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## GOD'S PROTECTIVE HAND

Acts 25:1-12

By

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Acts Lesson 65

## God's Protective Hand Acts 25:1-12

Many years ago, the painter John Sargent was in Italy. He learned that his train would be quite late. Others who were waiting for the train paced back and forth at the station, complaining about the heat and the delay, expressing their frustration.

But Sargent sat down, set up his easel, took out his paints, and began to capture a scene of a yoke of oxen on a street nearby. He literally turned the delay and potentially frustrating circumstances into a masterpiece.

As Christians, we will often face circumstances that can either be frustrating or fruitful for the Lord, depending on how we handle it. If we see things only from a human perspective, we'll grow impatient and frustrated as we think, "What a waste of time!" But if we see God's sovereign hand orchestrating all of our circumstances according to His plan, then we can rest in Him, knowing that He will work it together for good according to His purpose.

Paul easily could have become frustrated while he waited in prison in Caesarea. Felix knew that Paul was innocent, but he kept him in prison, hoping for a bribe from Paul's wealthy friends. When that didn't come, and Felix was recalled to Rome because of the complaints of the Jews, to gain some political capital, he left Paul imprisoned.

Felix's successor Festus was a more upright ruler than Felix (according to Josephus). He was a man of action. He had barely arrived in the capital of Caesarea before he went up to Jerusalem to familiarize himself with the situation there. Paul's Jewish opponents there took advantage of the governor's newness on the job to present their case against Paul and urge that he be brought to Jerusalem for trial. Their real intent was to resurrect their foiled plans from two years before and murder him on the way. But Festus wasn't going to let the Jews get the upper hand by telling him how to manage his affairs, so he told them that they could come to Caesarea and present their case against Paul.

When Paul found himself standing before the same angry accusers who had tried to get him executed two years earlier, he easily could have become frustrated. It seemed like more of the “same old same old.” These guys just wouldn’t quit! They didn’t have anything new to say. Their charges, which they couldn’t prove, were basically the same as before, that Paul was violating the Jewish law, that he had desecrated the temple, and that he was a threat to the Roman government (25:8; cf. 24:5-6). Paul could have impatiently thought, “When will this ever end, so that I can get on with the more important task of taking the gospel to the Gentiles who have never heard about Christ?”

But Paul didn’t grow frustrated or impatient. Instead, he calmly defended himself before this same angry group of Jews and before the new governor. As the trial progressed, Festus saw a way that he could now gain some political capital with the Jews, and so he reversed his earlier decision and offered to move the trial to Jerusalem. Paul could see that he would not get a fair trial there, if he even got there alive, and so he was forced to appeal his case to Caesar. Through this, God sovereignly was working to get His apostle to Rome.

When Festus granted Paul’s appeal to go to Caesar, he was probably relieved to get this sticky case out of his jurisdiction. But he also created a problem for himself, in that he had to give sufficient rationale to Caesar to trouble him with this case. About that time King Agrippa and his sister (and lover) Bernice, arrived at the capital to pay their respects to Festus. He was still puzzling over what to write to Caesar, and so he ran the case by Agrippa, who wanted to hear Paul. And so God used these potentially frustrating circumstances not only to get Paul to Rome, but also for Paul to bring the gospel before these influential leaders.

To understand the spiritual perspective of these events, you must read the story in the light of two texts. In Acts 9:15, the Lord had predicted of Paul, “He is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.” Here Paul bears witness before all three groups. And, in Acts 23:11, the Lord had told Paul, “for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.” God was at work behind these potentially frustrating circumstances and re-

peated false charges to fulfill His purpose for His servant, Paul. The lesson for us is that ...

God will protect His servants from the forces of evil and use us according to His sovereign purpose.

There are two main lessons:

1. Satan arrays his evil forces against those who serve the Lord.

The enemy of souls is not passive when a faithful servant of the Lord like Paul is seeking to preach the gospel. Here he brings two forces against Paul: the Jews, who are militantly hostile; and Festus, who is seemingly benign, but potentially lethal, if Paul had gone along with his suggestion of moving the trial to Jerusalem. But neither enemy is a problem for God to dispose of when they oppose His purpose for Paul.

The Jews illustrate for us the implacable hardness of the fallen human heart. These men were the religious leaders of Israel, God's chosen nation. They were the only people on earth who had received God's covenant promises and who were able to read His revelation in the Scriptures. They knew the history of the nation, how God had called Abraham, how He had preserved Abraham's descendants through four long centuries in Egypt, and how He had brought them out of Egypt with a mighty deliverance. They knew how God had protected Israel in the wilderness and had displaced the fearsome Canaanites and had given Israel the promised land. They knew the faithfulness of God in restoring them to the land after the punishment of the Babylonian captivity. They had access to God's presence through worship in the temple. Yet in spite of all of their knowledge and privileges, they had killed the Anointed One whom God had sent to save them from their sins. And now they were intent on murdering God's servant Paul, one of their own countrymen, who had done them no wrong.

When men stubbornly refuse to submit to God's truth, they will seek to eliminate it from their lives. The light exposes their evil deeds, which they don't want to face. Rather than coming to the light in repentance, they try to snuff it out so that they can continue living as they please (John 3:19-21). So we see these men, who were supposed to uphold God's holy law, trying to set up an ambush to

murder God's servant. If they couldn't murder him, they would slander him with false accusations and lies.

Paul himself, of course, had formerly been one of them. He was bent on destroying all who followed this new sect called the Way. What had changed Paul from persecutor and murderer to the ardent apostle who now said that he would even be willing to be cut off from Christ, if it meant their salvation (Rom. 9:1-3)? The only thing that can transform hearts so hardened by sin is the power of God through the gospel of Jesus Christ. God stopped Paul in his tracks, imparted new life to him, and claimed him as His servant. Even as God temporarily blinded Paul's eyes physically, He opened them spiritually to see the light of the glory of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead (see 2 Cor. 4:4-6; Gal. 1:13-16). That same power of God can still transform any sinner who comes to the cross for mercy.

Festus was an evil tool of Satan in a different way than the Jews were, in that he was more positive and subtle. He seems to have been a decent ruler. He wasn't willing to turn Paul over to his enemies without a trial. Perhaps he naively thought that moving the venue to Jerusalem would not compromise justice, although probably he knew the potential danger to Paul's life. But if Paul had been lulled into compliance with Festus' suggestion, it would have spelled certain death.

Festus' weakness was that he was a people-pleaser at the expense of doing what he knew to be right. Probably he had read Lysias' report to Felix about the plot to kill Paul. Felix had probably briefed him on the pending case. But Paul was only one man, and Festus had to live with these Jewish leaders. If Paul's life "accidentally" got snuffed out in transit to Jerusalem, that would be a pity. But if it gained some favor with the Jews, then why be unpopular by taking a hard line for truth and justice?

Sadly, I know of many evangelical pastors who compromise the hard truths of Scripture in order to be popular. They know that the Bible thunders against sin, but if you tell people that, some will get offended. So they play it down. They know that the Bible threatens a terrible eternal punishment in hell for those who reject Christ, but that's not a popular truth for our day. Besides, people like to come to church so that they can be uplifted and feel good,

not to be confronted with sin and judgment. So they skirt around the heart of the gospel in order to gain favor with people. Unwittingly, like Festus, they are often the more dangerous enemy of the gospel than those who are militantly opposed to Christ.

The application of all of this is, if you are serving the Lord in some capacity (and *every* Christian should be serving!), expect that Satan will oppose you, either with open hostility or with subtle compromises that are equally destructive. Don't be surprised when it hits. To be forewarned is to be forearmed.

2. God works, often behind the scenes, to protect and use His servants according to His purpose.

If we had to face Satan's frightening forces in our own strength or wisdom, we would despair. But thankfully, the Lord surrounds His servants, protecting them until it is His time to call them home. Our text reveals two ways that God protects us.

A. God protects His people through His providential power, directing even those who are opposed to Him.

We have already seen God's providential hand at work in protecting Paul from the plot against his life, but here we see it again. Although God is not overtly seen, He is covertly at work, orchestrating circumstances and people to accomplish His sovereign purposes through the gospel. (I am indebted to my friend, Bob Deffinbaugh, "Acts: Christ at Work Through His Church," [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org), for many of the following insights under this heading.) God has used Paul's love for his people and his strong desire to unify the Gentile and Jewish wings of the church to bring him to Jerusalem. He used the counsel of the Jerusalem church leaders, misguided though it may have been, to get Paul into the Temple. He brought along the Jews from Asia at just the right moment to spot Paul and stir up the riot against him. He used Lysias, the commander, to rescue Paul from the angry mob.

He used Paul's nephew overhearing the plot of the Jews, along with Lysias' protection, to save Paul's life and get him safely to Caesarea. He used the self-seeking scoundrel Felix to put the Jews at bay for two years, during which time Paul had further influence among the Jewish Christians and Luke had time to research his gospel and the Book of Acts. And now He uses the inexperi-

enced governor's suggested compromise to set up an appointment for Paul to preach to Festus, Agrippa, and Bernice, as well as to get him an all-expenses paid trip to Rome.

From a human standpoint, all of these events could seem like a comedy of errors for Paul. His gift to the church at Jerusalem had not been well-received, as he had hoped. Their scheme to go into the Temple had backfired, resulting in the riot and Paul's arrest. His interviews with Felix had not resulted in Felix's conversion or in Paul's release. And now, Festus' misguided suggestion forced Paul to appeal to Caesar, further delaying his release from custody.

But from God's standpoint (remember, we must read this story against the backdrop of God's prophetic declarations in 9:15 & 23:11), God was working all things together for good for Paul according to His purpose of being glorified through the gospel, before the Gentiles, kings, and the Jewish people. He was working to bring His apostle to Rome, where many in Caesar's household, and probably even Caesar himself, would hear the gospel.

The key for applying this to your life is to view your circumstances, however seemingly frustrating and confusing, from God's sovereign, providential perspective, not from the human perspective. From Paul's perspective, he was hemmed in and restricted. He had not planned these events in his personal three-year goals, nor was he the prime mover in bringing them to pass. But from God's perspective, God was setting up for Paul the witnessing opportunities of a lifetime, to preach the gospel to the most influential people in Israel and in Rome.

Often the greatest opportunities for ministry that God gives us come disguised as frustrating or confusing circumstances, where we seem to be restricted from reaching our goals. If we view those circumstances from the human perspective, as just so much "bad luck," we will grumble in discouragement and miss the opportunity for ministry. But if we submit to God's mighty hand, He can use us in such a way that He alone gets the glory.

B. God protects His people through human government, which He has ordained.

God has ordained human government to protect those who do right and to punish those who do evil (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-

17). Even though human governments are run by self-serving men like Felix, Festus, and Nero, God still uses them in His purposes. He commands us to submit ourselves to such governments and their laws, unless the government demands that we do something that violates God's commandments (Acts 4:19-20; 5:29).

It is not wrong for Christians to serve in government or to use the government and its judicial system to obtain due process and legal protection. Some argue that Christians should have nothing to do with government, because it is worldly or evil at its core. They say that we are citizens of heaven, not of this world. But I believe that the examples of Joseph, Daniel, and Nehemiah argue that some believers can and should serve in government. Paul's example here shows that it is proper for us to use the government to protect us and to uphold our rights as citizens.

Paul acknowledges that if he has committed the crimes that he was accused of, he was willing to die. This (as well as Romans 13:4, "bear the sword"), argues that the government has the right of capital punishment in certain cases. For the government to take the life of a convicted criminal who has committed serious offenses does not violate the sixth commandment, which is properly, "You shall not murder" (rather than "kill"). Certainly, the judicial process needs to be extremely careful to establish guilt beyond the shadow of doubt through a fair trial. But to abolish capital punishment in cases of first degree murder because "it is barbaric," actually results in greater barbarism, because it cheapens rather than elevates the value of human life.

Also, Paul's defense here (25:8) shows that it is not wrong for a Christian leader to defend his innocence against false charges. In my former ministry, I was being falsely accused of some things and I defended my integrity. An elder there, who holds a doctorate in theology, told me that I should not defend myself, but rather be like Jesus who was silent against His accusers. But Paul was not silent, because in addition to several defenses in the Book of Acts, he also wrote Galatians and 2 Corinthians to defend his ministry. Satan tries to discredit the gospel by slandering those who preach the gospel. There is no virtue and much damage to the cause of the gospel if a faithful man allows false charges and slander to stand without defense or explanation.

## Conclusion

I conclude by giving four practical lessons from our text:

- (1) If we have a clear conscience, then we can know that God is for us in spite of the slander or opposition of others.

Paul had maintained a blameless conscience both before God and before men (24:16). He knew that he had not committed any offense against the Law of the Jews or against the temple or against Caesar (25:8). Thus he could calmly state the truth and know that God was his shield and defender. The glory goes to God, not to me, but I know firsthand the peace that comes from a clear conscience when you are under attack. Shortly after I began my ministry here, four of the former elders sought to have me fired because I opposed one of them for being pro-choice on abortion. I told Marla, "Even if I have to get a job flipping hamburgers at McDonald's, I have peace in my heart that I did the right thing and that God will take care of us." As Paul puts it (Rom. 8:31-34),

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.

He goes on to show that there is absolutely nothing that can separate us from God's great love in Christ Jesus our Lord!

- (2) If we know the sovereign God, then we can trust Him to defend and protect us according to His purpose.

The doctrine of God's sovereignty is not a point for theological debate; it is a precious reality that brings great comfort to the believer. This week Dan Barton and I had lunch with our friend and fellow pastor, Chuck Ballard, who was visiting from Texas. He shared with us that his father, who was an unbeliever, had committed suicide some years ago. Chuck said that the Scripture that sustained him through that difficult time was Romans 9, where Paul shows so clearly that the primary cause of salvation is God's choice, not man's choice. It is a most comforting truth that the sovereign God is orchestrating all of the circumstances of our lives,

no matter how frustrating or confusing they may seem to us. We can trust Him to work all of the trials together for good for us, because we love Him and are called according to His purpose.

- (3) If we have personally received mercy at the cross, then we should view every circumstance, no matter how frustrating, as an opportunity to proclaim God's mercy to others.

If Paul had been focused on his frustrating circumstances, he would have thought, "Not this again! How long do I have to put up with these same enemies and these same false charges?" And he would have missed the opportunity to bear witness for Christ. If we put our focus on our frustrating circumstances, we will miss the opportunity to tell others of our great Savior and of the mercy that He offers every sinner at the cross.

- (4) If we follow the Savior who laid down His life for us, then we should be ready and willing to pay the price of our commitment to Him.

Paul did not consider his life of any account as dear to himself, in order that he might finish his course and the ministry that he received from the Lord Jesus, to solemnly testify of the gospel of the grace of God (20:24). You may think, "But if I didn't compromise the truth, it would cost the company a lot of money and my boss would fire me." Which is more important: a job, or to hear "Well done, good and faithful slave"?

Life presents us with many temptations to compromise our commitment to Jesus Christ. If we will stand for Him, even if it means imprisonment or death, we can know that His protective hand is upon us and that He will use us for His glory according to His sovereign purpose.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why is it crucial and very practical to see every circumstance as under God's sovereign control?
2. How can a people-pleaser learn to take a stand for God's truth? Where is the biblical balance between truth and love?
3. How far should Christians go in using the government to uphold righteousness? How far can we go in legislating biblical standards in a secular and pluralistic culture?
4. If God is sovereign over frustrating circumstances, is it wrong to seek to get out from under them? Why/why not?

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