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GOD'S PROVIDENTIAL PROTECTION

Acts 23:12-35

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Acts Lesson 61

God's Providential Protection Acts 23:12-35

"What rotten luck I've been having lately!" "I'm having a bad day!" "Oh, well, whatever will be will be, and there's nothing that we can do about it!"

You've probably heard people say all of the above. Perhaps you've even said or thought something similar yourself at times. But all of those declarations are at odds with biblical truth, because each statement goes against the truth of God's providence. There is no such thing as luck or pure chance. If we have a bad day, it is because the Lord ordained these circumstances for our benefit. Bad days don't just happen! "Whatever will be will be" reflects a view of our circumstances as being caused by impersonal fate.

The Bible often teaches and illustrates the doctrine of God's providence (I will give a definition later), and it should be a source of great comfort and instruction for every believer. It means that God is not distant, passive, or unconcerned with the daily events in our lives. Rather, as our loving and caring Heavenly Father, He actively governs the daily events of our lives, usually behind the scenes, without in any way robbing us of the duty of making responsible choices.

The story before us contains no exposition of biblical doctrine, no exhortations, and no commands. Rather, it illustrates for us the doctrine taught and illustrated elsewhere of God's providence. The governing verse for this and all of the events before Paul reaches Rome is verse 11, where the Lord promises Paul that he *must* witness at Rome also. God has declared His sovereign purpose, and we will see it unfold in the chapters ahead. Here, we learn that ...

When we face trials and opposition in our service for the Lord, we should trust Him to protect us by His providence and to work out His sovereign plan for our lives.

God declares that Paul will bear witness for Him in Rome. Over 40 Jewish terrorists determine that even if they die in the

process, they will not eat or drink until they assassinate Paul. Guess who prevails? It just “so happens” that Paul’s nephew gets wind of the plot and tells Paul, who sends him to the commander, who is willing to listen to the boy’s story and act on it. He calls together 470 armed troops to escort Paul safely to the Roman governor, Felix, at Caesarea. God wins! There are two practical lessons:

1. We all will face trials and opposition in our service for the Lord.

- A. No servant of Christ is exempt from trials and opposition.

Paul was not what you would call an ordinary believer. God has not used any other man in the history of the church as mightily as He used the apostle Paul. That being the case, you would think that God would grant this great man smooth sailing so that he could accomplish as much as possible. But if you have read your New Testament, you know that that is far from the truth. Here is how Paul himself catalogued what he had gone through:

... in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches (2 Cor. 11:23b-28).

If Paul, who was one of God’s choicest servants, went through such trials, then none of us are exempt. And yet often believers are surprised when they encounter trials in the course of their service for the Lord. They think, “If I were living for myself, that would be one thing. I would expect God’s hand of discipline in that case. But here I am trying to serve the Lord, and now this happens! What’s the deal?”

The deal is that God nowhere promises His servants a pass that exempts them from trials and opposition. In fact, His Word often describes the Christian life as warfare, and warfare is hardly a promise of a smooth, easy existence! So whenever you attempt to do anything to serve the Lord, whether it is a behind-the-scenes kind of helping ministry or a visible, up-front ministry, you should expect that the enemy will oppose you and be trying to take you out of service. It just goes with the turf!

- B. The trials and opposition that we face often comes from those who are religious rather than from the pagans.

Paul's opposition here came from the Jews, and not just from the average, go-to-synagogue Jews, but from the Jewish leaders. These zealots who intended to kill Paul engaged in a religious activity, fasting, to show their zeal and dedication to God. They no doubt justified their evil aim by arguing that the cause is so important that it doesn't matter what means are used to achieve it. This renegade Jew who went around the Roman Empire preaching that Gentiles could know God without becoming Jews needed to be silenced. If they couldn't silence him legally, they would have to kill him. If some of them died at the hands of the Roman guards protecting Paul, so be it. If it required deception to the Roman commander to pull it off, then they would use deception. The necessary end justified the wicked means!

Luke skillfully contrasts the kindness and lawful protection of the Roman commander with the murderous conniving of these religious Jews. This pagan man kindly took Paul's nephew by the hand, led him aside where they could talk privately, and listened to what he said. He could have scoffed at it as the wild imagination of a young boy, but he didn't do that.

Rather, he used his authority and the troops at his disposal to protect this Roman citizen so that he would receive a fair trial. And so a pagan Roman soldier shows far more kindness to Paul than his own kinsmen did. It calls to mind the story of Jonah, where the pagan sailors showed Jonah much more kindness than the disobedient prophet was willing to show towards the pagan people of Ninevah.

The Roman commander, in his letter to the governor, bent the truth a bit to make himself look good (23:27). But he also declared Paul innocent of breaking the Roman law (23:29). If Paul's enemies had a valid case against him, they would not have had to resort to violence. When people attack a man, it is often because they cannot refute his doctrine, and that doctrine convicts them of their sinfulness before God.

The application for us is, don't be surprised when your strongest critics and opponents of your service for the Lord come from within the church, rather than from outside. There are many in evangelical churches who simply "use" God as a covering for serving their own selfish purposes. They teach the Bible because it makes them feel important and gives them a public platform. They serve in some capacity because they love the recognition and praise that they get from it. They follow Jesus to the extent that He "meets their needs." But at the heart level, they have never dethroned self and enthroned Jesus as Lord.

The stumbling-block of the cross was at the heart of the Jewish opposition to Paul. If we were not sinners who deserve God's eternal wrath, then Jesus the Savior did not have to die for our sins. To receive Him as Savior requires that we acknowledge that we are sinners who deserve God's wrath. And, it is ridiculous to say that we can receive Jesus as Savior, but that submitting to Him as Lord is optional! If He is the eternal God who took on human flesh to die for our sins, then we owe Him everything.

So the first lesson is that we all will face trials and opposition in our service for the Lord.

2. When trials and opposition hit, we should trust God to protect us by His providence and to work out His sovereign plan for our lives.

The Lord had just appeared to Paul and told him that it was necessary (literal Greek for the word "must") for him to bear witness in Rome. As I mentioned last week, so far as the text reveals, the Lord didn't say a word to Paul about this impending plot against his life, or about any of the other trials that would be involved in getting him to Rome. He just announces His plan, that Paul would bear witness in Rome, and leaves it for Paul, seemingly

by “happence,” to discover this plot against his life. Paul’s nephew (this is the only direct reference to any of Paul’s relatives in Scripture) “happens” to be in the right place at the right time to learn about this plot. God uses this to save Paul’s life. There are four lessons here for us to apply:

- A. God has a sovereign plan for each of us, that we would glorify Him in the sphere that He appoints for us.

As the “Four Spiritual Laws” booklet states Law One: “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” Whether He calls you to be a bricklayer or a businessman, a school teacher or a missionary, a truck driver or a preacher, His plan is that you would live in such a manner that your life brings glory and honor to His name.

As we also saw last week, the Lord promised His exiled people through Jeremiah (29:11), “I know the plans I have for you, plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.” Or, as the prophet Isaiah (8:10) declares to the nations that threatened Israel, “Devise a plan, but it will be thwarted; state a proposal, but it will not stand, for God is with us.” Wicked men may plan to destroy God’s servants, but unless God permits it as a part of His sovereign plan, they will not succeed. God’s plans overrule the plans of men, no matter how powerful they may think they are. Even of kings, God says, “The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes” (Prov. 21:1). Proud men may plan out their lives, but “There is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel against the Lord” (Prov. 21:30). This means,

- B. No force, no matter how evil, can thwart God’s sovereign plan for us.

These more than 40 men who bound themselves under oath to murder Paul were terrorists. The literal Greek of 23:14 is, “We have anathematized ourselves with an anathema to taste nothing until we have killed Paul.” They knew that killing Paul while he was under Roman guard would probably mean that at least some of them would die in the attempt. If the others could be apprehended, they would be tried and executed for attacking Roman soldiers who were occupied in their duty of guarding a Roman citizen. But these

men were like modern suicide bombers; they were willing to die for their cause. But as David declares (Psalm 2:1-4):

Why are the nations in an uproar and the peoples devising a vain thing? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, "Let us tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us!" He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord scoffs at them.

Sometimes God's sovereign plan for us includes martyrdom, as it later did for the apostle Paul, and as it has for hundreds of thousands of saints down through history. But when the wicked succeed in killing God's servants, it is only because God has a higher plan and because He permits it. As Isaiah 54:17 promises, "No weapon that is formed against you will prosper." We can take great comfort in the fact that no evil person, government, or force can thwart God's sovereign plan for our lives.

C. God's providence is the means by which He carries out His sovereign plans.

The word "providence" does not occur in the Bible, but the doctrine is stated and illustrated as a major theme throughout Scripture. As you probably know, it is the theme of the Book of Esther, which never mentions God directly. And yet His providential hand is behind the twists and turns of the story, preserving His chosen people from destruction.

Deists deny God's providence by asserting that He created the world, but He is no longer actively involved in it. Others say that God is active in the events of the world, but that He is not sovereign over evil. Rather, evil is the result of free will. But the Bible teaches that God is actively controlling or directing even evil events and evil people in such a way as to accomplish His sovereign will, and yet He is not the author of evil and is not responsible for it (as Eph. 1:11 states). But no evil person or act changes or thwarts God's sovereign will (see the discussion in Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* [Zondervan], p. 322-331).

Here is how theologian Wayne Grudem (*ibid.*, p. 315, italics his) defines God's providence:

God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that he (1) keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them; (2) cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and (3) directs them to fulfill his purposes.

John Calvin puts it (*The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John McNeill [Westminster Press], 1:16:4), "providence means not that by which God idly observes from heaven what takes place on earth, but that by which, as keeper of the keys, he governs all events." As Grudem's definition outlines, there are three aspects of God's providence in the Bible (I'm following his treatment and quoting him, pp. 315-354, here).

First, God's providence means *preservation*, that "*God keeps all created things existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them*" (p. 316). Hebrews 1:3 tells us that Christ "upholds all things by the word of His power." The Greek word translated "uphold" means to carry or bear. Grudem says, "It does not mean simply 'sustain,' but has the sense of active, purposeful control over the thing being carried from one place to another" (*ibid.*). Colossians 1:17 also asserts that "all things hold together" in Christ. If Jesus were to "let go," the entire universe would instantly disintegrate! Thus God did not just design the laws of science and nature and step away from them. Rather, He actively maintains such laws.

Second, God's providence means *concurrence*, that "*God cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do*" (p. 317). This includes God's causing things to happen that we would think of as merely "natural" occurrences. For example, the Bible says that God causes the rain and snow to fall on earth, along with the wind to blow and the lightning to flash (Job 37:6-13; Ps. 135:7). God also gives food to the wild animals and birds (Ps. 104:27-29; Matt. 6:26).

God governs what we might call random chance events, such as the casting of lots (Prov. 16:33). Also, God causes things to happen where His creatures also play a role. For example, I may water and fertilize my grass or a farmer his crops, but God causes them to grow. I can put water into the freezer, but God makes it freeze (Job 38:27, 29-30).

God also governs human affairs. He determines the time, existence, and boundaries of the nations (Acts 17:26). He sets up rulers and takes them down again (Dan. 4:34-35; Ps. 22:28). He governs every aspect of our lives (Jer. 10:23; Prov. 16:9; 20:24), including the number of days that we will live (Ps. 139:16). He is even sovereign over evil, although He is not tainted in any way by it nor is He responsible for it (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; 1 John 1:5). But He uses evil men and events to carry out His sovereign plan, even as He is doing in our story with this evil plot to kill Paul.

Third, God's providence means *government*, that "*God has a purpose in all that he does in the world and he providentially governs or directs all things in order that they accomplish his purposes*" (p. 331). "He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, 'What have You done?'" (Dan. 4:35). God "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11).

The doctrine of God's providence is very practical and comforting on a daily basis. If we live in a world of random chance, it is a most scary place to be! You never know what bad things might happen to you or your loved ones, and so all you can do is hope for "good luck." Or, if as some Christians believe, God is not sovereign over evil, then when terrorists fly airplanes into the World Trade Center and kill thousands of people, or a crazy gunman kills your loved one, that's tragic, but there was nothing that God could have done about it, since He gave them "free will."

But if even that evil event was under God's providence, then we know that He can work it together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28). Those who lost loved ones can know that those wicked men did not in any way thwart God's sovereign plan. Rather, those evil men were inadvertently carrying out His sovereign plan for history and they will face God's eternal judgment!

Thus, God has a sovereign plan for each of us. Evil men cannot thwart God's purpose. God carries out His sovereign plan through His often behind-the-scenes providence. Finally,

- D. Trusting God to work sovereignly through His providence does not mean being passive or doing nothing.

God had promised Paul that he would bear witness at Rome, but when his nephew told him about this plot to kill him, he did not say, "Don't worry! God has promised that I will go to Rome, so we don't need to do anything about it!" No, Paul sent him to the commander, and then he thankfully used the horses and 470 armed soldiers that the commander provided to get him safely out of Jerusalem to Caesarea.

The Bible teaches that God ordains both the end and the means to the end. Some Christians wrongly conclude, "If God has ordained that a certain number of elect people will be saved, we don't have to do anything about it, because they will get saved." The fallacy in that statement is that God ordained that His elect would be saved through the preaching of the gospel to every nation (Matt. 28:19; Rom. 10:14-15). As Paul said, "For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory" (2 Tim. 2:10). Paul had to suffer what he went through in order to preach to God's elect so that they would get saved. God also ordains that we pray in order to see His kingdom come, even though it will certainly come (Matt. 6:10).

Conclusion

Hopefully no one here has (or ever will have) a band of assassins sworn to kill you! But you may be in difficult circumstances, perhaps even in connection with your service for the Lord. God wants you to see Him in all of your circumstances, orchestrating events to fulfill His plan for your life. As Harry Ironside comments on our text, "God is never closer to his people than when they cannot see his face" (*Lectures on the Book of Acts* [Loizeaux Brothers], p. 545). So we can submit to Him and His will as He deals with us through our circumstances.

But don't fall into the error of passively submitting to circumstances as if fate or determinism were true. God expects you to use the means that He has provided as a part of His providential care for you. As you work out your salvation with fear and trembling, you will see that it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13).

Discussion Questions

1. Is there a difference between God's permitting evil and His ordaining it? If so, what?
2. Why is the doctrine of God's sovereignty over evil more comforting than the view that He can't control evil since it stems from man's free will?
3. How can God actively direct all things through His providence and yet hold people accountable (see Rom. 9:9-24)?
4. How can we know whether God expects us to wait passively on Him or to take action ourselves (see Exod. 14:10-31).

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