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A Provision of Providence

Acts 23:12-35

Intro: You might not be fully aware of this but 2020 turned out to be a pretty rotten year for most people on planet earth. I know this is true from the vast amount of memes that were floating around the internet disparaging the year and all of its seemingly unprecedented events. I have never seen so many people, across all forms of media; rejoice so loudly in the departure of a particular year in all of my life. 2021 couldn't come fast enough. But, if January is any indication then the rest of this year may turn out to be just as much of a dumpster fire as the last one was, maybe even more – if you can believe that.

Now, I'm no prophet and as far as this prediction goes, I hope I am wrong. But in the event that I'm not, it's important that we stop for just a moment and attempt to glean some helpful information from our text. The passage we are looking at today concerns a plot to murder the Apostle Paul and his removal from Jerusalem to Caesarea by his Roman captors. But, the lesson to be drawn from the text has to do with hardships and the difficult times that come into everyone's life.

Things might be going great for you right now. You may have weathered the storm of 2020 and came out on top and are not facing any great difficulties in your life. If that's the case – praise the Lord! But, get ready. If you haven't already experienced hardships – they will be coming. Again, I'm not prophesying and I'm certainly not "speaking evil over you." The Bible says in [Job 5:7](#) that, "man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upwards" which is just a flowery way of saying that hardships are a normal part of life, for believers as much as anybody else. So hardships will come eventually, just as surely as they came to Paul. What we're going to see in the remainder of [ch23](#) is how Paul went through his hard times and how God took care of him.

Paul had already experienced some of these dark days in his ministry. On each of his missionary journeys, he experienced difficult and uncomfortable circumstances. He had been the victim of mob violence more than once. He had been beaten, wrongfully imprisoned, even stoned and left for dead. Yet, during all this, he was at least free. Now he was a prisoner of Rome. He no

longer has liberty to travel, and the days of his incarceration in Jerusalem, Caesarea, and eventually Rome stretch out for at least 5 years, maybe longer.

After Paul's appearance before the Sanhedrin, Jesus spoke to him (23:11). That's the NT equivalent of God's appearing to Abraham after he had rescued Lot from the 4 kings who had attacked and overthrown cities in the region including Sodom, where Lot lived. Abraham defeated these powerful kings through a surprise attack. But he was still in danger of a retaliatory attack from this superior force. But God spoke to him and said him, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward" (Gen 15:1). This had to be a tremendous comfort to Abraham, just as Jesus' words must have been to Paul.

But in this story, Jesus doesn't appear to Paul or speak to him. Paul receives no special revelation, no direct word of comfort during the events that are recorded in the rest of this chapter. As such, this section of Paul's life is a valuable lesson for living through dark times. There will be days in our lives when not only do things seem dark, but it will also seem like God isn't speaking to us. He seems silent or distant. Does this mean God has forgotten us or doesn't care about what's happening to us? No! The reality is "God is never closer to his people than when they cannot see His face" (Ironsides). That's a glorious truth. But there are still dark times when we feel like we're just plodding along in some weary path from day to day, and we wish somehow we could break out of it.

What do we do in these times? Like Paul and Abram, we live by the words we've already received from God. That means, in our case, we're to live by the Bible, because that's where God has spoken to us and continues to speak.

"Do not be afraid," God told Abraham. "Be of good cheer!" Jesus told Paul. These words weren't repeated. But they were spoken, and they were meant to stick with these men and strengthen them to trust God in the midst of their difficulties. Those words were also spoken for us. If you're going through hard times, as many are (or will be), you're to live by faith in these promises and trust in the God who gave these promises.

12-22 – So before this, Paul had been attacked by a mob in the temple complex and nearly killed. He was "rescued" by the Roman commander and

was now in Roman custody. It would appear that, behind such a formidable military force, Paul was relatively safe. But, where there's a will, there's a way. A sinister plot was devised that could actually have made the impossible goal of assassinating Paul while in Roman custody a reality.

Luke doesn't say who these Jews were that were plotting Paul's demise but they were more than likely zealots. The zealots were the equivalent of what we call terrorists. Their goal was to deliver Israel from Roman occupation and they carried out this goal exactly the way terrorists do today. They were secretive. Nobody knew who they were. They operated outside the law. They were violent. They would do anything necessary to accomplish their political objectives, particularly assassinating people.

Some scholars question how the zealots could have cooperated with the Sanhedrin since they weren't supportive of the Sanhedrin. They were fanatics, and they considered the rulers of the Jews to be compromisers. There were even times in Jewish history when they violently and openly opposed the Sanhedrin's policies. How could they cooperate with their political enemies for such a limited objective? The answer is: they could, just as terrorists will cooperate with various governments today for their own objectives. Terrorists are real threats to their own governments but sometimes they're seen as useful enemies; used by corrupt governments for their own nefarious objectives. That's what's going on here. The Sanhedrin hated Paul for his teaching. If the zealots wanted to kill him, the Sanhedrin was willing to cooperate with them to make it happen.

Now, none of us have a band of fanatics united against us today (hopefully). Still, it's worth noting that even though we don't have a band of terrorists trying to kill us, we do have a much greater enemy than that. Our enemy is Satan and the Bible describes him as "a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour" (1 Pt 5:8). Satan is an extremely fierce enemy, and he's all the more dangerous because he's a spiritual being and we can't see him. But, Satan is for himself and no one else. He hates the world even though it is also in opposition to God. Despite this, there's still a certain cooperation between Satan and the world in that Satan uses it and the world uses him. These both are allied against us much the same way the Jewish terrorists were allied with the Sanhedrin against Paul.

In fact, Satan and the world have an ally for their evil within each of us. The

theological term for this is “the inclination of the flesh,” which is our natural inclination toward evil because we are sinful beings. That is why temptation is said to come to us from “the world, the flesh, and the devil.” They’re a formidable alliance (Axis of Evil). Formidable: but not invincible and ultimately destined to fail. Paul’s enemies didn’t succeed in their plan, and neither will the world, the flesh, nor the devil succeed in overthrowing us.

Note how God rescues Paul from this wicked plot. In the OT, divine deliverance was often very dramatic: parting the Red Sea for Moses; sending manna from heaven for Israel; making the sun stand still for Joshua. There are multiple examples of God amazing power on behalf of His people. But God is not just the God of the dramatic; He’s also the God of small things. This sinister plot that had a high probability of success was completely foiled by the simple fact that an inconspicuous young man happen to be at the right place, eavesdropping at the right time.

This is the first time in Acts that we given any information about Paul’s immediate family. Of course, we know he had parents and that his father had to have been a Roman citizen for Paul to be born with that status. Now we learn that he at least had a sister and a nephew. All we know about this boy is what we can divulge from the passage. He’s a young man in Jerusalem who is somehow privy to the behind the scenes goings-on in the Sanhedrin. He overhears the plot against Paul and the Sanhedrin’s willingness to be party to it. He then goes straight to the military barracks and alerts Paul. Paul sends him to the commander to tell his story. When the commander heard it he immediately acted to remove Paul from danger.

So, here we have an example of a God who is capable of using great, dramatic things to accomplish His purposes actually choosing to use a very small thing to protect His servant. God doesn’t hesitate to use small things for His purposes. When He created the first man, He didn’t fashion Adam out of rare elements or harness the power of a neutron star – He stooped down and scooped up a handful of dust and started with that. When God revealed Himself to Moses, it was in a burning bush on a non-descript hillside in a barren, remote area of the world. He used a small stone in a sling in the hands of a teenager to take out one of Israel’s greatest enemies. He gave Samson a jawbone of a donkey and he wiped out 1000 Philistines with it.

That's the way God operates. This truth should be very encouraging because if God delights in using little things, then God can use us, no matter how small or insignificant we may think we are. Paul says as much in [1 Cor 1:26-29](#). If that is true, then there is hope for each of us. Here, God uses Paul's nephew to save Paul. When you find yourself going through a dark time (physical, financial, emotional); don't allow yourself to be blinded by the darkness. Don't think that your not accomplishing anything or that God couldn't possibly use you, especially not in the circumstances you're in at the time. The truth is: it's usually people just like us in circumstance just like ours that God often uses to reveal His power and glory. Many of the great people of the Bible were hardly great at all before God met them.

In our text, not only was Paul's nephew in Jerusalem (significant), he also happened to be in the right place at just the right time, dropping some eaves. Do you consider circumstances as always being against you—something God can't control? Do you ever think that if your circumstances were different, maybe then I could be somebody or could do something great for God or could triumph over whatever difficulty you happen to be in now? Don't think that way. Circumstances don't limit God. Circumstances are not independent of God. God creates circumstances. God is the master of circumstances.

Think of the amazing circumstances in Joseph's life that God used to raise him up from the pit of slavery to become the prime minister of Egypt: circumstances as small as the colorful coat his father gave him that provoked his brothers' jealousy; the fact that the cistern in Shechem was dry at the time of the year he was thrown into it so that he didn't drown; the passing of the Midianite caravan at that exact moment so his brothers didn't kill him but sold him off into slavery; the fact of his being purchased, not by a regular Egyptian Joe, but by Potiphar himself, Captain of Pharaoh's guards; the attachment Mrs. Potiphar had for Joseph; the accusation that caused him to be thrown into prison—not just any prison either, but the one where the political prisoners were kept; circumstances so small as the chief cupbearer and the chief baker being imprisoned along with him, and their having dreams, and the fact that he was able to interpret their dreams. It would be 2 more years before Joseph was released from prison and raised up to be the 2nd highest power in the land

Note: none of these circumstances were pleasant for Joseph and yet they

all lead to a great deliverance, not just for himself but for all of God's people. Were these insignificant circumstances? Yes, but they were circumstances that were created and being used by God. So don't think that God can't deal with your circumstances; that they're too complicated, too difficult, too depressing. God created those very circumstances to work through them to affect a change in your life. God uses many kinds of circumstances to bring people to faith and glorify His great name.

23-35 – When the commander received word of what was up, he did what he could. It was his job to keep Paul safe; so he prepared an escort for him. It's a humorous response; a classic example of overkill: 470 "crack" troops of the Roman army: foot soldiers, spearmen, even cavalry to escort Paul safely out of town. And Paul didn't even have to walk. Of course, this wasn't the first time Paul had to be smuggled out of town undercover of darkness. This great company took him by night about 35 miles downhill from Jerusalem to Antipatris, a troop staging area built by Herod. There, with the greatest danger being behind them, the foot soldiers returned to the Jerusalem garrison while the cavalry went on with Paul to Caesarea.

The Roman commander wrote a letter to Felix the Governor, who lived in Caesarea. History tells us that Felix was a corrupt character who was married to Drusilla, the daughter of Herod Agrippa I. His letter is interesting because while it is basically accurate it's also self-serving. It was true that Paul was a Roman citizen and that the commander had learned this. But he had learned it after the rescue, not before. He carefully leaves out that he'd already bound Paul and was about to have him flogged before he learned it. Still, the letter was generally accurate, and the commander had acted responsibly in dealing with this volatile situation.

When Paul was moved to Caesarea, he was able to witness of Jesus to kings. 20 years before, the Lord had said that he was to carry His name before Gentiles and kings (**Acts 9:15**) and now that promise began to be fulfilled. Paul hadn't testified before any kings when he was free. But now as a prisoner, a "victim" of circumstances, Paul testifies in **ch24** before Governor Felix, in **ch25** before Governor Festus, and eventually in **ch26** before King Agrippa—all this before he was taken to Rome.

I can't tell you what God is doing in your circumstances. I can't see the future any more than you can. But God is doing something in your

circumstances. If you, like Paul, are going through dark times, if you're discouraged, or disillusioned, if you're weary with the struggle, the message of this chapter is to continue to trust in God and serve Him regardless. His purposes for you will be accomplished, the day will brighten, and the will of God will be done.

Joseph didn't know how any of his circumstances would work out. In fact, the longer they went, they worse they got! Joseph couldn't see the future – he didn't know what would happen to him. But, he did believe and know that God was in control of his life. He couldn't extract himself from any of his circumstances but he continued to trust God and he continued to do the right thing. God eventually honored his obedience and his trust. It's safe to say that Joseph never would have become 2nd in command to Pharaoh if those disappointing circumstances had never occurred.

Each of us will have dark days, for whatever reason, from whatever source. But these dark days don't have to be days of despair and failure. Despite what is going on around us or within us, God is still on the throne and He is still in complete control of our lives. You may already know that to be a fact – you should because I have been saying it quite often these last few months. But, this is not just a truth that you need to know – it's a truth that you must be willing to trust; even if you can't see it or feel it. You must trust that God has not abdicated His throne!

Paul lived many years with great freedom, yet in all those years, he had to trust in the promises of God to get him through. During those years when he had little to no freedom, he still had to trust those same promises and trust that God would work just as powerfully through his difficult circumstances as He had in his freedom. Paul needed to receive the promises of Jesus with a confident faith; allowing those promises to change how he thought and felt. Every believer must do the same thing. 😊