistic creature and he says, I wonder are they going to find my plan? Oops, no, they've missed it. On to the reject people.

Now, I've caricatured it, but there are Christians who are anguished, anguished by that teaching. But they have irrevocably missed out.

It's too late. The locusts have eaten a year and they're in a position of a second-rate despairing existence. And that is simply not true.

God can bring good out of it. Even if you'd only one day left to live, God could bring good out of it. I believe that. So we need to think about these things and reflect on our lives.

[ 51 : 46 ] Very impatient age. Have you ever noticed how young Christians are ready to write off their pre-conversion years? Well, God had nothing to do with that.

God started working with me when I became a Christian. That's a mistake. God separated me from my mother's womb. In spite of us, the Lord was working.

You remember the statement of Joseph? How shamefully and inexcusably his brothers had treated him with cruelty, lying, kidnapping, treachery? He was able to say, you meant it for evil.

But God meant it for evil. God says to us this evening, I know you, you meant it for evil. But listen, I meant it for evil.

And the cross is a supreme example. Was there ever a more total evil act? evil? If ever we could say God was not finished, surely it's the crucifixion of the Son of God.

[ 53 : 01 ] But God meant it for it. Now, why is this important? It's important for the sake of our future.

Calvinism has bred strong men and strong women. people convinced that they were men and women of destiny with a place in God's plan, with a work to do for the kingdom.

Listen to Calvin's comment on this passage. God decreed before the foundation of the world what he would do with every one of us, and has assigned to everyone, by his secret counsel, his part in life.

he is said to separate us from the womb, because we are sent into the world for this purpose, that he may accomplish in us what he has decreed.

We are sent into the world for this purpose, that he may accomplish in us what he has decreed. And this is a bewildered evil age.

[ 54 : 08 ] When people are confused and scared and frightened and demoralized even God's people, we need a fresh awareness of the mighty, wise hand of God, guiding and directing in spite of ourselves, that tonight, however humble our position may be, however limited our gifts, however difficult our circumstances, friends, we are a part of God's plan for the world.

And you and our significant hearts, we're not indispensable, but it's true to say that you have something to do for God which no one else in this universe ever can do or ever will do. You parents, your children will never have a father or a mother beside you. never, never, to all the parents, the only mother they'll have, and you have a work to do in their life, no one else will do. There's a place for each of us and we're shaped for that and it doesn't fit anybody else. Why do you think I would come here if I didn't believe in the problems of God? Why do you think I would get on a plane and fly 6,000 miles to South Africa? I sit at home and I look at my preparations and they seem desperately feeble and I say well what am I doing going away to talk to these people?

[ 55 : 50 ] What can I contribute? What can I give them? And in my fear God comes to me and he says listen, we've asked you to go, you've accepted the invitation, just go and be yourself.

don't put on any airs and graces, don't pretend to be something you're not, just be yourself and give them the message I gave you and I assure you there will be people there and it will help them. Doesn't matter whether it's good or bad, that's all besides the point. God's problem. Every minister believes that when we go up into the pulpit. We're not trusting in our brilliance, our cleverness, our preparation, no, no.

God has a purpose in me. I'm going to fulfill his purpose. God set me apart. What a motivation for a life.

My friends, there will still be mystery. I hope there are no questions in the discussion period on the relationship of free will to this. If there are, Mr. Roberts can answer them.

[ 56 : 57 ] I don't know the explanation. I don't want to be glib about this or pass out of it. I know there are questions and there are great periods of darkness and there are agonies and there are deep mysteries.

There are times when no glib answer is going to chase away the shadow. But you see, Christ is with us and the day is coming when we shall see the whole wonderful pattern of our lives spread out before us.

And if we've been obedient, we'll say, Lord, I understand it now. See it now. Won't it be a wonderful thing if in heaven we are allowed to see the pattern of the life of every belief?

Wouldn't that be a marvellous way to spend part of eternity? The life history of every single child of God. And how in every case, God was weaving it together, weaving it together.

And we'd just be praising and worshipping it in every life. Oh, God, how wonderful that is.

Thousands and thousands of lives. We shall know, even as we are known.

[ 58 : 15 ] And we will admire what our sovereign Lord has done for us. And we will praise him for all eternity. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.