

# PROMISES MADE, PROMISES KEPT

ACTS 23:12-35 JANUARY 20, 2021

In Isaiah 54, verses 15 and 17 we read:

**Isaiah 54:15, 17 - <sup>15</sup> If any nation comes to fight you, it is not because I sent them. Whoever attacks you will go down in defeat...<sup>17</sup> But in that coming day no weapon turned against you will succeed. You will silence every voice raised up to accuse you. These benefits are enjoyed by the servants of the Lord; their vindication will come from me. I, the Lord, have spoken!**

While this particular prophecy looks ultimately to the Millennial Kingdom,<sup>1</sup> it reminds us of God's sentiment toward His people in every age. We serve a God who makes *big* promises. They're often dramatic and astounding. Now, sometimes we misunderstand them or hope to apply them to the here-and-now rather than as future-hopes in glory, but even so, the Lord promises much. And no matter how many He has made, all of them are "Yes" and "amen."<sup>2</sup>

When we last left Paul, Jesus Christ had come and made a bold promise to the discouraged apostle. The Lord said, "Paul, *you* are going to preach the Gospel in Rome." Of course, that promise is paired with what Ananias had told him on the very first week in his walk with the Lord: That he would testify before governors and kings. But no sooner does the Lord make this wonderful promise than the Devil scrambles enemy fighters to try to stop it. In our passage tonight we'll see a well laid, coordinated effort to destroy Paul, who (from what we can tell) has been abandoned by the church in Jerusalem and left to an uncertain fate.

How would God keep His promises to this vulnerable servant? The way He does so is what we call providence. A simple definition of providence is that God *provides* for His will to be done. As we've said before, we reject the idea of "meticulous determinism," where God is the specific cause of every choice, action and event. Where He specifically and purposefully controls the motion of every molecule. We reject determinism because it isn't taught in the Bible and because it would mean God is the constant creator of evil *and* that man is condemned to hell for sins he was *forced* to commit.

At the same time, the Bible is clear that God *will* have His way. There is no doubt that *every one* of His promises will be truly accomplished. Big or small, national or personal, they will all be done. He is able to bring about His will while maintaining the free moral agency of mankind through providence. And, tonight, as the story unfolds, providence is showcased for us. We see how detailed it can be, how powerful it is, and how quickly it can change everything in the worst of situations. And, one of the best things we see is how human beings can have meaningful participation in God's unstoppable plan to do good and glorify Himself.

**Acts 23:12-13 - <sup>12</sup> When it was morning, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under a curse not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. <sup>13</sup> There were more than forty who had formed this plot.**

Though it lies outside the main theme of our study tonight, I'd have us look for a moment on the marvelous care our Lord shows His children. That He would leave heaven *yet again*, to not only come into the squalor of fallen earth, but down into a prison cell and visit with this *one* individual.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bible Knowledge Commentary

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 1:20

Perhaps you've seen the famous photo of Pope John Paul II sitting in the jail with the man who tried to kill him. The man was a murderer who escaped prison and attacked John Paul, shooting him 4 times.<sup>3</sup> About 7 months later the two met in prison where the Pope expressed his forgiveness.

Paul had once been a killer. The foremost enemy of Christ. But, by grace he had been saved, adopted and commissioned. And there's the Lord, spending an evening in chains with His friend. *That's* the kind of care God has for you and I.

But poor Paul - every time he catches a break, a new danger pops up. He's getting beat to death? Soldiers rescue him. He's about to be flogged? His citizenship spares him. He's about to be torn apart again? He's yanked out of that. And now, we've got this conspiracy of assassins ready to kill him. It's like an action movie where the bad guys have a seemingly unlimited number of henchmen.

There's actually something for us to learn here, though: When it comes to your life, the real smooth sailing begins in eternity. Until then, our enemies will persist in their efforts to discourage, derail and destroy you. In the Bible our enemies are sometimes categorized as the flesh (meaning our personal sin nature that is tempted to disobey God), the world (meaning the world system which rejects God) and the Devil. And like these 40 guys in verse 13. They are not playing. They are dedicated to your ruin. Their whole focus is evil toward you. Think about this for a moment: This conspiracy is almost certainly a suicide mission for *some* of them, and they know it. But to them, it's worth it. The same is true of our spiritual enemies. Think of the flesh: Think of what the flesh is willing to lose just to get that moment of victory in your life. The Devil has *nothing* to lose. His only goal is to kill and destroy.

Now, we also notice that these are bad odds for Paul. We might call them 40 to 1. Even if some of these guys were killed in the melee, there's effectively no chance he would survive the attack.

**Acts 23:14-15 - <sup>14</sup>These men went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have bound ourselves under a solemn curse that we won't eat anything until we have killed Paul. <sup>15</sup>So now you, along with the Sanhedrin, make a request to the commander that he bring him down to you as if you were going to investigate his case more thoroughly. But, before he gets near, we are ready to kill him."**

The leaders of Israel, the chief priests and elders, didn't balk at this plan. They supported it. What a gross, sad moment in the history of their nation. We need men and women of *integrity* and *honesty* to lead us. Sadly, it's becoming harder and harder to find candidates like that.

**Acts 23:16 - <sup>16</sup>But the son of Paul's sister, hearing about their ambush, came and entered the barracks and reported it to Paul.**

Whoa, wait a minute, *Uncle* Paul? How big was his family? Were they Christians or not? In the end, these are unanswerable questions. But there are a few things we might observe. First, we saw in chapter 21 that Paul did not lodge with them. Second, it seems unlikely that his sister and nephew were Christians, as he had some kind of access to the chambers of the rulers of the Jews, or at least he was let in on the plan in confidence by a friend.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://mashable.com/2015/09/30/pope-john-paul-ii-assassin/>

But clearly this nephew had both love for his uncle and dedication to do what was right, even when it wasn't easy. It's not clear just how old he was. Scholars point out that the term used in verses 17, 18 and 22 (young man) can be used for a little guy or for a man in his late 20s or even 30s. Hard to tell. On the one hand, he's got a good head on his shoulders, and he can think and speak clearly. On the other hand, the Commander will treat him the way you'd treat a child, not a full grown man.

However old he was, we should be impressed by his bravery. Here he was, testifying against killers, going to the Roman fortress and facing the occupiers of his nation. I remember once, when we visited a prison in Peru, it was hard to tell who to be more afraid of: The guards or the inmates. The whole thing was very unsettling. And we were in a group and several of the guys had been there many times and knew people. This young man goes alone.

Though we don't know much about him, his example here is helpful. First: If God is stirring up your heart with some burden to do something that is right, then do it. It may be difficult or frightening, but it also may be a powerful part of God accomplishing His providence. Second - particularly to you young people - your lives and conduct matter. History can turn on your willingness to do what is right. To stand for the truth. See what God can do through a Samuel or a David, an Esther or a Daniel. Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego changed the world because they were willing to *literally* stand, when that is what God asked of them. And though it may seem like the moments of greatest significance are still far away, the truth is, *every* moment of your life is valuable in God's plan. There's an interesting contrast in this story. Paul's nephew was called a "young man" and he's found overcoming fear, risking much for the sake of another and the result is that Caesar himself would hear the Gospel, not to mention Herod, Felix, Festus and countless more. Paul was once called a "young man" in this same book. And that's when he watched the clothes of those who murdered Stephen. What sort of young person are you today? What sort of pursuits fill your hours?

**Acts 23:17-19 - <sup>17</sup> Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the commander, because he has something to report to him." <sup>18</sup> So he took him, brought him to the commander, and said, "The prisoner Paul called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, because he has something to tell you." <sup>19</sup> The commander took him by the hand, led him aside, and inquired privately, "What is it you have to report to me?"**

This would've been even more nerve-wracking. The motions of providence are not always a walk in the park. Sometimes it's a walk through the Red Sea. Can you imagine how nerve-wracking that would have been? Now Paul, for *his* part, did not just "let go and let God." Paul took the situation seriously and made wise choices based off of what he knew and how he was led.

Just because God makes promises and then works out His providence to accomplish them doesn't mean we are excluded from action or participation. Quite the opposite, actually. Think of some of the great Biblical moments of providence: David killed the giant. But first he gathered 5 smooth stones. The starving widow borrowed every jar she could from friends and family, and then they were miraculously filled until no more were left. The disciples got to be a part of two of Jesus' greatest miracles, feeding multitudes, but first they canvassed the people for a few loaves and fish.

Now, God *could* have just said a word and remade reality according to His promises, but instead we see His will being accomplished through supernatural *and* natural means. First, this young man *happened* to be in the right place at the right time to hear about this plot without being recognized. That alone probably took hundreds of providential moves. Then, he somehow made it right into a heavily guarded garrison. Some suggest that Paul would've been treated very loosely, but I don't

think so. This guy is the cause of *multiple* riots and he could potentially bring judgment down on the soldiers who had violated Roman law in binding him. And yet, his nephew had no trouble coming in. Next, we see that God granted Paul and this young man favor in the eyes of the Centurion and the Commander. They could've been conspiratorial themselves. "If we get rid of Paul, that solves a lot of our problems." God has made a clear path for all this to happen, even though I'm guessing the whole garrison was on high alert. Think about what's been going on this week leading up to the inauguration. They moved 20,000 National Guardsmen to D.C. Jerusalem was trembling with unrest. But God made a way.

**Acts 23:20-21 - <sup>20</sup>"The Jews," he said, "have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the Sanhedrin tomorrow, as though they are going to hold a somewhat more careful inquiry about him. <sup>21</sup>Don't let them persuade you, because there are more than forty of them lying in ambush – men who have bound themselves under a curse not to eat or drink until they have killed him. Now they are ready, waiting for your consent."**

Consider the ramifications of what this young man is doing: He may be signing his *own* death warrant. He is, after all, standing in the way of these Jewish zealots and he's enlisting Rome to help. Despite the pressure and danger, he was going to tell the truth. In this action, we're reminded of the power of the truth. In this era of relativism, with all sorts of "new truths" being thrown at us, we remember what the Bible says: That the truth, *God's* truth, sets us free and it sanctifies us and we are stand in it. The truth is powerful in a world of schemes and politics and conspiracies and rage. Hold fast to it. Because this boy told the truth, Paul stands before Caesar. God used that simple choice to do something remarkable. That's the way He still operates today. Of course, Paul's nephew was just *one* of many links in the chain of God's providence, but we see he was just as meaningful, just as essential, as the others.

**Acts 23:22 - <sup>22</sup>So the commander dismissed the young man and instructed him, "Don't tell anyone that you have informed me about this."**

Another bit of providence here: The Commander *immediately* believed this report. He didn't hesitate or order an independent investigation. And it's a good thing he didn't. But clearly the Lord was operating in his mind and heart to accept this testimony and respond quickly.

**Acts 23:23-24 - <sup>23</sup>He summoned two of his centurions and said, "Get two hundred soldiers ready with seventy cavalry and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea at nine tonight. <sup>24</sup>Also provide mounts to ride so that Paul may be brought safely to Felix the governor."**

In a move of breathtaking providence, what was 40 to 1 *against* Paul is now 10 to 1 in his favor! Just like that, in a *moment*, the advantage was reversed, to a stunning degree!

**Acts 23:25-30 - <sup>25</sup>He wrote the following letter: <sup>26</sup>Claudius Lysias, To the most excellent governor Felix: Greetings. <sup>27</sup>When this man had been seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them, I arrived with my troops and rescued him because I learned that he is a Roman citizen. <sup>28</sup>Wanting to know the charge they were accusing him of, I brought him down before their Sanhedrin. <sup>29</sup>I found out that the accusations were concerning questions of their law, and that there was no charge that merited death or imprisonment. <sup>30</sup>When I was informed that there was a plot against the man, I sent him to you right away. I also ordered his accusers to state their case against him in your presence.**

We know that Lysias was playing fast and loose with the truth, removing the mistakes he made and making himself the hero, but Paul doesn't rat him out. He doesn't go after his job or anything like that. Lysias wasn't a believer, but we see him repaying Paul's grace with goodness. He uses his influence to say, "Hey, this guy isn't guilty of anything." He didn't have to do that, but when God's people act as salt and light in the world, it makes a difference.

**Acts 23:31-32 - <sup>31</sup> So the soldiers took Paul during the night and brought him to Antipatris as they were ordered. <sup>32</sup> The next day, they returned to the barracks, allowing the cavalry to go on with him.**

There's a sad milestone here: As far as Acts is concerned, we've left Jerusalem for the last time. After so many chances, the window was closed. Paul leaving reminds us of the glory departing from the Temple in Ezekiel. But, despite their rejection, God will *still* accomplish His many promises to His special nation. One day all Israel will be saved as they look on Him whom they pierced.

**Acts 23:33-35 - <sup>33</sup> When these men entered Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. <sup>34</sup> After he read it, he asked what province he was from. When he learned he was from Cilicia, <sup>35</sup> he said, "I will give you a hearing whenever your accusers also get here." He ordered that he be kept under guard in Herod's palace.**

More providence at play: Paul was born in the right province to be under Felix' jurisdiction. Which would open the door to him testifying to King Agrippa and others.

Now, here's what's interesting: After such a rapid flurry of providential activity, we know Paul will spend two years right here, waiting for trials and verdicts. Why is it that sometimes God moves instantaneously, and sometimes His plan takes many years? We can't know the answer to that, certainly in our own lives, but we can see things like this: Some believe that it was during these 2 years of waiting that Luke was able to travel and research for the *other* book he would write, the Gospel of Luke.<sup>4</sup>

At any given moment, God is not just accomplishing *one* thing, but *an innumerable* set of things in thousands upon thousands of situations. Sometimes the main fulcrum in some act of His will be 1 boy doing the right thing. Other times it's going to take deep complexity. Our confidence is that, no matter the situation, God *is* able to do whatever He has promised. Not only is He *able*, He *will* accomplish it. And, whether that accomplishing takes one night or a lifetime, it is clear that God *is* working. He busies Himself without rest, without hesitation, without fail on your behalf and mine and He invites us to join in with Him. He doesn't need us, but He *loves* us and brings Himself pleasure and glory by utilizing us in His service. That service may be something great and monumental, like Paul preaching the Gospel before the worst tyrant alive on planet earth, or it may be the simple action of telling the truth to one person. I've said it before, but the Bible reveals that the very countenance of your face can be used by God for His eternal purposes.<sup>5</sup> The borrowing of a jar. The *lending* of a jar. "Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord," not only because this is our duty as citizens of His Kingdom, but because He is able to take our lowly tuppence, our measly mites, and change eternal destinies with them. These benefits are enjoyed by the servants of the Lord.

---

<sup>4</sup> Coffman Commentaries On The Bible

<sup>5</sup> Daniel 1:15