

Acts 23: 11-35; “Be of Good Cheer, Paul” Sermon # 84 in the series –
“Laying the Foundations”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on October 9th, 2022, in the Morning Worship Service.

When we last left Paul he was in danger of being pulled to pieces by the contending factions of the Sadducees and the Pharisees, in the Council. So the commander told his soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks. But the following night, Luke says, the Lord Jesus Himself stood by him and said to him – Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.

It is this statement that I want to open up for your edification, at this time. I want to speak to you about God’s providence in our lives. I want you to see just how near the Lord was to Paul during these various episodes of persecution and rough treatment that he went through. I want you to see how the Lord Jesus would encourage the apostle Paul in His ministry, so that he would go on to fulfill it. Amazingly, He said to him – Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.

How could Paul be of good cheer in these circumstances that he was in, and why would our Lord say this to him? And how can you and I be of good cheer in the difficult or dangerous circumstances that we may sometimes find ourselves in? There are 3 reasons that I would like to give to you, so that you will be of good cheer in the various difficult situations of your life.

1st of all – You should realize that God’s providence is ordering all things for your good. (verse 11)

But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Be of cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.” When I make this statement, about God’s ordering all things for your good, I want you to realize that I speaking to those who are Christians. God orders all things according to the counsel of His will. But He more specifically orders all things to work together for good, to those who love Him, to those who are called according to His purpose. These are those persons who are His elect, those whom He has chosen from the foundation of the world to be His special people.

But when I mention the doctrines of election and predestination, I do not want us to leave out of our consideration anyone who is thinking about becoming a Christian. Or even a person who will eventually become a Christian, even though, now, they are opposed to the faith. Paul was opposed to the faith, but the Lord had mercy on him and saved him. By His grace, He made him into the mighty man of God that he became. He did this by His providentially ordering all things for good in his life. Even those things which were the most difficult. So, what is God’s providence anyway? Well, the Westminster Shorter Catechism says that it is God’s most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing of all His creatures and all of their actions.

As we read the Bible we find that God has created all things for His glory. He has created all things in order to fulfill the purpose for which He created them. This purpose extends to all of His creatures and all of their actions. Stephen Charnock, the Puritan, says this: “God hath a book of Providence, wherein He writes down who shall be preserved, and this book Moses understands: God said to him in Exodus 22: 33 – ‘Whoever hath sinned against Me, him will I blot out of my book;’ not the book of Election – No names there are blotted out, but out of the book of Providence.” “As it is understood in Isaiah 4: 3 – ‘Everyone that is written among the living in Jerusalem,’ i.e. everyone whom God designs to preservation and deliverance.”

But I want you to see, that the Lord Jesus was ordering all these things for Paul’s good, so that he could fulfill the ministry which He had given to Paul. This is why the Lord could say to Paul –

Be of good cheer, Paul. The Lord knew that Paul was going to face great opposition and difficulty in relation to his preaching Jesus to the many people he would be brought into contact with. He wanted Paul to rejoice in this, as his opportunity to speak for him. He says to Paul – As you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome. You might protest this statement of Christ's to Paul by saying – But Paul never got to really preach the gospel or testify to the Council. He was never allowed to even speak the name of Jesus before them.

Well, I want you to see that even though he did not get to say a word directly about the Lord Jesus before the Sanhedrim, nevertheless, his testimony to Christ was borne to them. How so? It was, that those men knew that Paul had been preaching Christ all along. They knew that this was the reason that he had gotten into such trouble in the temple that day, when the Jews from Asia found him there, and they hauled him out of the temple and began beating him to death. These men in the Sanhedrim could see that Paul was willing to suffer for Christ, and that he had a good conscience in the matter. I want you to see that this incident set in motion all the subsequent events and actions which followed it.

But the Lord was providentially ordering all these things so that Paul could speak where the Lord wanted him to speak, and his preaching of Christ would reach the ears of all the people in that whole area, because God would be working to see to it that it was so. When the Lord told Paul that he must also bear witness at Rome, it showed that He had a predetermined plan of what Paul would accomplish by his life and ministry. He had Divine foreknowledge of the various places where He would lead Paul to testify. And that is why He words it here in the way that He did. I wonder now, if hearing of these things concerning Providence that you yourself will be able to be of good cheer in the most difficult of situations which the Lord calls you to be in?

Will you be able to rejoice to know that your life is a testimony to the grace of Christ, just as much as your words will be to others around you? I am saying if you have come to realize that it is God who is working according to His plan in the ordering of circumstances, situations, and the people that you are interacting with, then you will be able to be of good cheer! It is God who providentially superintends these things, so that you can testify of what Christ has done for you. This is why you should be of good cheer as well. It is He who is leading you. It is He who is guiding you. This is why, even when you face trouble, difficulty, and persecution, that you will realize that Christ is going before you into these situations. He will never fail you, nor forsake you.

My wife Jenni has often been quoting to me lately the verses in Deuteronomy chapter 31, verses 6-8 – “Be strong and of good courage, do not fear or be afraid of them; for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you.” “He will not leave you nor forsake you.” “Then Moses called Joshua and said to him in the sight of Israel.” “Be strong and of good courage, for you must go with this people to the land which the Lord has given to them, and you shall cause them to inherit it.” “And the Lord, He is the One who goes before you.” “And the Lord, He is the One who goes before you.” “He will be with you.” “He will not leave you nor forsake you; do not fear or be dismayed.”

This is how God wants us to see the life that we live. If we are believing in Christ, and bearing witness to Christ wherever we go, He is with us. We should live our Christian lives, being strong and of a good courage. We should not be those who are fearful, or those who are afraid of people around us, as to what they might think, or as to what they might say; but we should simply be ready to bear testimony to Christ and His grace. And the reason is, that the Lord is right there with us. He is the One who goes before us into every situation, foreseeing every difficulty, and all the obstacles to our being able to be His faithful witnesses in every situation. He longs to be gracious to you. He is always thinking of how He can do you good and how He can help you by

His grace in the midst of the many situations of people who you will encounter. He wants you to fulfill the personal ministry that He has given to you, in relation to the gift that He has given to you.

2nd – You should realize that the Lord’s providence extends to all people and events.
(verses 12-22)

Verses 12-15 say – “And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul.” “Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy.” “They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, ‘We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul.’” “Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near.” Now, in light of what we have been talking about here, thus far, we have to ask this question: Did God know about this plot of these more than 40 men? We must certainly say that He did.

For it says in Proverbs 15: 3 – “The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good.” Well, since this is the truth, that God’s eyes are in every place, and He beholds all the evil and all of the good, then the logical question that should come to your minds is this – Why does He not intervene to prevent the evil from taking place? If He is all-powerful, then surely He would be able to do this. And yes, we can say that He certainly is all-powerful, and that He is able to prevent all evil that man does, from taking place. But why does He not choose to do so? It is because He wants all men to learn the tremendous lesson of their need of Him, because all men since Adam are fallen creatures. And since this is the case, God must show us what is right and then, also, He must give us grace in order to help us to do what is right.

This is an essential part of the meaning of life that each of us can only learn by having our spiritual eyes opened to it. When God created the first man Adam and the first woman Eve, He gave them freedom of will. He wanted them to be able to make their own decisions. But He will did not give them this freedom so that they would do whatever they pleased, but so that they would freely will to do what was pleasing to Him. They would submit to His plan and purpose for them, and not live to themselves, their own wisdom, and their own fallen purposes. We see in the Bible that Adam and Eve failed to do this. They chose to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and in the day that they ate of it, they died spiritually. They fell from their original righteousness.

When they fell, then sin entered their mind, their heart, and their will. They no longer by nature were inclined to do God’s will in regard to keeping His commandments. They were free to do evil, still, but they were not free to do what was good and right because their nature was not inclined that way any longer. Every man by nature is in bondage to his sin. And so it is sadly true, that all of us as Adam’s descendants, are going to act freely, and in many cases, sinfully, according to what we desire to do at any given time, unless we have Christ and His grace to teach us the better way.

And so, since the Fall, God has wanted to retain the truth of the reality of man’s freedom. It is because of this, that He does not intervene to stop the sins of men at every point. Rather, since He knows all things and is able to know the future just as well as the past, He knows what will take place if man is left to himself, and so He wisely chooses to intervene expressly according to His purpose. He always providentially orders things according to His purpose in relation to every man; both those whom He saves, and those whom He chooses to pass by, those whom He leaves to themselves to act out their many sins. It is their fault that they do not repent when He strives with them by His Holy Spirit.

Our 1689 Confession of Faith says this in Chapter 5, Paragraph 4 – “The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God, so far manifest themselves in His providence,

that His determinate counsel extends itself even to the first fall, and all other sinful actions both of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, which also He most wisely and powerfully bounds, and otherwise orders and governs, in a manifold dispensation to His most holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness of their acts proceeds only from the creatures, and not from God, who being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.”

You can see God doing this in relation to these men who had banded together and had taken an oath saying that they would not eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. They were free to do this in their sin. God knew all about these men taking their plans to the chief priest and elders for their approval and their cooperation in this crime. Since God was then, and He is now, the Governor of the World, He decided that He would only let this conspiracy go to a certain point, and then thwart it. It was not the purpose of God to permit Paul to die at this time. God knew that He had many other things for Paul to do yet, in his ministry for Him, to testify of His name.

Neither is the Lord limited or at a loss to determine what he should use as the means to thwart this plot of these wicked men. He will providentially order that Paul’s sister’s son would somehow come to hear of it; of what they were going to do, to ambush Paul. He came to the commander, and he met with him, and told him about the plot; that the Jews had agreed to ask that he bring Paul down to the council the next day, as though they were going to inquire more fully about him. But Paul’s nephew told him not to yield to them, for their purpose was to kill Paul. This truly was a wonderful act of Providence on Paul’s behalf. God, we should understand, always works according to His own purposes. He may allow James and Stephen to be slain by the Jews, and not intervene to prevent it. But His plan for each and every man is always what He conceives to best, as to what will glorify Him, and will fulfill His purpose in the lives of His people.

3rd – You should realize that God’s providence extends to all people who have public authority. (verses 23-35)

We needn’t take too much time here, but I want you to notice that since God wanted to deliver Paul from this sinful plot of the Jews, He took definite steps to bring this about through the commander’s actions. Verse 23 says that he called for two centurions, and he told them to prepare two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea, and in the third hour of the night; to pick Paul up, and to bring him safely to Felix the governor. This was how Paul was going to eventually get to bear his testimony concerning Christ, before Governor Felix, and also eventually before king Agrippa.

God was not going to allow Paul to be martyred at this point in time. He would overrule this awful plot of these wicked men to actually allow Paul to go on to fulfill his entire ministry and mission! What we should conclude from this is, that when we find wicked men coming against us, and ourselves in very humanly bad circumstances, on account of the gospel we preach, we should not despair. God has many ways that He can deliver us if it be according to His will and purpose for our lives. God is glorified in our laying down our life for the gospel. But it is not wrong to pray to be delivered.

It is wise for us to always to be in prayer; to be always ready to suffer, and even to die for the truth, if it comes to that. That is, if we come to understand that God would have us to leave this world and come to Him. We should rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice. We should ask others of our brethren to pray for us. Listen to Paul in 2nd Thessalonians 3, verses 1-5. “Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you, and that we may be delivered from wicked men; for not all have faith.” “But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one.” “And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you, both that you do and will do the things we command you.” “Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ.” It is always good to be of good cheer, my brethren, if we have lived a life according to a good conscience in the sight of God and Christ. For we will be able to testify for Him whether we live or whether we die.