

Providential Protection

[Acts 23:12-35](#)



Paul has finished his missionary journeys and is now in Jerusalem. Everything Paul has tried to do since he came to Jerusalem has ended in a riot. He tried to pacify the Jewish Christians by purifying himself in the Temple and paying the expenses of four men who had taken a vow, and that ended in a riot. He tried to give his testimony of what God had done in his life to the Jewish crowd in the temple court and that ended in a riot. He tried to give testimony before the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin, and that ended in a riot. Now, he's a prisoner. A bunch of Jews put together a plot to assassinate Paul, but God providentially protects him.

Let me just say that the term "providence" is not found in the Scripture, but the doctrine of providence is very scriptural. The theological term "providence" means nothing short of: *"the universal sovereign rule of God."* Providence is *the preserving and governing of all his creatures and all their actions.*

Charles Hodge said, *"The external world, rational and irrational creatures, things great and small, ordinary and extraordinary, are equally and always under the control of God."*

The text we want to look at today is interesting in that it contains no exposition of biblical doctrine, no exhortations, and no commands. In fact nothing about the Lord is mentioned from verse 12 to the end of the chapter. The name of God isn't mentioned nor is the name of Jesus mentioned. There is no mention of the Holy Spirit, salvation, or any biblical doctrine. So we are going to just skip this text and move on to chapter 24. Just kidding!

This text is like the book of Ester in which God is never mentioned and yet His providential rule is seen at every turn. In Ester we see the deliverance of Esther, Israel and Mordecai, by the fact that King Ahasuerus one night couldn't sleep. Because the King couldn't sleep, he called for the political records of the kingdom to be read to him. As they were being read, he found in there that Mordecai had done a very noble thing in the past. And he said, *"What's been done for Mordecai?"* You know the story. Haman, a wicked man, who wanted to do away with Mordecai and all of the Jews, had already made his plans. Haman had ordered gallows be constructed, upon which Mordecai to death, and made arrangements for the extermination of the Jews. Well, because of the fact that Ahasuerus couldn't sleep one night, just that incidental little thing, changed everything. The result was Mordecai was delivered, honored and Haman died on the gallows he had constructed for Mordecai.

Our text like Ester illustrates the doctrine of God's providence. In our text, Paul had a bad day. He had been before the Sanhedrin which ended in a riot and now he is sitting in jail wondering what will happen next. Believers, if we have a bad day, it is because the Lord ordained these circumstances for our benefit. Bad days don't just happen!

So Paul sits alone in the barracks, and the Lord Jesus comes to him in person in verse 11, and it says,

But on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also." (Acts 23:11 NASB)

The risen Lord stood by Paul, presumably visually, and tells him to *"Take courage."* The word *"courage"* here is the Greek *tharseo* which means: *"to have courage, to be of good cheer or comfort."* If the Lord showed up to cheer up, comfort, encourage Paul, then Paul must have been somewhat discouraged. If you were Paul, and you had been rejected by your own people, God's chosen people, the Jews, and you had risked your life to witness to them, only to be beaten, and now imprisoned, there would be cause for despair. This was the fourth time in the book of Acts that the Lord shows up for Paul during a time of hardship. Here the Lord tells Paul that he must witness for Him at Rome. It took two years for this promise to be fulfilled.

Do you remember what happened when Paul was imprisoned in Philippi?

and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. (Acts 16:26 NASB)

They put Paul in jail and the Lord causes a very localized earthquake that only knocks the jail down—that's a miracle. But there are no miracles in our text for today. In this text we see Paul's imprisonment as God's providential protection of Paul. Paul was now such a marked man, and so intensely hated by many Jews in many cities, that wherever he went, his life was in danger. So much so that some followed him around with the aim of killing him. If Paul, who was one of God's choicest servants and went through such trials, then none of us are exempt, and the health/wealth teachers are theologically bankrupt.

When it was day, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. ¹³ There were more than forty who formed this plot. (Acts 23:12-13 NASB)

"When it was day"—that's the morning after the night in which Jesus appeared to Paul and the very day after he had given testimony to the Jewish Council. It says that the Jews bound themselves under an oath—the Greek is ***"they anathematized themselves with an anathema"***. They devoted themselves to destruction. This was not an uncommon thing. They placed themselves under a divine judgment, as it were, and they invoked the vengeance of God. These men clearly expected to achieve their aim quickly. Now you may be thinking, well I guess these men are dead now. Well, yeah they are, but not because of this vow. Technically, they could have gotten out of the vow. The rabbis provided absolution for those who just couldn't come through with their vow.

Why then, did they hate Paul? He'd never harmed them, stolen from them or broken their laws. All he did was preach love and salvation, announce that the Messiah, Jesus Christ, whom they had rejected, came alive from the dead. Paul told them that even after they had rejected and crucified Jesus, He would grant them eternal life if they believed. They hated Paul because he went around the Roman Empire preaching that Gentiles could know God without becoming Jews. This message needed to be silenced.

They came to the chief priests and the elders and said, "We have bound ourselves under a solemn oath to taste nothing until we have killed Paul. ¹⁵ "Now therefore, you and the Council notify the commander to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case by a more thorough investigation; and we for our part are ready to slay him before he comes near the place." (Acts 23:14-15 NASB)

Now the chief priests of the Sanhedrin were the Sadducees. The Sadducees' party was the most antagonistic to Paul. Do you remember for what reason? Because Paul taught the resurrection and they were anti-resurrectionists. The High Priest probably never forgave him for publicly calling him a whitewashed wall and reminding him of the judgment he faced.

Now obviously the conspirators knew that the leadership of Israel was so morally rotten that they were willing to advertise a murder. These men were supposed to be the spiritual leaders and they agree to a murder plot according to verse 20.

These assassins planned to kill him somewhere on the streets between the Fortress of Antonia and the hall of the Sanhedrin. These buildings were not far apart. They surely realized that Paul's Roman guards might kill some of their number in the process. They hated Paul so much they were willing to die in order to kill him.

On the surface, it would appear that Paul was really in danger now. Things seem to be going from bad to worse. But this is only the appearance of things. In reality this conspiracy is by God's providence Paul's ticket for a safe departure out of Jerusalem. It is also his next step toward Rome.

But the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, and he came and entered the barracks and told Paul. (Acts 23:16 NASB)

It was no "coincidence" that Paul's nephew just "happened" to be there when these conspirators met, and to overhear their plans.

This is the only time the Bible says anything about Paul's family, other than Paul saying that his father was a Pharisee. We don't know anything else. We do know that in [Philippians 3:8](#), he said that because of his faith in Christ, he had suffered, ***"The loss of all things."*** Most Bible teachers assume that ***"the loss of all things"*** included being disinherited from his Jewish

family, because from then on, you hear nothing at all about his family.

God providentially ensured that news of the plot reached the ears of Paul's nephew. And he came to the fortress and informed Paul. Paul, as a Roman citizen, would have a certain freedom to enjoy visitors.

Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Lead this young man to the commander, for he has something to report to him." (Acts 23:17 NASB)

As a Roman citizen his request would be received with respect. They would not want to offend him.

I have a question for you. How do we reconcile this verse with verse 11?

But on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also." (Acts 23:11 NASB)

The **"must"** here is the Greek word "**dei**," which is a term often used by Luke to indicate divine necessity. Since God had already told Paul that he was going to Rome, why did he even bother with these Jewish threats? Why didn't Paul just laugh and say, I'm going to witness at Rome, try and stop me. Or, Thanks for telling me the news, but I'm trusting the Lord—so you can go back home.

Sovereignty and Responsibility:

We know that God is sovereign over everything that happens. Nothing happens outside the sovereign will of God. He controls plants, animals, men, weather, nations, and nature. God controls everything that happens. 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 and a farmer may do the same, but God causes them to grow.

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](#)).

Because we are so prone to twist or misuse the truth we find in Scripture, it is the tendency of some individuals to see the doctrine of sovereignty as fatalism. The fatalist would say, **"God is going to do what He wants to do so I'm not going to concern myself about it."** If there was a storm coming, they would make no preparations; they wouldn't run to the store or make sure they had batteries or water.

On the other hand, the person who rightly understands God's sovereignty would make all the preparations that wisdom dictates, while the whole time trusting in God and praying for wisdom and protection.

God's sovereignty does not negate our responsibility to **act wisely**. Acting wisely, in this context, means that we use all legitimate, Biblical means at our disposal to avoid harm to ourselves or others, and to bring about what we believe to be the right course of events.

David gives us a good illustration of acting wisely as he fled from Saul. Saul was determined to kill David. So David did every thing he could to avoid Saul. David acted wisely. David knew that he was to be king some day:

Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. And Samuel arose and went to Ramah. (1 Samuel 16:13 NASB)

He had already been anointed to succeed Saul and David knew that the Sovereign God would carry out His purpose:

I will cry to God Most High, To God who accomplishes all things for me. (Psalms 57:2 NASB)

David knew that God would fulfill His purpose for him. Yet David didn't just sit down and say, "Saul can't hurt me because

God had ordained that I be king, and I can't be king if I'm dead." David fled from Saul and took every precaution so that Saul could not kill him. David didn't presume upon the sovereignty of God, but acted wisely in dependence upon God to bless his efforts. He ran from Saul, and he prayed to God.

Jesus also gives us a good illustration of acting wisely. For most of His ministry, the Lord Jesus had been telling His disciples not to disclose to the world that He is the Son of God. Even demons are silenced who cry out, **"We know who You are!"** When a leper is healed, Jesus says, **"See that you don't tell this to anyone"** (Mk. 1:44). When a little girl is raised from the dead, we are told, **"He gave them strict orders not to let anyone know about this"** (Mk. 5:43). When Peter, on behalf of the apostles, says, **"You are the Christ,"** we read that **"Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him"** (Mk. 8:30). The reasons for this were that there was considerable misunderstanding as to the nature of the Messiah; the crowds thought of that figure as a political revolutionary.

If Rome suspected that He was a revolutionary who claimed to be the Messiah, they'd have captured and arrested Him. If Jesus had immediately thrown down the gauntlet to the chief priests by teaching that He was the promised Messiah, then He wouldn't have survived the two or three years of ministry He had to have.

I think Jesus' attitude of secrecy teaches us something about sovereignty and responsibility. Jesus knew He was going to the cross; it was God's will, and it could not be stopped. And yet Jesus uses human means to keep His secret until the proper time.

Through indolence the rafters sag, and through slackness the house leaks. (Ecclesiastes 10:18 NASB)

The house is not said to decay because of God's sovereign plan, but because of man's laziness. If a student fails an exam because he did not study, he can't blame it on God's sovereign will, but is responsible for his own lack of diligence. God is sovereign over every thing that happens in life, but we are still responsible. Don't ever use God's sovereignty as an excuse for your failure to use wisdom.

Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Lead this young man to the commander, for he has something to report to him." (Acts 23:17 NASB)

Take this boy to Claudius Lysias, your commander and chief.

So he took him and led him to the commander and said, "Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to lead this young man to you since he has something to tell you." 19 The commander took him by the hand and stepping aside, began to inquire of him privately, "What is it that you have to report to me?" (Acts 23:18-19 NASB)

"Paul, the prisoner"—this is Paul from now on. Paul uses similar words 5 times in his letters ([Ephesians 4:1](#); [Philippians 1:13](#); [Philemon 1, 9](#)). Who does Paul see himself as a prisoner of? Rome? No, the Lord Jesus Christ:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles-- (Ephesians 3:1 NASB)

Evidently Paul's nephew was a young boy because Lysias took him by the hand and drew him aside to talk to him.

And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down tomorrow to the Council, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more thoroughly about him. 21 "So do not listen to them, for more than forty of them are lying in wait for him who have bound themselves under a curse not to eat or drink until they slay him; and now they are ready and waiting for the promise from you." (Acts 23:20-21 NASB)

No doubt the chief captain questioned the lad about the source of his information, and was satisfied. He would know that the High Priest Ananias was quite likely to be involved in such a plot. It was typical of his methods.

So the commander let the young man go, instructing him, "Tell no one that you have notified me of these things." 23 And he called to him two of the centurions and said, "Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen." 24 They were also to provide mounts to put Paul on and bring him safely to Felix the governor. (Acts 23:22-24 NASB)

Do you notice how Luke seems to contrast the kindness and lawful protection of the Roman commander with the murderous

conniving of these religious Jews?

This is the heavily armed infantry, 470 soldiers armed to the gills to escort one apostle out of town. This would deprive the fortress of a good proportion of its force for a short while, but Claudius Lysias figured he needed a large force. He knew that the whole of the populous in the temple ground had riled against Paul; he knew that this was a big issue, and he was afraid, so they left at 9:00 that night. He knew that Paul would be safe in Caesarea if he could get him there. Caesarea was a Gentile-dominated town and a Gentile-dominated territory. There was less likelihood of a real problem, or revolution, or assassination.

And he wrote a letter having this form: (Acts 23:25 NASB)

How did Luke know the wording of this letter? Luke never read it. This is a good illustration of divine inspiration. The Spirit of God told Luke, by the miracle of revelation, the words of that letter, and he wrote them down with his own hand.

Claudius summarizes the events that have brought him to this place of sending Paul:

"Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix, greetings. ²⁷ "When this man was arrested by the Jews and was about to be slain by them, I came up to them with the troops and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. ²⁸ "And wanting to ascertain the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their Council; ²⁹ and I found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment. ³⁰ "When I was informed that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, also instructing his accusers to bring charges against him before you." (Acts 23:30 NASB)

Notice the *lie* in verse 27. He explains the circumstances of Paul's rescue, and suggests that he did it because he knew that Paul was a Roman citizen. This was presumably in order to gain himself some credit. He didn't know he was a Roman until he had already rescued him and strapped him on the frame to be scourged.

Notice that the commander indicated in very clear language, Paul's innocence:

... I found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment. (Acts 23:29 NASB)

Why didn't the commander just release Paul if he knew he was virtually innocent? Because he knew that the Jews would kill Paul, and that Paul's rights, as a Roman citizen, would thus be violated. He felt obligated to keep Paul alive. Again this is the providence of God.

So the soldiers, in accordance with their orders, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. (Acts 23:31 NASB)

Antipatris is about 35 miles from Jerusalem. To crank those 35 miles out in that one night, they would have had to push to their limits all through the night.

But the next day, leaving the horsemen to go on with him, they returned to the barracks. (Acts 23:32 NASB)

Once they got him to Antipatris, they were in Gentile territory pretty much. They felt that the 70 horsemen could handle him, so the other 400 came back to Jerusalem.

When these had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. ³⁴ When he had read it, he asked from what province he was, and when he learned that he was from Cilicia, (Acts 23:33-34 NASB)

Now, he had to determine where Paul was from, because he had to determine who had jurisdiction. There were two kinds of provinces in the Roman Empire: There were those under the control of the Roman senate, and those which reported to the emperor—the imperial provinces. He learns that Paul is from Cilicia which, like Judea, is an imperial province under the direct control of the emperor himself, responsible to him.

he said, "I will give you a hearing after your accusers arrive also," giving orders for him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium. (Acts 23:35 NASB)

The word **Praetorium** is from the Greek "[praitorion](#)". It means the residence of the governor. Herod the Great had built in Caesarea a very costly palace (Josephus Jewish Antiquities 15.331), which now served as the headquarters of the Roman procurator of Judea. So Felix said, "**Keep him in my house.**" Paul was being given due respect as a Roman citizen. Paul had been escorted by 470 soldiers and now, he was going to room in the palace. God is taking care of him.

Let me point out several points from this text:

There is a very clear contrast in our text between the kindness and attention to the law of the Roman commander, Claudius Lysias, and the cruel disregard for the law of the Jews, and especially of the Sanhedrin.

Paul's movement toward Rome is at the same time a final movement away from Jerusalem. Though he will continue to witness "**to the Jew first**" ([Acts 28:17-27](#)), Jerusalem's refusal to receive the gospel message ([Acts 22:18, 22](#)) and constant intent to destroy its messengers ([Lk 13:34](#); [Acts 25:3](#)) seals its judgment from God ([Lk 13:35](#); [21:20, 24](#)).

This chapter, like the rest of the Book of Acts, underscores the sovereign control of God over history. This has got to be one of the greatest illustrations in the entire New Testament of the providence of God. God is at work in all that happens, though we don't usually appreciate, or understand it. All too often we are just like Jacob. We see the circumstance of life as against us instead of trusting in God who controls our circumstances. Look at what Jacob said when he was really suffering:

Their father Jacob said to them, "You have bereaved me of my children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and you would take Benjamin; all these things are against me." (Genesis 42:36 NASB)

"All these things are against me"—he was dealing with some difficult circumstances, he had lost Joseph; he thought Joseph was dead, Joseph the son of Rachel, his beloved wife. There was a famine in the land. Simeon is now in Egypt and the prime minister there is holding him, and the prime minister also now is insisting that Benjamin come. And so, Benjamin, the young son of Rachel, now both appear to be gone. Joseph is dead. Simeon is gone. We can't get more food unless Benjamin goes to Egypt. It's not so much one thing, it's when everything seems to come together and it's all bad that we are often troubled. And Jacob responds, "***All these things are against me.***"

At the very moment that Jacob uttered, "***All these things are against me,***" actually, everything was working for him; for Joseph, the son that he had thought dead, was not only alive, he was the prime minister of Egypt, the greatest kingdom of the earth. Egypt was the place that had the grain that could solve their problems of food. In addition, Joseph the prime minister was the beloved son of Rachel, and Joseph the prime minister was longing to be with his family. The very time when Jacob says, "***All these things are against me,***" is the very time when all these things were working for his ultimate blessing and good.

You know, if we understand the providence of God, and understand how God controls the affairs of human lives, and our lives, in particular, it's amazing, really, that we can be disturbed about things.

In Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book 1, Chapter 17, Paragraph 10:

"Without Certainty About God's Providence Life Would Be Unbearable."

Here we are forcibly reminded of the inestimable felicity of a pious mind. Innumerable are the ills which beset human life, and present death in as many different forms. Not to go beyond ourselves, since the body is a receptacle, nay the nurse, of a thousand diseases, a man cannot move without carrying along with him many forms of destruction. His life is in a manner interwoven with death. For what else can be said where heat and cold bring equal danger? Then, in what direction soever you turn, all surrounding objects not only may do harm, but almost openly threaten and seem to present immediate death. Go on board a ship, you are but a plank's breadth from death. Mount a horse, the stumbling of a foot endangers your life. Walk along the streets, every tile upon the roofs is a source of danger. If a sharp instrument is in your own hand, or that of a friend, the possible harm is manifest. All the savage beasts you see are so many beings armed for your destruction. Even within a high walled garden, where everything ministers to delight, a serpent will sometimes lurk. Your house, constantly exposed to fire, threatens you with poverty by day, with destruction by night. Your fields, subject to hail, mildew, drought,

and other injuries, denounce barrenness, and thereby famine. I say nothing of poison, treachery, robbery, some of which beset us at home, others follow us abroad. Amid these perils, must not man be very miserable, as one who, more dead than alive, with difficulty draws an anxious and feeble breath, just as if a drawn sword were constantly suspended over his neck?

Calvin, also writes, *“Ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries. The highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it.”* I couldn’t agree more.

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