

God's Gracious Provision

Acts 23:23-35

By Phillip G. Kayser at DCC on 4-26-2009

Introduction

You may have heard of George Phillips. He was a very elderly man in Meridian, Mississippi. One night when he was going upstairs to go to bed, his wife called down to him that he had left the light on in the garden shed. He said that he hadn't been out there, but she insisted that she could see the light on from her window. So he went back down the stairs and opened the back door. And when he stepped out, he noticed that there were some people in the shed stealing his tools. He quietly stepped back into the house, called the police and asked them to come over. They asked him if he was in any in danger. He said, "No, but they are in my shed and stealing my tools right now."

Then the police dispatcher said, "Well, all patrols are busy. You should just lock your doors and an officer will be along when one is available." George said, "Okay." He hung up the phone and counted to 30. Then he phoned the police again and said, "Hello, I just called you a few seconds ago because there were people stealing things from my shed. Well, you don't have to worry about them now because I just shot them." And he hung up. Within five minutes, six Police Cars, a SWAT Team, a Helicopter, two Fire Trucks, a Paramedic, and an Ambulance showed up at the Phillips' residence, and caught the burglars red-handed. One of the Policemen said to George, "I thought you said that you'd shot them!" George said, "I thought you said there was nobody available!" Well, old George knew how to get the cops out of the donut shop. That story may be an urban legend because it seems like overkill to send so many people.

I. God's Protection of Paul from being killed (vv. 23-30)

A. *The huge body guard (vv. 23-24)*

But think of the overkill in this passage; and this is no urban legend. Strange things like that do happen. Look at verse 23: "**And he called for two centurions, saying, 'Prepare two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to go to Caesarea, at the third hour of the night;'**" That's far more impressive than the little army that George Phillips was able to muster up with his phone call. This is almost half of the 1000 troops in the cohort that was stationed in Jerusalem. That's

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an enormous body of men to protect one little guy. That's 472 soldiers! Paul must have been chuckling to himself as he looked at all of these soldiers surrounding him and protecting him. He had the protection of a prince.

And furthermore, this commander is willing to have them start traveling at the third hour, or nine o'clock that night, travel all night at a fast march for 40 miles, and then (as we will see in a bit), for half of them to travel all the way back to the barracks – all within 24 hours. That's an incredibly generous provision for Paul.

As we go through this passage we see God's generosity and provision in abundance. God could have protected Paul with one or two horsemen taking him at night. If he had been killed – O well. But God is going to make it clear to Paul that He can move mountains. And He loves to move mountains.

Consider the evidence. We know that this time in Jerusalem was incredibly tense and dangerous. The historian Josephus tells us that there were all kinds of Jewish uprisings that Felix had brutally suppressed. And that just made more Sicarii and other assassins arise. Jerusalem had become a very dangerous place to stay. Romans were being killed by these Jewish assassins month after month. Why would Lysias risk losing half of his own protection? He's got almost as many soldiers protecting Paul as are left to protect the whole of Jerusalem. There are 472 soldiers going with Paul and 528 soldiers left in Jerusalem. That commander was taking a big risk. But that's how great our God is. If it is needed for your protection, God can have the whole police force show up. God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think.

B. Two horses for Paul [and his companions?] (v. 24)

The second way in which God's generous protection is shown is in verse 24: “**and provide mounts to set Paul on, and bring him safely to Felix the governor.**” First of all, he doesn't make Paul walk. That's a wonderful provision. Paul is pretty beat up and sore, and it would have been pretty hard to keep pace with these soldiers on foot if he had been forced to walk like these foot soldiers were. But God gets him a ride, and he is in a much better position than 270 of these soldiers.

Secondly, notice the plural word “mounts.” There were at least two horses provided for Paul. People have wondered why he would need more than one horse for a 65-mile trip. Well, maybe this is a spare. But that seems unlikely. Kistemaker suggests that this may have been for Paul's friends

Luke and Aristarchus. So it strongly appears that Paul has companions during this time. Either way, this shows God's provision. Though it mentions that Paul is going to the notorious Felix (he was a horrible man), God is going to pile encouragement upon encouragement that Paul need not worry. God is going to provide above and beyond what he needs.

C. Lysias' great reference (vv. 25-30)

Look at the wonderful reference letter that Lysias gives for Paul. This too is a provision from God's hand. Beginning to read at verse 25:

Acts 23:25 He wrote a letter in the following manner:

Acts 23:26 Claudius Lysias, To the most excellent governor Felix: Greetings.

This was actually a more generous title than would ordinarily have been used for Felix. "The most excellent" was a title used for the equestrian order, of which Felix was not a member. But Felix was an egomaniac who loved to be buttered up, and the commander (according to God's good pleasure) does what is needed to make a good impression upon Felix. Verse 27:

Acts 23:27 This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them. Coming with the troops I rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman.

The commander is making himself look a little bit better than he really was. He didn't know that Paul was a Roman until after he had planned to scourge Paul. And he conveniently leaves *that* detail out. But in the last couple of years Felix has had no end of trouble with the Jews, so this verse would put Paul into a somewhat favorable light. The Jews don't like Paul, so maybe Paul's not all that bad a guy – that's probably what Felix would be thinking. It would also make the Jews not look too good since they were trying to kill Paul without a court conviction. But Felix knows all about these politics. Verse 28:

Acts 23:28 And when I wanted to know the reason they accused him, I brought him before their council.

Acts 23:29 I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but had nothing charged against him deserving of death or chains.

The commander gives his opinion that Paul is innocent. In any case, this involved a question of *Jewish* law, not Roman law, so it would in no way require the death of a Roman citizen. It's a great declaration of Paul's innocence. So why did Lysias not release him? Verse 30 explains:

Acts 23:30 And when it was told me that the Jews lay in wait for the man, I sent him immediately to you, and also commanded his accusers to state before you the charges against him. Farewell.

This letter says that he needed to get Paul out of Jerusalem to protect Paul. It also says that to avoid conflict with the Jewish leaders, he had informed

them to bring charges in a court of law. So this letter does not paint the Jews in a good light. They are clearly seen as assassins, not seekers of justice. But it paints Paul in a *very* good light. Again, we see the providence of God at work in making sure that Paul does not get into trouble.

D. Safe conduct to a Gentile city (vv. 31-32)

The final thing that God does to ensure Paul's safety is to make sure that he has safe conduct all the way to a Gentile city. Verses 31-32

Acts 23:31 Then the soldiers, as they were commanded, took Paul and brought *him* by night to Antipatris.

Acts 23:32 The next day they left the horsemen to go on with him, and returned to the barracks.

Antipatris was a Roman military post about 40 miles northwest, so it would be a safe place for a brief stopover. They had to travel all night to get there, and they had to travel at a pretty good clip. Now that they were past places of ambush, the foot soldiers could return and only the 200 cavalry continued on to Caesarea. But that in itself is an amazing provision. Paul is being treated as a very important person – escorted the rest of the way by 200 cavalry.

Caesarea itself was a Gentile city with baths, temples to Rome and Augustus, gladiator games, an amphitheater that was larger than the Coliseum in Rome. And I bring that up to point out how safe the city was. It was probably the safest city in Judea that Paul could be in as far as Jewish assassination threats might be concerned.

So in these first few verses we see God going above and beyond human expectation in providing for Paul's needs. We have a saying that God pays for what He orders. This is what Jesus meant when He told His disciples, "**But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you**" (Matt 6:33). When you are kingdom oriented, God will bless you with resources, whether those resources are people, money, emotional strength, angelic protection, or whatever. We don't need to go into debt to secure what God wants us to have. We live in a time when Christians think that they *have* to compromise in order to make progress in politics, or to be successful in business, church growth, or other things. But I challenge you to find a single example in which Paul compromised in order to advance the cause of Christ. He knew that when he did things God's way, that God would provide. God pays for what He orders. I love 2 Corinthians 9:8 and all of the superlatives it uses. It says, "**And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you,**

always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.” We serve a generous God, and we can trust Him.

II. God’s protection of Paul from being released (vv. 31-35)

Now you might think, with all the remarkable ways in which God has provided for Paul, surely God could have gotten Paul released. It looks like Paul wasted two years of his life in Herod’s palace in chapter 24. But we will be seeing that nothing in those two years was wasted. Nothing. And this brings us to point II. God did not want Paul released. In fact, keeping Paul in Caesarea was part of His kingdom goals and really shows God to be powerfully at work. Remember verse 11? It said, **“But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.’”** Paul had to be in Rome to get Rome to start crumbling to the Gospel, and if Paul got released, it would be next to impossible for him to preach to Caesar’s household. In fact, orchestrating Paul’s arrival in Rome is a remarkable chain of events that could have been broken at any time. In chapter 24 we will look at several dicey situations that might have kept Paul out of Rome.

So God has to provide for Paul’s safety while at the same time making sure that people don’t get so cozy with Paul that they want Paul released. How does God accomplish this?

A. Paul in the custody of Felix (vv. 26,33-35), an unscrupulous man

First of all, God made sure that Felix was in power. Felix was an unscrupulous tyrant who ruled as procurator of Judea for seven years. Tales of his treachery and cruelty abound. The historian Josephus despised Felix. He was originally a slave of the emperor whom the emperor freed and then elevated to civil service. We don’t know why the emperor liked him so much, but being a favorite of Nero, he was given this post, which was ordinarily only given to the equestrians. And he used it to enrich himself. His behavior was so despicable that both Jews and Romans ended up despising him. The Roman historian Tacitus said, “he practiced every kind of cruelty and lust, wielding the power of a king with the instincts of a slave.”¹ So in a sense, he was sort of like Nero. No wonder Nero liked him. How can God use a person like that?

Most Roman governors would have released Paul, and that would have worked contrary to God’s purposes to get Paul to Rome. As we will see

¹ Tacitus, *History*, 5:9, as cited by Kistemaker, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), p. 826.

in chapter 24, there was absolutely no legitimate charge against Paul from a Roman perspective. But God did not want Paul released. And he knew that Felix would use every opportunity in his power to take advantage of this situation. For example, look at chapter 24:26. It says, “**Meanwhile he also hoped that money would be given him by Paul, that he might release him. Therefore he sent for him more often and conversed with him.**” The reason he kept Paul around for two years is that he was hoping for a bribe. Paul did not oblige. Now look at the next verse: “**But after two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul bound.**” What was happening there was that Felix had proved to be such a hopeless administrator and such a cruel tyrant, that he was recalled to Rome. And the incident that precipitated the recall was a brutal suppression of Jews that left several Jewish leaders killed. They had it in for him, but he used Paul as a negotiating tool. If the Jewish leaders would testify favorably to the emperor, he would leave Paul bound and make sure that Festus handed Paul over to them. If they gave a bad testimony about him to the emperor, he would give Paul his freedom. So he was using Paul as a pawn. This was the kind of man that Felix was. He wanted money, which fit into God’s plans to let Paul preach in front of many influential people in the next two years. This was an incredible forum for influence throughout the empire. But Felix also wants to survive, which made Felix willing to eventually hand Paul over to Festus. God’s got this all planned out. But the reason it takes some planning is that there was a constant danger of Paul being released.

B. The “danger” of being released

1. The letter (and previous trials) proved Paul’s innocence

What was the danger of release? It was two-fold. First, Paul has already been shown to be innocent at two trials under Lysias, has been officially declared to be innocent in the letter sent by Lysias, and in each trial in chapters 24-25 is said by both Felix and Agrippa to indeed be innocent. Any self-respecting Roman would have immediately released Paul. In fact, it is amazing that Paul was not released. Yet God had said that Paul must go to Rome, and to Rome he would go. God had to orchestrate things to keep Paul in custody.

2. Paul's hometown is in Cilicia, and Felix had the option to transfer Paul's case there to be heard by Ummidius Quadratus (vv. 33-35)

The second danger of release happened in verses 33-35:

Acts 23:33 When they came to Caesarea and had delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him.

Acts 23:34 And when the governor had read *it*, he asked what province he was from. And when he understood that *he was* from Cilicia,

Acts 23:35 he said, "I will hear you when your accusers also have come." And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium.

Commentators point out that the conclusion of verse 35 could have been the exact opposite – that when he understood that he was from Cilicia, he would have realized that the legate of Syria-Cilicia should hear the case. That was the man who had jurisdiction over Paul. But it is almost guaranteed that the legate of Syria-Cilicia, a man by the name of Ummidius Quadratus, would have instantly released Paul. He was not given to the politics, corruption and treachery that Felix was. And no one knows why Felix didn't send him on. That was customary. He probably thought that his superior would not want to hear a trivial case like this – especially since Felix had the authority to release him. It was probably Felix's preoccupation with maintaining power and influence that caused him to keep Paul with him for two years.

And I think there is a lot that we can apply from these verses. First, though God controls all things, and though He is generous and loving in His dealings with us, He sometimes allows us to go through difficult times for our good and for His glory. And just as nothing can stop Him from blessing us in point I, nothing can stop Him from holding us prisoner to circumstances if that suits His purposes. I want you to turn to a little letter that was written during his stay here. It's Philemon, the book right after Titus. Philemon is a wonderful little document on the goal Christians should have of freeing slaves. Look at Philemon 1. It says, "**Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus...**" He didn't just think of himself as a prisoner of Felix. He could see that *Jesus* wanted him in prison, and had a purpose for placing him under custody. He was ultimately a prisoner of Christ Jesus. You could not get a more clear statement of Christ's control over Felix than this verse. Look at verse 9: "**yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.**" Look at verse 23: "**Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you.**" What a wonderful perspective Paul had! He was not a victim of

circumstances. This two year stay was not a tragic waste of time. Jesus Christ had Paul exactly where Paul needed to be. Though he was in custody of the Romans, he was really a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

You may be frustrated at the things that have happened to you. You may be frustrated that you have been hemmed in on your business options, or your family responsibilities, or your need to work two jobs. Perhaps a sickness has hemmed you in and you can't do the things that you have wished that you could do. You aren't a victim of tragic circumstances beyond God's control. You are a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

Remember that some of the most world-shaking things have happened because God has hemmed his people into places they would not otherwise have chosen. Some of our greatest growth has come through times of misery. When God makes men and women of destiny, He often does it through something like point number II. Cripple such a man, and you have a Sir Walter Scott. Interestingly, both Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott were lame, but the lameness of Byron made him angry and bitter. So point II doesn't automatically bring good out of you. You need to respond to it in faith. But God many times will orchestrate a point II to free up our time to do something special. Put such a man in a prison cell, and you have a John Bunyan who wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* and other masterful books. John Bunyan has had more influence upon the world for good than any other post-apostolic man. And yet Bunyan would not have had the time to achieve that if he had not been hemmed in by God in a British prison. Bury a man in snow and ice and afflict him with smallpox, tuberculosis, and malaria, and you have a George Washington, used by God to found a free nation. Make a boy so ugly and ridiculously clothed that he was tormented by his schoolmates into the seclusion of reading and you have a Ben Johnson, honored by Queen Elizabeth for his literature. Make a child so sickly that he cannot do any apprenticeships, and you have a brilliant Lord Kelvin – a Christian who invented so many useful scientific things. When Milton became blind, it forced him to slow down and his accomplishments while blind included *Paradise Lost* and a Latin Dictionary.

I'm not saying that I do not sympathize with your plights. Nor am I saying that we should passively accept any difficulties that we may face. Paul did what he could to resist tyranny. We saw that last week. But what I am saying is that we should try to figure out the reason why God is hemming us in. Is it discipline? Sometimes God hems us in with financial woes or disease because we are living in sin, and God wants our wholeness. We need to at least ask that question: "Lord, are you disciplining me?" And the Lord

will make that clear. Or maybe it is totally different - perhaps we are being hemmed in because that is God's way of giving a wake up call about some danger and protecting us from something far worse. Is it to introduce us to people we would not otherwise meet? Is it to set a precedent? Is it for our growth?

While Paul was in prison here, he accomplished a lot. Some scholars believe that much of the Praetorian Guard was converted in this city. There is evidence that other public officials were influenced. There is debate on which epistles were written during this time and which were written during his time in Rome. There is strong evidence that Philemon was written here in Caesarea, and Robinson and many other scholars believe that there is a lot of internal evidence showing that Philippians, Colossians and Ephesians were written during these two years. But whatever the case, we know that God had His good reasons for slowing Paul down. He had some specialized work for Paul to do.

III. God's gracious provision of a comfortable vacation (v. 35ff; 24:23)

So we have seen that God protected Paul from being killed, and He protected Paul from being released prematurely. The last point that I want to make is that God made a gracious provision for a comfortable vacation for Paul. Verse 35: **“he said, ‘I will hear you when your accusers also have come.’ And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium.** Let me comment on that Praetorium. It is what makes many commentators believe that Philippians was written here. This is the only reference in Acts to a Praetorian guard. But for today, I just want to comment on the accommodations. He was not put into a dungeon or anything like that. Paul has experienced that in the past, and even dungeons can work together for our good. But this is far better than a dungeon. This is an incredible palace resort; a seaside resort. This was one of Herod's palaces, built for comfort.

Look at chapter 24:23. **“So he commanded the centurion to keep Paul and to let him have liberty, and told him not to forbid any of his friends to provide for or visit him.”** Paul had the run of the place. He wasn't able to travel anywhere, so he was truly a prisoner, but he had the run of the place. Easton's Bible Dictionary says, “It was a mysterious providence which thus arrested his energies and condemned the ardent worker to inactivity; yet we can now see the reason for it. Paul was needing rest. After twenty years of incessant evangelization, he required leisure to garner the harvest of experience.”

Conclusion

Those are three quite different ways in which God provides for us as well: He provides protection and resources (that's point #I), He keeps us from doing what we want (that's point #II), and He gives us rest that we weren't anticipating (that's point #III). And they all come from the hand of a loving God. I urge you to look beneath the things that are going on in your life and see the hand of God. Seeing God's gracious provision in all things will help you to look to the future with joy and expectancy. Nothing happens without God's wise appointment, and nothing in life is wasted. Even the timing of this sermon was perfectly timed by God in ways I may never know. John Piper has a book called, *Don't Waste Your Life*. And he pointed out that you can waste your life by failing to respond to your cancer properly, or by failing to use the blessings of finances properly. All of life should be seen as a gift from God, and we need to learn to open up these gifts and appreciate, and grow through them.

We don't always know how God is working things together for our good. William told a friend recently that he didn't know how a pebble that he had thrown to the side was part of Romans 8:28, but he was certain that it was. Spurgeon once said,

The affliction of today may have no reference to the circumstances of today, but to the circumstances of fifty years ahead. I do not know that that blade required the rain on such a day, but God was looking not to February as such, but to February in its relation to July, when the harvest should be reaped. (*Collected Sermons*, vol. 59, p. 402).

We may not always understand what God's purposes are, but we can find joy in knowing that He has a good purpose and that all that we experience is his gracious provision – even in prison. May you find joy in that certain knowledge. Amen.

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