

Protecting Presence

Acts 23:11-22

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on April 19, 2009

Introduction – Adam Smith’s reference to “an invisible hand.”

Some of you have read Adam Smith’s famous book on economics. It’s probably not the most exciting reading for people not interested in economics. But the book is called, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. It was written in 1776, but is still being studied by economists. And he was fascinated with how the laws of economics work. You would almost think there was a God who controlled those laws. And he described the amazing way in which societies work, using the language of an invisible hand that was guiding these economic laws. And I want to give a quick quote from him before I start my sermon to describe the pervasive way in which this invisible hand of God controls things. He said,

...every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good.

And then he goes on to cynically talk about government officials who try to do good by “fixing the economy.” There are definitely people in Washington DC who should read this book. But I especially like that phrase: “led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention.” That is definitely going on in this chapter. God has been leading the free actions of so many players in chapters 22-23 to accomplish His own ends, and the players don’t even recognize the fact that God’s presence is guiding their free affairs.

This gives me hope and comfort. For believers it guarantees that Christ’s presence with us is a protecting presence. It protects His interests in our lives by bringing just the right pressures and trials for our holiness and good, and just the right mixture of the free actions of others to advance His cause. Unbelievers may not be aware of it, and we ourselves may even

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forget that it is happening. But Christ's presence is guiding our affairs just as surely, whether we realize it or not.

I. Christ's Presence

A. Presence recognized (v. 11a)

Verse 11 shows one of those rare times when Jesus has actually shown Himself visibly to those whom He loves and they can't help but recognize His presence. It says, "**But the following night the Lord stood by him and said...**" When Jesus made Himself visible to Paul, it no doubt had a powerful impact upon him. But it is important to realize that Jesus was no less present ten minutes before or ten minutes after this manifestation (whether it was literal or a vision). He had promised in the Great Commission: "**And lo I am with you *always*, even to the end of the age.**" *Always* He is with us. It's true that His *body* will not always be present, but His Spirit is. He had promised in Hebrews 13:5, "**I will never leave you nor forsake you.**" We ought not to think that our case in America is hopeless until the Second Coming when we will all see Jesus physically and tangibly coming back. No - His *spiritual* presence with us now is just as powerful even though it is an invisible hand.

What makes the difference in our comfort is when we *recognize* His presence. It's critical that we *recognize* His presence with us, whether it is in the laws of economics or in any other affairs. Christ's words imply that Paul was beginning to be fearful and to have doubts about what was happening. And Christ's special manifestation of His presence removed those doubts by reminding Paul that Jesus is indeed beside him always.

I preached on that from Colossians 3 last week. It was a consciousness of Christ's presence with me that has revolutionized my life. It revolutionized Paul's life in Acts 9, and it has revolutionized the lives of countless Christians since that time. I don't have to see him visibly; I just need to recognize that He is indeed present. So that is the first key in this passage – it was a presence recognized. And God wants us to walk continually in the awareness of His presence with us.

B. Presence bringing encouragement (v. 11b)

We see next the fruit of this recognition of Christ's presence – encouragement. Jesus said, "**Be of good cheer, Paul**" or literally, "take courage, Paul," or "be confident, Paul." Commentators point out that this is the same word that was used by Jesus to calm the fears of His disciples when they were terrified. And I can assure you that the sense of Christ's presence

in your life can calm your fears and bring great encouragement. It is worth it to learn how to walk *coram deo*. Some of you have aspired to do that after last week's sermon. I would admonish you to continue.

Hebrews 6:19 says, “**This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil.**” Too many of us see the veil and are discouraged by the lack of God's presence. Because God is hidden from our view, we are discouraged. But faith takes us past that veil into the Presence and gives us a hope and encouragement that is sure and steadfast. Let me read that verse again: “**This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil.**” Why did God put a veil in the temple in the Old Testament? It was to make people walk by faith. But His presence was no less real.

One of my close friends in an unnamed country sensed a special measure of God's presence as the bones in his feet were being broken by the police, and that night as he was standing with his arms stretched above him to a pole and his body arched forward to make his back ache and he was shivering in the freezing rain, he prayed to God, and he said that it felt as if God was lifting him and warming him and he had a great night's rest. But he saw God's invisible hand at work in so many ways during his stay in prison. He had led his cellmates to Christ but didn't dare baptize them because they were constantly being watched, and he knew that every one of them could be severely beaten for being baptized and he didn't want to jeopardize them at this point. But it was time for him to leave and he told his friends that he wanted to baptize them right then. At that moment the lights went out and the backup generator didn't come on. It gave him a few minutes to baptize everyone, and when the lights came back on they were all back in their places rejoicing in God's invisible hand at work in even the power outage. When you recognize His invisible hand in the small providences around you it can bring encouragement just like this tangible and audible presence did.

C. Presence not always seen (v. 11c)

And the next phrase implies that usually the presence was not seen by Paul. God was behind the veil for Paul as well. Jesus said, “**As you have testified for Me in Jerusalem...**” That's past tense. What Paul had been doing, he was doing for Jesus even though he may not have seen Jesus. As Matthew 25 says, “**inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me**” (Matt 25:40).

D. Presence guarantees Paul's outcome (v. 11d)

Finally, this Presence guaranteed Paul's outcome. Verse 11 continues: "...so you must also bear witness at Rome." That was Paul's dream – to go to Rome. And it suddenly all makes sense why God has allowed him to be captured. He may have previously wondered, "What is going on here? Has God not heard my prayers? Why won't He let me live?" The last days have been a blur in his mind, but my guess is that when Jesus uttered these words it all began to make sense to Paul. All of these events had been orchestrated by an invisible hand to get Paul safely to Rome. Notice that Jesus said, "**you must also bear witness at Rome.**" There was no maybe. Christ's presence guaranteed the outcome without violating anyone's will. This is the genius of God's invisible presence that made even people like Adam Smith to stand in awe (at least in the area of economics).

So I believe that this realization no doubt flooded Paul with joy, hope and confidence. Paul would still face many dangers and trials in the next three years, but this knowledge that God's invisible hand would guarantee his passage to Rome helped him not to fret. And we too need to have a similar confidence that no matter what the ups and downs of the economy and the political scene in the next few years, that God's invisible hand is powerfully at work to advance His cause and our good.

So we have seen that Christ's presence can be visible or it can be invisible. But the recognition of that fact is what enables Hebrews 13 to say: "**I will never leave you nor forsake you. So we may boldly say; 'The LORD is my helper; I will not fear, what can man do to me?'**" That needs to be your testimony in the next few years. It's because of His presence that I can say, "The LORD is my helper; I will not fear, what can man do to me?"

II. Christ's Protection

A. Cannot be thwarted

1. Cannot be thwarted by conspiracies (v. 12)

Let's move on to Roman numeral II. In Paul's life, Christ's invisible hand could not be thwarted by conspiracies. Verse 12 says, "**And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under and oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul.**" That's a pretty serious conspiracy, and if it wasn't for Christ's presence, it could have unnerved Paul.

I have relatives and friends who are greatly unnerved by what has been going on in the last three months. There are conspiracies and rumors of conspiracies swirling all around us. And it has made some Christians want to give up. They feel helpless in the face of a tidal wave of humanism. And this tidal wave is coming on many fronts.

I listened the other day to a professor in Kuwait describing to a large auditorium how to use anthrax to terrorize America. He spoke of the number of sleeper cells that they had planted in the US. That makes some people worry that terrorism is a hopeless enemy. Others see the Zionist influence in the media, in international banking and in other areas, and they fear that Zionism will triumph. And as we look at the conspiracies being hatched by the Bilderbergers and other Globalists it is easy to lose heart. But we need to be convinced that those conspiracies are no match for King Jesus. In fact, why don't you turn to Psalm 2? Psalm 2 gives us a Biblical philosophy of conspiracies. It doesn't deny that such conspiracies exist. Instead, verses 1-3 indicate that we can count on Satan driving powerful men throughout history to try to throw off the bonds of Christ. It says,

Psalms 2:1 ¶ Why do the nations rage,

And the people plot a vain thing?

Psalms 2:2 The kings of the earth set themselves,

And the rulers take counsel together,

Against the LORD and against His Anointed, *saying,*

Psalms 2:3 “Let us break Their bonds in pieces

And cast away Their cords from us.”

The “why” implies that it is stupid and irrational for people to be doing the kinds of things that are happening in Washington, DC. David says, “Why?” Why would people even try? But the rest of the first three verses guarantees that they will try to conspire against God's law order as long as Satan is around. But I find encouragement in the rest of the Psalm, which says,

Psalms 2:4 He who sits in the heavens shall laugh;

The LORD shall hold them in derision. [He's basically saying that these conspiracies are futile. Verse 5 says]

Psalms 2:5 Then He shall speak to them in His wrath,

And distress them in His deep displeasure:

Psalms 2:6 “Yet I have set My King

On My holy hill of Zion.” [That is Jesus being exalted to the right hand of the Father in heaven. When He is in heaven He is behind the veil and is invisible to us. But He is ruling with His invisible hand nonetheless. Verse 7 gives Christ's words in heaven.]

Psalms 2:7 “I will declare the decree:

**The LORD has said to Me,
'You are My Son,
Today I have begotten You.**

Psalms 2:8 Ask of Me, and I will give You

**The nations *for* Your inheritance,
And the ends of the earth *for* Your possession.**

Psalms 2:9 You shall break them with a rod of iron;

You shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel.' ” [That is speaking of the complete control that Jesus has over history in bringing redemptive judgments. All conspiracies will be smashed. None will be successful. And so in verses 10-12 David warns these conspirators who are trying to throw off the laws of God:]

**Psalms 2:10 Now therefore, be wise, O kings;
Be instructed, you judges of the earth.**

**Psalms 2:11 Serve the LORD with fear,
And rejoice with trembling.**

**Psalms 2:12 Kiss the Son, lest He be angry,
And you perish *in* the way,
When His wrath is kindled but a little.**

Blessed *are* all those who put their trust in Him.

He is saying that the conspirators may succeed for a while, but they are ultimately doomed to frustration and failure, while believers will be blessed by the Lord. Now that's an encouraging philosophy on conspiracies. The Bilderbergers will not win. The Liberal media will not win. The Obama's of this world will not win. Christ will bring all conspiracies to futility and frustration. And he has done this to conspiracy after conspiracy in the last 6000 years of world history. Read Gary North's book on conspiracies. It will give you a Biblical perspective that neither ignores their enormous threat to your liberties nor paralyzes you with fear. Instead it will give you realistic hope and reason for action.

2. Cannot be thwarted by large numbers of conspirators (v. 13)

And it doesn't matter how many people conspire together in their conspiracies, they will never thwart Christ's invisible hand. Verse 13 says, **“Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy.”** That's a lot of people against little ol' Paul. It would be easy to feel doomed. And you might respond, “Hey, things are way worse now. There are hundreds of thousands that are conspiring against us today.” That may be true, but with the Lord, the battle can be won with few or with many. It really doesn't matter.

3. Cannot be thwarted by the complicity of civil governments and churches (v. 14)

Nor could Christ's presence be thwarted by the complicity of civil governments and churches in these conspiracies. Verse 14 says, "**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.'**" I've often wondered if they starved to death or if they had to break their great oath. They were serious. But they could not thwart the invisible hand of Jesus in advancing His cause.

We have all kinds of stories circulating around the web, some of which may be true and some of which who knows. We do know that Harry Knox is a radical homosexual activist who has been appointed by Obama to serve on the Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships Council. There is going to be a wake-up call to a lot of evangelical churches that have taken money from the Bush administration. But I'm not here to scare you about all the horrible stuff that is being passed. I'm here to tell you that conspiracies of civil governments and anti-Christ clergy cannot thwart Christ's invisible hand at work. He knows how to bring false theologies to nothing. He knows how to frustrate conspiracies.

4. Cannot be thwarted by courts that have been bought (v. 15)

Verse 15 says, "**Now you, therefore, together with the council [that would be the court system], 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.**" That was a conspiracy to pressure the Supreme Court to go along with their plans. Have the One-World-Globalists gotten to our Supreme Court? It seems likely, but it really doesn't matter to a people in touch with the Lord Almighty. Amen? God's purposes will be accomplished in this nation. Were there behind the scenes dealings to get the Iowa Supreme Court to give their pro-homosexual agenda? I don't know. But I do know this: God knows how to make the Hamans of this world overreach themselves. He knows how to get the Jewish court here to do something that will forever discredit them in the eyes of Jews and Romans once the news gets out.

That doesn't mean we should be passive. We will see in the next verses that Paul does everything he can to thwart such conspiracies, and we must as well. We cannot be passive. The church of Jesus Christ better wake up and repent, and pray, write, get involved, petition, use lawyers and use every means at our disposal to stop what is happening to our nation. But God

loves to use the weak things of this world to frustrate the mighty. And that's exactly what He does in this passage. Let's look at the nature of the protection of Christ's invisible hand:

B. The nature of the protection

1. A sympathetic connection (v. 16a)

Verse 16 gives one of the links in Christ's masterful chain of events. It speaks of "**Paul's sister's son...**" Early in the book we saw that Paul's wealthy family likely disinherited him. But Paul's sister's son must have had a soft place in his heart for his uncle Paul. And when he just "happens" to overhear what is being said by the conspirators, he feels compelled to squeal. God can set up sympathetic connections for you too. Many people fear that Obama is raising up an army of Brown-Shirt-type volunteers, and that he wants them as well funded as the army. They fear that this is déjà vu of what Hitler did with his Brown Shirts. But whether that is true or not, God can bring sympathetic connections just as Nazi Germany abounded with remarkable stories of escapes that people had because of sympathizers. And people might think, "But how can God control the sympathies of unbelievers?" He can. And just as the invisible hand of Adam Smith amazingly enforces the laws of economics, the same invisible hand is moving the church to victory.

2. An overheard conversation, or a conversation leaked (v. 16b)

Verse 16 goes on to say, "**So when Paul's sister's son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul.**" We aren't told what motivated him to do so. All we know is that this super-secret conspiracy got leaked, and by divine inspiration we find out where the leak came from.

But hasn't God been just as kind to us in the past three months? There have been all kinds of leaks. Let me give you an example: By now all of you know about the conspiracy of the secret federal MIAC report in Missouri. I've got a scanned copy of the revised report (and its bad enough in its own right), and it shows police and other officers how to profile people who might be members of either militia groups or right-wing-extremism. And it actually does describe some rather scary stuff that has happened in the USA, but mixes those in with supporters of Ron Paul, Bob Barr, and Chuck Baldwin. It profiles people who talk about the dangers of the New World Order, the United Nations, confiscation of firearms, or the danger of FEMA camps. It speaks with suspicion of people who have "anger toward the

Federal Reserve System,” those who believe that we should not be “assigning homeland security functions to an active duty Infantry Brigade” to police our nation, and “many extremists fear that he [Barack Obama] will enact firearms confiscations.... [and] have claimed that ...[he] does not meet the residency requirements to hold the office of President.” One paragraph said,

“Rightwing extremism in the United States can be broadly divided into those groups, movements, and adherents that are primarily hate-oriented ... and those that are mainly antigovernment, rejecting federal authority in favor of state or local authority, or rejecting government authority entirely. It may include groups and individuals that are dedicated to a single issue, such as opposition to abortion or immigration.”

Well that would profile many prolife groups or the Minutemen. What’s conspicuously absent is references to Islamic terrorist cells in the country and their danger to the nation. It makes no mention of the dangers of World-Federalists. It’s a strange document. And this is the cleaned up version.

Well, thanks to a leaked copy of this report from an anonymous state trooper, the report hit the web and created outrage. Three presidential candidates that were named respectfully demanded that their names be removed from the report and that it no longer be circulated. The governor initially refused to retract it, but later under pressure the state sent an apology to the three presidential candidates and made some edits, but still refused to edit proliferators out of the report.

And this hasn’t stopped some TSA agents from profiling Steve Beirfeldt, the director of development for Ron Paul’s Campaign for Liberty. This guy doesn’t even remotely look like a terrorist. Nor did he do anything illegal. Nor did he hide anything. You aren’t allowed to carry more than \$10,000 onto an airline, but he had only \$4700 from book sales and contributions at the Campaign for Liberty meeting in Saint Louis. But this didn’t stop them from treating him like a terrorist in the airport. But Steve “happened” to have a cell phone on him that can record conversations. Over 80% of the harassing conversation was recorded and has been broadcast onto TV and then onto the net, much to the chagrin of the TSA. God knows how to make leaks happen to the detriment and frustration of conspirators. There is no such thing as a foolproof conspiracy. And those who make world-conspiracies all-powerful, all-knowing, and invincible insult Almighty God. Conspirators are not on the throne, God is.

All you have to do is read the book of Esther, (which I highly recommend that you do from time to time) and you will see God’s invisible

hand controlling things like insomnia, the pride of a public official, a couple terrorists trying to kill the king, a believer trying to stop the terrorist, this believer being accused of being a terrorist himself, an overheard conversation, a forgotten conversation, and other details woven together at just the right time. That book shows that God's invisible hand is powerfully at work in advancing His kingdom and frustrating the cause of Satan.

3. A cooperative government official (v. 17)

Verse 17 says, **“Then Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, ‘Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to tell him.’”** God kept this centurion's curiosity at bay. He kept him from protecting his superior from a nuisance. God made the man willing to be cooperative with Paul. And why not? The Jews outside his barracks had hardly done him any favors. Who knows, maybe this guy had taken a hit on his body from one of those Jews. There are any number of things that God could have woven together to make this person willing to help.

4. A commander who has the time to listen (v. 18)

Verse 18 says, **“So he took him and brought him to the commander and said, ‘Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to bring this young man to you. He has something to say to you.’”** The invisible hand makes sure that this commander is not too busy to listen. I can imagine scenarios where a busy Roman who doesn't like Jews anyway, would not give the time of day. But he listens.

5. A restrained youth and a wise confidentiality (v. 19)

Verse 19: **“Then the commander took him by the hand, went aside, and asked privately, ‘What is it that you have to tell me?’”** I find this verse fascinating. Consider whom this Gentile is touching. The commander committed a major cultural blunder. Paul's nephew is likely a Pharisee of the Pharisees who would not take kindly to being touched. If Paul was a son of a Pharisee and a Pharisee of the Pharisees, and if his dad had paid to have his son study at the feet of Gamaliel, we know that Paul's sister was also a Pharisee. In fact, her sister's family must have been incredibly trusted by the haters of Paul or this information would never have been leaked. It is highly unlikely that Paul's sister or her son were Christians at this stage. Being a Pharisee, it is absolutely amazing that this young man would let the commander lead him by the hand. Pharisees would not touch the hand of a Gentile. It would have been repulsive to him. They were so strict on their lack of contact with Gentiles that every time they came home,

they would sprinkle themselves with water of purification just in case a fly that had landed on them had previously landed on a Gentile. If this young man had showed disgust at being touched or had in any way shown offense, it is unlikely that this commander would have been solicitous of him. How does the Invisible Hand control that? I don't know. There are so many emotions, opinions, cultural customs, and other events that had to line up to make this little detail work.

6. Revealing the conspiracy (vv. 20-21)

Of course, the revealing of the conspiracy is what is never supposed to happen with a secret conspiracy. Yet here Christ gets the beans spilled quite effortlessly. Verses 20-21 says, **“And he said, ‘The Jews have agreed to ask that you bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more fully about him. But do not yield to them, for more than forty of them lie in wait for him, men who have bound themselves by an oath that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him; and now they are ready, waiting for the promise from you.’”** This young man was just in the nick of time. The conspiracy is revealed before the commander can make a rash promise. One day later and it wouldn't have mattered that the conspiracy was revealed – it would have been too late. The young man is precise, clear and convincing in his speech. And he is courageous. He could easily have been killed if anyone had seen him and guessed at what he was doing. But there is something about this conspiracy that really bothers him.

7. An clear-thinking civil officer (vv. 21b-22)

He speaks. And it has its desired effect. Verse 22 says, **“So the commander let the young man depart, and commanded him, ‘Tell no one that you have revealed these things to me.’”** This was a clear-thinking civil officer and he was going to immediately take action in the verses that we will look at next time.

But you know what? We have the same things going on today. And God has raised up officials in our own government who are outraged at injustices that are being planned by the Department of Homeland Security. This past Thursday I read an article saying that both Democrats and Republicans are outraged at a new DHS report entitled, “Rightwing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment.” It's an outrageous mix of information about homegrown terrorists mixed in with vague references about those who seek to defend their First, Second, Fourth and Tenth Amendment rights. And

what it leaves out is almost as outrageous as what it includes. Now I suspect, that what some of these congressmen on the oversight committee were most outraged about is that DHS has kept this document from them and cut them out of the information loop. They are supposed to be giving oversight. There seems to be a government within a government. There are unaccountable agencies. But the point is, clear-thinking civil officers can sometimes be the weak link in a conspiracy's ability to work. And that was definitely true of this Roman commander.

Conclusion

It's such a great story of rescue. And it has such great application for today. I think this passage is a wonderful correction to those who have been paralyzed by the bad news coming out of Washington DC. The presence of conspiracies is no reason to give up or to lose hope. Psalm 2 guarantees conspiracies like the one listed here. Don't be surprised. But Psalm 2 prophesies of the presence of King Jesus as well. Yes He is on His throne in heaven behind the veil, but He is present. And it is that Presence and victory which we must keep in mind if we are to have the faith to expect great things from God and attempt great things for God.

Don't be like the ten spies. Be like Joshua and Caleb. Fifteen years ago I read a book describing the Illuminati, the Bilderbergers, the Trilateral Commission and other Globalist organizations. It also spoke of the amazing and successful conspiracy of the humanists to take over the churches, schools and civil agencies of America. The book spoke of the steps we have been taking toward a one-world government. By the time I was finished, I was depressed out of my socks. The research was well done, but it left me with a hopeless feeling like we might as well give up trying. That's where many Christians are at today. In my opinion, that writer has been acting like ten of the twelve spies who went into the land of Canaan. They were good spies. They brought back accurate information about the enemy, but they looked at the information from totally a different perspective than Joshua and Caleb did, and they failed to act with faith. In fact, they were killing the faith and action of their brothers. Faith and action are of the utmost importance in these coming days. We can have *faith* because Jesus has promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against you. We can have *action* because the invisible hand of Jesus can continue to multiply the little loaves and fishes that we contribute through our pitifully small efforts. But don't any of you dare give up and despair. Despair is unworthy of the Christian. Instead, take Christ's words to heart in verse 11 – despite the

conspiracies – be of good cheer; take courage. His Gospel and His presence will triumph. Amen.

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Acts 23:11-22

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on April 19, 2009

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