

Is It Really All That Bad?

Acts 23:11-35

One morning, not any particular morning, Alexander woke up to what would turn out from his perspective to be a *Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. It began when he realized he had gum in his hair. After stepping out of bed, he tripped on his skateboard dropping his sweater into the sink where the water was running. At breakfast both his brothers got cool prizes from the cereal boxes they held. He only got cereal.

On the way to school he got the middle seat - again. At school his teacher, Mrs. Dickens, didn't like his picture of the invisible castle he had drawn which was nothing more than a blank piece of paper and then she later criticized his loud singing. His best friend Paul deserted him for his third best friend and then at lunch he had no dessert.

At the dentist's office he was told he had a cavity, the elevator door closed on his foot, his brother pushed him in the mud while his other brother called him a crybaby, then Mom punished him for punching his brother for calling him names.

At the store they couldn't find the pair of shoes he liked so had to settle for plain white tennis shoes, which he wouldn't wear. He made a mess at his Dad's office and then at home had to eat lima beans for supper. The tv had too much kissing for him, the bath water was too hot, soap got in his eyes, a marble rolled down the drain and he had to wear the pajamas he just hated – his railroad train pajamas.

The day ended as it began – terrible and horrible. The nightlight burned out, he bit his tongue, his brother took a pillow and the family cat chose to sleep with his other brother. He decided that no bad things would happen to him if he moved to Australia, but Mom reassured him that everybody has bad days, even people in Australia.

Maybe you've had a day like that, where everything just seems to go from bad to worse. Perhaps Murhpy's law is right that anything possible that can go wrong, does. Maybe Paul thought that. Could things get any worse for Paul? It seems like

even since arriving in Jerusalem things went from bad to worse. But the bad things that happen to Paul weren't his fault. As a matter of fact if you get right down to it, God was the one who allowed them to happen. Figure that one out. His greatest ambassador was the one who seemed to have the most trouble heaped on him. But then, like Job, Paul never blamed God for any of it. In Jerusalem Paul was branded as a troublemaker.

How would you like that reputation? Wherever Paul went trouble was sure to be close behind. It's like his shadow. No matter where he went, no matter what time of the day, his shadow was always with him. Trouble seemed to follow Paul everywhere. Just as had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit and confirmed by the prophet Agabus, Paul was facing both hardship and prison. He was misunderstood by the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

He was maligned and manhandled by the Jews. He was mistreated by the Roman government represented by the commander and soldiers.

In our last time together we left Paul in the barracks occupied by the Roman soldiers. He is alive, but he is alone and seemingly abandoned. Luke remains silent at this point as to the whereabouts of the Jerusalem church leaders with whom Paul had met recently or the church folks to whom he had just delivered a generous contribution for financial aid. It was only days earlier that we noted how warmly the apostle was welcomed. Luke also gives us no details about where his companions were at this time who had traveled with him to Jerusalem. There seems to be no one around to comfort and encourage him in this time of confusion. Barnabas, the son of encouragement, isn't there this time to give Paul a word of hope. There is no indication that the Jerusalem church sent him notes to tell him they were standing by him no matter what. Paul seems to be all alone.

Maybe you have been in situations much like that.

Oh, not that you've spent time in prison, but some event has occurred in your life in which you wonder where all the Christians have gone. Where is the body of Christ who is supposed to help you through the tough times? When the body of Christ is needed most, they seem to be somewhere else. Maybe that's how Paul felt. Yet like Paul, maybe the Lord stood by you through something you read in His Word that comforted your heart and told you to take courage. It was like a soothing balm that brought peace and contentment to a weary and troubled soul. In the absence of those who you think you can count on, remember that God gives you courage to keep going. That's where we left Paul last week. He had been told to take courage.

Having both Roman citizenship and a Jewish heritage he was caught in the middle between political and religious ideologies asserting their power. Both groups were toeing the party line and neither was interested really in discovering or upholding the truth. Whether politically or religiously motivated, caught in the middle Paul was just a means to an end for these two groups in achieving their respective goals and ambitions.

On the one hand, the Jews were out to execute Paul without any solid evidence of wrongdoing. It wasn't so much what he was teaching as it was who he was teaching. That he was telling the Gentiles they could also have a relationship with God without becoming a Jew was anathema to the Jews. That infuriated them and they couldn't get rid of him fast enough. Their accusations though held no weight and were contradictory. And besides, the soldiers stepped in before they could finish the job.

On the other hand there were the Roman soldiers who did their bit for king and country. At the head of this cohort is Lysius the commander. He represents all that Rome is. He'll write a letter to Governor Felix that isn't so much to exonerate Paul as it is to save his own skin. He had wrongly accused Paul of being someone else responsible

several years earlier of entering Jerusalem with the intent of usurping Roman authority. He had wrongly put him in chains without just cause. Then he wrongly had Paul stretched out on the rack ready to beat him with whips which in many cases led the death of the prisoner. Finding out that Paul was a Roman citizen put the fear in him. If word of this injustice against a Roman citizen got out, Lysius could lose his command, he could lose his citizenship which cost him a lot of money, or it could even result in his own death. Roman citizens had rights that he had violated in his treatment of Paul. He was out to cover his tracks and we'll see in his letter to Felix that he fabricates the truth to his advantage.

In 23:11 we learned that God had a specific plan for Paul. These events really began back in 20:22 where the Holy Spirit had compelled Paul to travel to Jerusalem setting the ground work for his trip to Rome. God said He would get Paul there to testify about Him but He didn't say how He would get him there. From a purely human perspective even though things seem to go from bad to worse for Paul, God had everything under control. With all the stuff that had and would happen to Paul how many of us would be able to write the words he so eloquently penned to the Philippians: "Now I want you to know, brother, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly." (Philippians 1:12-14) Can we say that about the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day we might be having?

Where we ended last week is where I want to begin today and consider just two points this morning that I trust will be of encouragement to each of us when things seem to appear chaotic and we're not sure what the Lord is doing, when things just can't get

any worse and they do. Turn in your Bibles to Acts 23:11-35. Hopefully by now in our study of Acts you have seen God's fingerprint throughout the book. Hopefully you have become convinced that when God sets out to do something nothing is going to alter His will, nothing will change His plans. But because we need to be reminded from time to time we'll see these two points again in this passage about Him:

God's plans are sovereign – v. 11

God's protection is secure – v. 12-35

I. GOD'S PLANS ARE SOVEREIGN – v. 11

Sovereignty is not a word that we find in our Bibles anywhere, but its principle is well established. When we speak about the sovereignty of God we mean that God is the supreme ruler of everything. Theologian Charles Hodges said about sovereignty that "the external world, rational and irrational creatures, things great and small, ordinary and extraordinary, are equally and always under the control of God."

That God is sovereign means that He has absolute authority over everything and that no other being has greater power or authority than He does. That He is sovereign also means that everything He does is consistent with His character and attributes. Who He is determines how He rules and how He rules is done so because of who He is. He rules and reigns out of love and out of justice – both in equal balance. But you say, if that's the case why does He allow sin to be prevalent and persistent? Why does He allow natural disasters to occur that devastate people and property? Why does He allow man-made disasters to occur like war or genocide or terrorism? Why is there disease and suffering around the world? Why would a loving God who is supposed to be all powerful allow such horrendous events to occur in the life of His greatest ambassador? Some people take these disasters to either make the claim that God does not exist at all or if He does exist He is either too weak to do

anything about them because they are beyond His power or control or He just doesn't care enough about us because we are so out of control that He chooses not to lift a finger to stop things from happening. Neither could be further from the truth. I Chronicles 29:10-13

Daniel 4:35

Of God's sovereignty Cyrus, king of Persia acknowledged that it was God who had given him all the kingdoms of the earth (Ezra 1:2).

Psalms 66:7 speaks about God ruling forever by His power, that His eyes are always on the nations. He is the One who sets up kings and removes them through His sovereign reign all for His purpose.

Psalms 93:1-2 "The Lord reigns, He is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed in majesty and is armed with strength. The world is firmly established; it cannot be moved. Your throne was established long ago; you are from all eternity."

That His throne was established long ago means that there isn't ever going to come along some power or being that will usurp it.

Writing to Timothy, Paul spoke of the sovereignty of God "In the sight of God who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which God will bring about in His own time – God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To Him be honor and might forever. Amen."

(I Timothy 6:13-16)

Emery Bancroft writes that "God has power to do what is worthy of Himself. God can do all He wills, but will not do all He can. His power is under the control of a wise and holy will."

I believe today we have lost a sense of God's sovereignty. We don't understand it and we don't live our lives according to it and that includes many Christians. We don't give Him the reverence due one who is sovereign. We don't consider Him to be in total and complete authority and rule otherwise we would live our lives differently. To take a thought from the poet William Ernest Henley we live our lives as if we are the master of our fate, the captain of our soul. We give lip service to His sovereignty and then question His work and motives. We have come to give Him second place not rightful place as sovereign. We have come to believe and behave that in every area outside the religious realm that I and I alone choose the destination and my destiny is in my hands. We ignore Jeremiah 29:11 that God has plans for us. We forget what He states in Isaiah 46:11 "...What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do." Unfortunately and all too often His plans become secondary to ours. If God is truly sovereign then He commands that we give Him our all. That's what Paul was doing. He may not have understood God's method of getting him to Rome, but he was going to follow God's plans, because He understood it to be the best plan to follow and trust. We must come to the place where we believe and accept His sovereignty by a word we call faith. "But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he that comes to God must believe that He is and that He rewards those who diligently seek Him." (Hebrews 11:6)

Paul had to accept by faith the sovereign plan of God when the Lord stood next to Paul and told him to take courage, that he would testify about Him in Rome. The stamp of God's sovereignty, that He controls all things for our good and His glory, is seen in what Paul wrote to the Romans. "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose. For those God foreknew

He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son..." (Romans 8:28-29b)
 God is working all things for His glory as He uses those events to make us like Christ. Paul understood that the events happening to him though he may not have liked what he was going through, all had a purpose in God's great plan. The sovereignty of God is seen in verse 11. And so it is that Paul must have been discouraged and wondered what in the world was going on for the Lord Himself to come and stand by him and tell him to take courage. His sovereignty is seen that in spite of the threats against him by the Jews and in spite of his current incarceration none of these things would alter God's plan to get him to Rome. This was a way of God's protecting his servant to accomplish His will.

So what are you going through now for which you are wrestling with God's sovereignty? What is going on in your life for which He wants you to trust His plan for your life? What are you going through where you need to acknowledge that He is in control no matter how crazy it might seem? God's sovereignty recognizes that He is in control of my life as well. Am I willing to let Him have sovereign rule?

Paul trusted in the sovereignty of God. He was willing to let go of his plans and follow God because there was a greater eternal purpose in it all.

You Can Have Me – Sidewalk Prophets

If I saw You on the street
 And You said come and follow me
 But I had to give up everything
 All I once held dear and all of my dreams
 Would I love You enough to let go
 Or would my love run dry
 When You asked for my life
When did love become unmoving?
When did love become unconsuming?
Forgetting what the world has told me

Father of love, You can have me

You can have me

If You're all You claim to be
Then I'm not losing anything
So I will crawl upon my knees
Just to know the joy of suffering
I will love You enough to let go
Lord, I give you my life
I give you my life

Chorus

I want to be where You are
I'm running into Your arms
And I will never look back
So Jesus, here is my heart

Chorus

Repeat chorus

My Father, my love

You can have me

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God is in control. So why not follow His plan?
Bad days aren't just Murphy's Law having a hay
day. God's plans are sovereign. Are you willing to
follow them?
God's protection is secure.

II. GOD'S PROTECTION IS SECURE – v. 12-35

When God gives a promise, you can count on Him to keep His word. In this section we see how God providentially protects Paul. Nothing will happen to Paul that God does not want to happen to him. Everything will happen to Paul according to God's sovereign plan, because it is ultimately for God's glory. Remember when Paul and Silas were in Philippi? What happened? A riot broke out and they were thrown in jail. At midnight a great earthquake shook the cell to pieces and all the doors flung open but no one escaped. The jailer came in and asked how he could get saved. The next day they were set free. There is no earthquake here. God has other plans to get his servant to Rome safely.

Here is where we begin to see how Paul is going to get to Rome. Remember that during the night the Lord stood beside Paul and told him he would go to Rome. Verse 13 begins "the next morning." Here's where from our perspective things go from bad to worse. A bunch of guys, over 40 of them, agree to conspire against Paul to kill him. They were out for blood. Here is also where we see just how corrupt the Sanhedrin really was. These guys form a plan and tell the Sanhedrin to request that the commander bring Paul to them for another meeting to question him more thoroughly. These 40 guys would set an ambush so that when the soldiers came by with Paul they would kill him. It was an assassination plot and it didn't matter if some of them were killed in the process so long as Paul lay dead at the end of the day. They had bound themselves with an oath before God that if they failed they would be cursed by God. Here's where we see the corruption of the religious leaders – they agreed to the plot. Those who were chartered with protecting life, agreed to take a life. The plan sounded good.

But Paul's nephew somehow was divinely positioned to become privy to the plot and ran to tell Paul. The short version of the story as we read it is that the nephew was taken to the commander who believed the story and made preparations for Paul's safety. He told the boy not to tell anyone so that first of all it wouldn't tip off the would-be assassins that they now knew so that their plans would be altered and second, he wanted the boy to be safe. We read on that the commander prepared for the protection of this Roman citizen. He didn't care what Paul's religious views were or that they differed from those of the Jerusalem establishment. He had a Roman citizen on his hands whose life was being threatened and he was going to do all he could to ensure Paul lived. If harm came to this Roman citizen who had been arrested without just cause, his life as well could be taken in return.

The first thing was to get him out of Jerusalem, so he got two centurions, 200 foot soldiers, 200 spearman and 70 cavalrymen. Then he had Paul escorted out of town under cover of night and sent to Caesarea which was the seat of Roman government in Palestine. There Paul's case would be heard by Governor Felix.

When God's plans seem to be challenged, God always has a way to ensure His plans go through. Take Israel for example in the book of Esther. Esther was a nobody in the kingdom but became a somebody because she was willing to trust God. She became Queen of the land after the previous Queen fell out of favor with the King. In the meantime Haman had sprung a trap to get rid of all the Jews in the kingdom just because he had a bad encounter with one Jew named Mordecai. It wasn't just by chance that the King had insomnia one night. It was God's plan. The King couldn't sleep so he called for the royal history books to be read. As they were reading to put the king to sleep they read about a guy who had overheard a plot to assassinate the king resulting in the king's life being spared. Mordecai was honored. Eventually the plot to kill all the Jews which included the Queen was revealed and Haman was hung on the gallows he had built for Mordecai.

God's plans will always be carried out. God provided protection for Paul to get him out of Jerusalem and on his way down the road to Rome. Once out of Jewish territory and into Gentile territory (Antipatras) 400 of the soldiers returned to Jerusalem. Paul was sent to Caesarea with a letter written by Lysius. In it Lysius changed some of the details of the incident for which Paul came into his custody as a way of saving his own neck. He made it sound like he knew Paul was a Roman citizen before the riot broke out and hence the reason for stepping in. Truth be told, he neglected to include that Paul was stretched out on the rack ready to get another 39 lashes. That he also includes no formal accusations isn't by accident. Instead it mentioned the threat on Paul's life for which he felt it in the best interest of all parties to get him out of Jerusalem safely. He did not

want to appear incompetent in his duties so used the assassination attempt as a way of passing the buck. From our vantage point with Scripture in hand we can see the protective security of God on Paul's life. God had promised to get His servant to Rome. He is faithful to do what He says even when we think things aren't going our way. "Faithful is He who calls you, He will do it." (I Thessalonians 5:24)

Jacob thought everything was against him. The same promise had been given to him as was given to Abraham and Isaac. You'll become a great nation and be given the land promised. But he thought everything was against him. He thought he lost his son Joseph. He thought he lost his son Simeon. He thought he was losing his son Benjamin. There was a severe famine in the land. But all the while God was working in the background preparing for the preservation of his chosen people. God would protect them down in Egypt to eventually get them to the Promised Land.

God's protective plan for you is also secure. If God has a plan for you, even though things look like they aren't going in your favor, He will protect you to get you to the place where He wants you to be. If something we consider bad happens to us, it isn't because God wasn't watching or God didn't see it coming or that God was powerless to stop it from happening. Consider it God's plan to get you where He wants you. Trust Him. He'll protect you.

That is especially true in salvation. In Romans 8 we are reminded that nothing can separate us from God's love. His protective hand keeps us safe because nothing can snatch us out of His hands.

God's plans are sovereign. Are you living in such a way that God is sovereign in your life?

God's protection is secure. Are you trusting in God's protection to get you to where He wants you to be? It isn't just a place. It is also the destination of a character that is like Christ and to heaven itself.

Can we learn that in all things God's grace is sufficient for us? (II Corinthians 12:9)