

God's Protecting Hand Acts 18:11-17

We have been looking at the ministry's of Paul in the city of Corinth. We realize in many ways it has been a successful ministry. The church is growing and many individuals are coming to a saving knowledge of Christ. But Paul sees what looks like is over the horizon, and that is more opposition and persecution. And it seems that he is discouraged and might even be overwhelmed with the thought of what might lay in the future if he continues in Corinth. And then we have verses 9-10, **"And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.'"** Do not be afraid Paul — the one person you want to be with you — is, and he is in control of every and all the events of life. And the promise is an incredible promise, and that is no one will harm Paul. He is to continue on in the city, and realize that many more will come to Christ because God has many more of his elect in that city.

And so what is left for Paul to do? And it is the same thing for us to do, and that is to trust in the revelation of God. If God promises that he will never leave us or forsake us, if God promises that nothing in all of this created order can ever separate us from his love, if God promises that he control all things and events of life and everything works for his glory and our God, then we are trust in him. But here is the question — what does it look like to trust in the Lord? And we see what it looks like in verse 11, **"And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them."** Staying a year and six months is like Paul putting down roots. And it is not that he just stayed there during that time but he persevered in ministry — in teaching the word of God which is short hand for the gospel of Jesus Christ. And think of it because the more he preached the more God gave the increase, but the more the increase the more opposition came. But Paul was not fearful or anxious or agitated because he looked not at his opponents but to his God and the promises God has given him. And that is what it looks like to trust in God. We walk in faith according to his word and his promises. And he is a God who cannot and will not fail.

And now we come to verses 12-18 and Paul before the Roman authorities. And it is incredible that we have no miracles or no revelation in this section. We have no supernatural intervention of God through this section, but God is all over this narrative section. This is really a commentary on the revelation God gave to Paul to go on preaching and no one will harm you in this city. What we see in this paragraph is none other than the providential hand of God. When we talk about the providence of God what we mean is God's sovereign hand directing all of life through normal and natural means — through having this person here, or this event take place at this time. God's providence is many times not seen in the midst of trials and events but many times we can see his hand afterward.

You can see this in the book of Ruth. It is the only book in the Bible which does not mention the name of God but he is everywhere in that book orchestrating the events of that book. It looks like everything is against the Jews. Haman has a plot to kill all of the Jews, and sets us a gallows to hang the Jew he hated the most which was

Mordecai, but through a series of events, the Jews are saved and Haman is executed on the very gallows set up for Mordecai. It is an amazing history where you can't see the hand of God in all the events of life bringing to pass his sovereign will through the normal decisions of man until afterwards. What people means for evil, God means for good, and orchestrates that good.

Our problem is that when we are in the midst of those trials and opposition we often cannot see the hand of God, but he is there. God silent and secretive providence is often seen after the fact. What we are called to do is trust him in the here and now. And you can see not only Paul trusting God through his activity of preaching, but you can see God preserving and protecting Paul just like he said he would in this section. And I might not know all the trials you are going through, but our God does. He not only knows but his sovereign hand is in complete control. He will bring his good purposes to pass. His promises to you and me as believers has not changed. And I want us to see that in this passage this morning. I want us to see the trial and then the triumph.

1. We need to see the trial. Vv. 12-13.

It is incredible when we look at events and even people in our lives, whether they think they are doing good or not, they are out to destroy you. They are out to wreck havoc maybe on your reputation or whatever. Sometimes they work behind the scenes. Sometimes they are on the offensive right in front of you. But they can hardly wait or contain themselves to speak against you. The enemies line up and blister condemnation against you. And if you ever want to live for Christ, people will oppose you. It has always been that way and will be until the return of Christ. Now, we can be obnoxious and be arrogant, which is no honour to Christ. But here is the thing about Christianity — we can truly live for Christ, and seek to make him known for the glory of God and the welfare of others, and yet be maligned. And it has always been this way. Jesus said on the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:11-12 **“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”** If you are serious and seek to make much of Christ, if he is your delight, you will suffer at the hands of others.

Now here is what makes that suffering so difficult and not blessed as Jesus says it is — we cannot see God's sovereign hand. We can not see how all things work for good to those who love God and are called according to his purposes. We cannot see that the Lord is at hand. We cannot see that he is orchestrating everything, not just some things for our good and his glory. We cannot see the refining process going on in us. We cannot see how God will bring about any good.

And that is exactly what you see in these two opening verses of this paragraph — nothing good. Here is the evil plot and intentions of these opponents of Paul and of Christ who seek to outlaw Christianity and once and for all stamp out any light or thought of Jesus being the Messiah, and even execute any and all that claim him as Lord and Saviour. This really is a well thought out plot and heinous act that sought the greatest retribution against Paul and those who follow Christ. And it looks like all of life is out of control. Look at verse Acts 18:12, **“But when Gallio was proconsul of**

Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal.” It is incredible to look at the names and the places of these rulers. Luke is absolutely accurate in all of these histories, which should not surprise us because he is under the guiding hand of God the Spirit in what he records. Gallio was proconsul or governor of the region of Achaia from AD51 to AD52, because God orchestrates the leaders who rule and the decisions they make. And this hauling of Paul before this ruler is different from them hauling him before other rulers. Those who were local officials of towns. This was a Roman official of the whole region of Achaia which would have taken in towns and cities like Corinth. And his decision would be different. What he ruled would become a precedent where people could look to as far as the whole Roman Empire. So what the Jews do here is try to outlaw Christianity throughout the whole Empire. And if Jesus is preached anywhere there would be severe persecution and punishment and imprisonment and death to those who did.

So they haul Paul before Gallio with the the intention of the maximum damage done to the preaching of the gospel. And look at the accusation they bring against him in verse 13, **“saying, ‘This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.’”** Now this would have been more of a preliminary hearing without much evidence coming forward. There would have been a summary of the accusation against the accused. Now what evidence they would have brought forward we do not know. They might have said that Paul proclaims that Jesus is King when Caesar is King, or that they say he teaches that circumcision is not required to follow the God of the Jews. The Jewish religion was sanctioned by Rome or tolerated by them, but this is something outside of Judaism and not under the banner of Judaism. It might be that they are meeting in the home of Justus, and this is not in the synagogue which is the prescribed place to meet and the only sanctioned place to meet for the Jews.

They have their arguments in order and they really believe that their case is airtight and that it will be heard and go in their favour. It really reminds us of the Jews coming before Pilate in order to have Jesus executed. They want Pilate to rule in their favour. And as you look at the various trials of Jesus that lead up to his execution it really looks like the forces of darkness have won when Jesus is finally executed. They have prevailed with their wicked plot and there is no way that anything good can ever come from this. And don’t we think the same thing? There is no good that can ever come from my broken and struggling marriage. There is no good that can come from my struggles to have a pure mind. There is no good that comes from the opposition of family members to my following Christ. There is no good that can come from that individual who is intent on doing me the greatest harm. And why do we come to those conclusions? It is because we believe there is no one in control. There is no one who has not only planned these events but there is no wisdom where this could ever work for God’s glory and my good.

Now here is the question, because we all have suffering some difficulty and some kind of opposition in our lives — why do we come to those conclusions? And the answer is quite simple. We walk but sight rather than faith. Isn’t it true? It is not because God has not spoken. It is because we just don’t believe it. We are more taken up with what we see rather than what God has said. The verses are there in the Scripture. Think of what is going on in government, and even the plot to make it more difficult to worship Christ. Can anything good come out of this? Is God present? Listen

to Psalm 33:10-11, **“The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.”** Do you believe in your circumstances and the plots that might be against you Proverbs 19:21, **“Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.”** Romans 8:28, **“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”**

Listen to what Jerry Bridges writes in his book *Trusting God*, **“One of our problems with the sovereignty of God is that it frequently does not appear that God is in control of the circumstances of our lives. We see unjust or uncaring or even clearly wicked people doing things that adversely affect us. We experience the consequences of other people’s mistakes and failures. We even do foolish and sinful things ourselves and suffer the bitter fruit of our actions. It is difficult to see God working through secondary causes and frail, sinful human beings. But it is the ability of God to so arrange diverse human actions to fulfill his purposes that makes his sovereignty marvellous and yet mysterious. No Bible-believing Christian has any difficulty believing that God can and has worked miracles . . . But to believe in the sovereignty of God when we do not see direct intervention — when God is, so to speak, working entirely behind the scenes through ordinary circumstances and ordinary actions of people — is even more important because that is the way he usually works.”**

So God is at work using all the events of your life for your good and his glory. But here is the question — can you trust him? The question can be asked in a couple of ways. First, **“Can you trust HIM?”** In other words, do you know who he is, his promises. Do you know his character and his goodness? But the other way it could be asked is, **“Can YOU trust him?”** Do you have such a confidence in whatever you are going through that he is in control, and he is up to good. Do you have such a walk with him, delighting in him, a relationship with him, that you know he is all good and sovereign? that is the epitome of walking by faith.

2. We see the triumph. Vv. 14-18.

I believe these passages, along with the Book of Ruth which we mentioned, or Joseph being sold into slavery, and the crucifixion of Jesus are all given to us, to see the providential and good hand of God. These are seemingly insurmountable odds that anything good would come from these circumstances, but just the exact opposition but this passage is so reminiscent of what Joseph says to his brothers in Genesis 50:20, **“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”** Here, the Jews mean this whole thing for evil — for the decimation of Christianity. But what God means it for is none other than the progress and prosperity of Christianity — for the advance of his kingdom.

So look at the response to the request to hear the case, and this is a surprising and shocking verdict because he could have at least heard the case but listen to what he says in verses 14-15, **“But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said**

to the Jews, **'If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things.'**" Paul goes to give a defence but he is interrupted by Gallio because no defence is needed. There is no crime committed. There is no threat to Rome or disturbance of the peace. It is incredible how clearly he saw the case right from the beginning. He says this whole thing stems from three things, "words," and these might be things like redemption and forgiveness, or practices such as circumcision. Then there he says "names" such as Saviour, Lord, resurrection and the such. And lastly about the "Law" and how to interpret the law, but Gallio saw this all under the umbrella of Judaism. He refuses to enter into something that he knows so little about that is basically all in the religion and practice. There is nothing evil or seditious here.

And here is the thing about his ruling. His ruling basically put Christianity under the safety of the umbrella of Judaism at least for now. They did not have to worship or sacrifice to Caesar, and now Paul and others were free to propagate the message of Christ, the glorious gospel everywhere in the Roman Empire. This was a precedent setting case and could be referred to over and over. It gave believers in a very dangerous world such liberty to make know Christ. And think about it because Gallio ruled that whole region for less than a year. If there was any other ruler they probably would have ruled in the favour of the Jews. But God is the one who ordain all of these events to come to pass, and what God had ordained has come to pass. Listen to what God promised Paul again in Acts 18:10, **"for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people."** No one will harm you Paul! Here the representatives of Satan are all gathered to destroy Paul and his gospel, and what happens? The exact opposite happens. Paul is not only allowed to keep preaching not just here but now through the whole region. What man means for evil God means for good.

And look at the ending, because it really does have a Haman and Mordecai kind of ending here, **"And he drove them from the tribunal. And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this."** With the Jews plot, Paul is the one who was supposed to be beaten at the end of this scene, but here is Sosthenes, the replacement for Crispus who became a believer, and who would have led this affront on Paul and the gospel. Notice that the passage says "they all seized Sosthenes." The all here is either the Jews, or the Jews and the Roman guards present, but here is the amazing thing, the very supporters of Sosthenes are so frustrated by what has taken place that they turn on him and began to beat him. We see Gallio did not intervene because he looked at this whole event as vindictive and a waste of his time.

Now here is the question, because this whole scene seems stranger than fiction. Who directed all of this? Who is the cause of putting a pagan governor who cared nothing for Paul or cared nothing for Christianity to rule in Paul's favour? Listen to 2 Chronicles 36:22, **"Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing."** And the writing was to allow the people to go

back into the land. He had his own reasons and did it freely and willfully but what came to pass is exactly what the Lord willed and planned. This remarkable reversal took place because there is someone else at the head of history who really is working all things out for our good and his glory.

And these sections of Scripture are not given that we might interpret or understand the good that God is accomplishing in our lives, or to think that there has to be a certain outcome. But they are given to us so that we would know that God really is in control of your life and all the details of your life. That Romans 8:28 is such a reality in your life even if you cannot see it. It is a call to walk by faith and not by sight, trusting the infinite wisdom of the one who knows all things and plans all things. J. L. Dagg wrote this in the 1857, **"It should fill us with joy, that infinite wisdom guides the affairs of the world. Many of its events are shrouded in darkness and mystery, and inextricable confusion sometimes seems to reign. Often wickedness prevails, and God seems to have forgotten the creatures that he has made. Our own path through life is dark and devious, and beset with difficulties and dangers. How full of consolation is the doctrine, that infinite wisdom directs every event, brings order out of confusion, and light out of darkness, and, to those who love God, causes all things, whatever be their present aspect and apparent tendency, to work together for good."**

Things have not gone your way. There are relationships and opposition in your life. This can lead to despair and even anger if there was no God ruling and reigning for our good and his glory. Look to him. Walk by faith. He really is all good and all glorious. And he really does have an indestructible and good plan for your life. The cross proves for all time that he can be trusted with our lives.