

Death, Taxes, and the 3-Dimensional Grace of God (Part 2)

Introduction

The Text

A. Before I read [Acts 23:11](#), let me quickly reestablish the context for you . . .

1. In [Acts 21](#), we saw that Paul has returned to Jerusalem.
 - a. The Jews are not happy with him because of his faith in Jesus and corresponding embrace of the Gentiles.
 - b. And so things get out of hand very quickly. They see him in the temple and start to falsely accuse him.
 - c. We're told in [v. 30](#) that "[all the city was stirred up](#)" against him. They drag him outside the temple gates intending to kill him.
 - d. But just then the Romans catch wind of it and come to intervene. The chief officer asks the crowd what is going on, but everyone is just yelling one thing or another.
 - e. We're told that things were getting so turbulent, in fact, that Paul actually had to be "[carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd](#)" ([v. 35](#)).
2. Then in [Acts 22](#), things go from bad to worse, we could say.
 - a. Rome turns from momentary friend to foe. In an effort to get the truth out of Paul, they decide he must be "[examined by flogging](#)" ([v. 24](#))—which is just a euphemistic way of saying, they were preparing to torture him with a scourge.
 - b. Paul slyly plays his Roman citizen card at this point, and, not wanting to be found on the wrong side of Roman law, the tribune and his minions abort this line of approach and instead determine that he should be tried by his own people—by the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin.
3. That's what we see as we turn to [Acts 23](#).
 - a. The hope was that maybe they could get to the bottom of this. Maybe they could sort out for the Romans what the raucous is all about.
 - b. But they don't. It's just [Acts 21](#) all over again. So we're told in [v. 10](#): "[\[W\]hen the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks.](#)" "Back behind bars you go."
 - c. Things are moving from bad to worse to . . . worst.

B. Oh but then we come to [v. 11](#), our text under focus for this morning, and we read this . . .

The following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.” (Acts 23:11)

Part 2

- A. This is now part 2 of what we began last time. And, if you were here with us, you remember I opened with those well-known words from Benjamin Franklin: “[I]n this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.”
1. It’s a gloomy statement when you really consider it. But it’s not wrong.
 2. And the essence of the message is this: One of the only things you and I can be certain about in this life is that it’s going to hurt. “Death and taxes”—nobody wants them and yet, surely, we’ll get them. Suffering, sadly, is a given.
- B. The Declaration of Independence—which, as it turns out, Franklin also had his fingerprints on—refers to “the pursuit of happiness.” But here he refers to the certainty of hardship.
1. The former is possible. The latter is inevitable.
 2. You can chase after the good stuff, and we wish you the best in that, but you can be sure of the hard stuff. It’s one of the ill-fortuned facts of life.
 - a. As I put it last time: You’re either coming out of hardship or heading into hardship, but you can’t avoid hardship.
- C. So what do we do about it? How do we get through it?
1. That’s what I’m attempting to help us with in these two sermons. Because that’s what I think we learn here from Paul in these chapters.

3-Dimensional Grace

- A. And I’ve said the way he gets through it is by what I’ve called 3-Dimensional Grace.
1. Grace is coming at him here from all directions, from all sides, because of Jesus. There is (1) Past Grace; (2) Future Grace; and (3) Present Grace.
 - a. We looked at the first two last time,
 - b. and we’ll take up the third here in just a moment.
- B. But let me at least refresh you on those first two dimensions:
1. With Past Grace—we talked about how, sometimes, when things get hard, we’re prone to forget how good God has already been to us, the grace he’s already shown us.
 - a. And we need to remember that, revisit that. Because who he was for us then is who still is for us now.

- b. And we see this with Paul in [Acts 22](#) in particular where it's clear that he's not forgotten his testimony. He remembers who he was and who he would still be were it not for the grace of Jesus and his loving confrontation there on the Damascus road.
 - i. It's Past Grace.
 - ii. And remembering that helps him in present distress. It will help us too.
2. With Future Grace—we talked about how sometimes, when things get hard, we're prone to go blind to the future that God has promised us in Jesus. The present hardship feels so all-consuming, we lose sight of where this is going, what God has planned. We lose hope.
- a. But Paul doesn't. He still has a grip on Future Grace.
 - b. That's what we saw in [Acts 23:6](#) with his talk about "the hope and the resurrection of the dead . . ." He knows, no matter how bleak it gets, God wins in the end. Because Jesus conquered death, no hardship can conquer my hope—I have a living Savior, so I have a "living hope" ([1 Pet. 1:3](#)).
 - i. It's Future Grace.
 - ii. And, again, faith in that helps us get through present distress. It lets a little light in to the darker moments.

C. But now we come to Present Grace . . .

Present Grace

- A. Sometimes when things get hard, this is the one that we really struggle with.
1. Maybe you remember just fine how faithful God was to you in the past.
 2. And maybe you have no problem imagining that he'll be good to you in the end.
 3. But where is he today?
 - a. If he really is with me now, good to me now, gracious to me now, why would I be going through this?
 - i. Oh sure you know: he was with you in the past, he'll be with you in the future, but it feels like he's all but abandoned you in the present. It feels like you're on your own.
 - b. Have you been there? Are you in that space even now?
- B. I'm a part of a cohort with other pastors from the network we're a part of, [Acts 29](#). We try to get away twice a year to connect and support each other.
1. And, at this last one, one of the guys was sharing his story. And it had been hard, real hard.
 - a. He was an orphan, abandoned by his parents.

- b. Then he was adopted, but she was a Mormon lady, and I guess when he became an evangelical Christian, she kicked him out, disowned him.
 - c. Then he got married but to another lady who had similar trauma.
 - d. Then they got into ministry and ministry can be a lot sometimes.
2. It all started to take a toll and they finally realized we need some counseling, we need some help. So they went to this counseling intensive thing in Colorado and he said here was the most impactful thing . . .
- a. They realized they hadn't properly processed their pain. They just moved right along.
 - b. And one of the things these counselors asked them to do was to go back to those significant moments of struggle and trauma, sit in it for a bit, and really try to locate Jesus in it. Where was he in all that? How was he with us there?
3. And that's where the lightbulb started to flicker on a bit for him.
- a. He realized it was relatively easy for him to think of Jesus as gracious to him in the past with his conversion and things.
 - b. And he knew God would be gracious to him in the future, that he would eventually turn all the hard stuff for good in the end.
 - c. But it was a lot more challenging for him to locate Jesus in the hard stuff itself, in the midst of the trees.
 - i. With [Rom. 8:28](#), we think of Jesus as parachuting in at the end of what would otherwise have been disastrous and he saves the day—he grabs the wheel, as it were, before we drive the thing off the cliff, and he turns it all for good.
 - ii. But he doesn't just come in at the end and turn it. He's with us in it. He has the wheel the whole time!
4. Think of the story of Israel. God doesn't just set them free in the Exodus and then wait for them in Land of Promise. He's with them in the wilderness.
- a. You remember what Paul says of those Israelites that journeyed through the wilderness: “[They] all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4).
 - i. You remember the rock that Moses struck and water gushed forth them to drink. Paul is saying it's a picture of Christ who's been struck for us.
 - ii. And he says that Rock wasn't just there for them at the beginning or there at the end. It “followed” them all the way through. He followed them all the way through.
 - (1) He's with us in the wilderness, present in the pain.
 - (2) Grace isn't just the bookends of this story—the front and the back of it. It's the whole book.

5. And this guy in my cohort said, getting that, locating Jesus, not just before and after the pain, but in it—that’s what really started to unlock healing for him.
 - a. It’s Present Grace.
 - b. And we need it too, if we’re going to get through the hard times in a healthy and enduring way.
- C. So that’s why I want to look at [Acts 23:11](#). This is where grace gets present-tense for Paul. We’re going to spend our whole time on it.
1. I’m just going to make my way bit-by-bit through the words and phrases and draw out things for us. So here are my four points: (1) “The following night”; (2) “the Lord stood by him”; (3) “and said, ‘Take courage’”; and (4) “for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”
 - a. Let’s get to it!

(1) “The following night”

This Might Take a While

- A. That’s how our verse begins: “[The following night . . .](#)” ([Acts 23:11](#))
- B. You may have skipped right over this little note regarding the timeline here, but it’s my job to make sure you see it.
1. All this terrible stuff has gone on for Paul in the past couple of days. He’s been nearly killed by the Jews twice, nearly tortured by the Romans once. He’s currently in chains in prison. Who knows what’s coming next for him.
 - a. No doubt, he’s exhausted, a bit scared, struggling.
 2. And yet, here’s what you can’t miss: Jesus doesn’t come to him on the first or even the second night of his imprisonment. No, it’s “[the following night](#)”—which, in the course of things, would have been his third night in that cell.
 - a. And I’m just thinking: Why? Why the delay? Why not come stand by him, encourage him straightaway?
- C. Well, I think there’s an important lesson for us in this.
1. On the one hand, it reminds us that sometimes the redemption, the help, the presence of God we seek, it doesn’t come right away. Sometimes we have to wait.
 - a. It was 25 years between God’s promise to Abraham of a son and the actual arrival of Isaac ([Gen. 12:4](#); [21:5](#)). And it’s hard not to lose our nerve in the middle, isn’t it?

2. But, on the other hand, it also reminds us that sometimes, even when his grace is right in front of our face, it takes us a little bit to see it.
 - a. We don't catch it right away. Our eyes are often dimmed in our distress. I can't see where he is in all of this. I'm not able to trace out his grace.
 3. So this reminds us that sometimes Jesus takes a while to reveal himself in our struggle, and sometimes it takes us a while to see it. Often, both are in play.
- D. I suppose I bring this out because I don't want you to be discouraged if you're in the thick of it and you're not seeing him right now. It's not just two nights that have passed, but many. 25 years.
1. Hold on. Sometimes it takes time.
- E. I thought of John the Baptist, do you remember? When he was sitting in his own prison cell at Herod's decree.
1. He sends some of his disciples to Jesus—the very one he had previously been touting before all as the promised Christ.
 2. But this time he's got a question for him and it must have just tore at Jesus' heart: *“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”* (Luke 7:19).
 - a. Why the change? What happened?
 - b. His eyes were dimmed in his distress. He'd spent too many nights in a dungeon, waiting for a jailbreak that didn't come. He was tempted to flinch in the face of this timeline.
- F. Don't you flinch! No matter how long it takes. He's right here. He's up to good. And soon enough you'll see it!

(2) “the Lord stood by him”

A Person of Authority with a Posture of Solidarity

- A. It's not as if he wasn't there the night before, it's just that he didn't choose to unveil himself to Paul until this sacred moment. Here is where, all at once, the dungeon filled with light: *“The following night the Lord stood by him . . .”* (Acts 23:11).
- B. Do you want to know what “Lord” means in the Greek?
1. It means Lord. It means he's still over this. He's still king.
 - a. I don't care if you're tied up and dealing with these Jewish or Roman authorities.
 - b. I don't care if you're standing before Caesar himself (who everyone else was calling “lord” [cf. Acts 25:26]).

- c. Jesus is still the Lord (of lords)!
2. And catch this: he's the one who's standing by you. Here we have a person of absolute authority taking a posture of total solidarity! "I am over you. But I am with you." "[T]he Lord stood by him"
- C. I'm reminded of what Paul will say later, near the end of his life, when yet again, it seems like things have from bad to worse to worst to—what's worse than worst?—"worstest."
1. This time he's in a prison cell there in Rome and he makes it clear he's awaiting his death.
 2. But do you want to know what else he makes clear? The Lord is still standing by him.
 - a. 2 Tim. 4:9-18, some of the last sentences he would ever pen: " ⁹ Do your best to come to me soon [Timothy]. ¹⁰ For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. ¹¹ Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. ¹² Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. ¹³ When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. ¹⁴ Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. ¹⁵ Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message. ¹⁶ At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! ¹⁷ But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. ¹⁸ The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen."
 - b. "They may desert me, he will uphold me. They may harm me, he will heal me. They condemn me, he will rescue and receive me. They may all turn on me, he will stand by me. . . . And that's all I need."

The Turning Point in Every Trial

- A. This is the turning point in every trial: when you realize that, no matter how hard or horrible it gets, he really is with you.
- B. That's what Paul is trying to get across to us in Rom. 8.
 1. This love, this commitment, this "standing by" it's not just for him, it's for all who have placed their faith in Christ: " ³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? . . . ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height

nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (vv. 31-35, 37-39).

2. It’s the logic of the cross.
 - a. If God gave his highest treasure, his only beloved Son, for us when we were at our lowest, his enemies, he’s not about to turn back stingy on us now.
 - b. If he didn’t abandon you then, he’s not about to abandon you today . . . or ever!
 3. It’s as he said to his disciples in the very last words of Matthew’s Gospel: “[B]ehold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).
 - a. Just because he doesn’t always unveil it, just because you don’t always see it, doesn’t mean it isn’t always true.
 - b. The Lord is standing by you.
- C. Oh I wonder how recognition of this gospel truth might transform your trials today—whatever dungeon you find yourself trapped in at the moment?
1. Are you dealing with terrible conflict and unease in your relationships—with a spouse, with a child, with a coworker, or a neighbor, or a friend? You wonder if the rift will ever be repaired. “The Lord is standing by you!”
 2. Are you dealing with anxiety and what feels to be overwhelming pressure at work? You fear you’re going to lose your job. Or maybe you already lost it? Maybe you’ve been without work for a while and it’s been closed door after closed door. “The Lord is standing by you!”
 3. Are you dealing with a sudden turn in your health. Everything hurts, nothing feels right. Your body is broken, and so is your heart. How many doctors will it take to get it right? “The Lord is standing by you!”
 4. Maybe you can’t even pinpoint what you’re dealing with. It’s just this feeling of dread and despondency and depression. What’s the point? It’s the dark night of the soul. “The Lord is standing by you!”
- D. Again, just because he doesn’t always unveil it, just because you don’t always see it, doesn’t mean it isn’t always true.
1. As Charles Spurgeon once put it in an old sermon: “[The Christian] believes [God] to be too wise to err and too good to be unkind; he trusts him where he cannot trace him, looks up to him in the darkest hour, and believes that all is well” (A Happy Christian). Because it is!

(3) “and said, ‘Take courage’”

Our Courage and His Presence

- A. So our verse continues: “The following night the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Take courage . . .’” (Acts 23:11)
- B. I just want you to see here the connection between our courage and his presence.
1. In other words: our courage, our fearlessness—it’s not based on the absence of danger but on the presence of the Lord. Do you see that?
- C. As I just alluded to with that text from 2 Tim., it’s not like everything suddenly gets easier for Paul. In many ways, it only gets harder.
1. If you need convincing of this, all you have to do is look at the very next verse, Acts 23:12: “When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul.” We’ll get to all this nonsense next time. But for now I just want you to see . . .
 - a. Jesus says, “Take courage,” not because he’s suddenly going to make everything go wonderfully for Paul.
 - b. No! He says, “Take courage,” because, even though it’s about to go from bad to worse to worst to “worstest,” he is and will still be with him all the way through to the end.
 2. Again, our courage, our fearlessness—it’s not based on the absence of danger but on the presence of the Lord.
- D. And, as we might expect, this is the case all over the Scriptures:
1. So in Deut. 31:6, when Israel is about to pass over the Jordan and into the Promised Land, Moses says to them: “Be strong and courageous. Do not fear or be in dread of [these nations], [why?!] for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you.”
 2. In Josh. 1:9, God himself says to Joshua: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, [why?!] for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”
 3. In 1 Chron. 28:20, when David is trying to encourage his son Solomon in the building of the temple, he says this: “Be strong and courageous and do it. Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed, [why?!] for the LORD God, even my God, is with you. He will not leave you or forsake you, until all the work for the service of the house of the LORD is finished.”
 4. In Isa. 41:10, God says: “[F]ear not, [why?!] for I am with you; be not dismayed, [why?!] for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”
 5. Or what about those famous words from Ps. 23: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, [why?!] for you are with me . . .” (v. 4).

- i. It's not the absence of danger. It's the presence of the Lord.
- E. Perhaps that's why, interestingly enough, in the NT the Greek word translated "Take courage" here is, in all but one instance, found on the lips of Jesus himself (cf. [Matt 9:2, 22; 14:27; Mark 6:50; John 16:33; Acts 23:11](#)).
- 1. And the only place where it's not ([Mark 10:49](#)) is when it's spoken by his disciples to a blind beggar because Jesus was drawing near to heal him: "And they called the blind man, saying to him, 'Take heart [take courage]. Get up; he is calling you.'"
- F. The courage that is swelling in your chest is directly connected to the Christ who is standing by your side!

(4) "for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome."

Jesus Is Not Done!

- A. That is how our verse concludes: "The following night the Lord stood by him and said, 'Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome'" ([Acts 23:11](#)).
- 1. And it reminds us that Jesus still has a plan and a purpose for Paul.
- B. I think part of what can make suffering so excruciating at times for us, is we think it means God is done with us. We're out of his favor. He has no more use for us. Maybe he's even angry at us.
- 1. If you were with Paul in prison here, would you be tempted to think that?
- C. But this midnight revelation makes it clear: Jesus is far from done with him. And yet the same could also be said of his sufferings.
- 1. Jesus is not done.
 - 2. But neither are his trials. It's just going to get harder.
- D. And here's the interesting thing: this suffering, these trials—this is actually how Jesus is going to get him to Rome and fulfill his good purpose for him.
- 1. The persecution here with the Jews in Jerusalem, that's why he ends up being pushed on to Caesarea; that's where he'll ultimately have to appeal to Caesar, which is why he'll end up going to Rome.
 - a. He doesn't go to Rome with a tourist's visa.
 - b. He goes to Rome in chains.

2. The suffering is not a sign that God is done with him. It's not getting in the way of God's plan for him.
3. It's the way Jesus is moving things forward. He's on the move for good right there in the midst of it.
 - a. And he's doing that in our lives with our pain as well—again, whether we see it at first or not.

“There Are No Maverick Molecules”

- A. A few weeks ago, Paul Walton texted me a link to the extended version of a 60-minute interview with former U.S. senator Ben Sasse. And I'm glad he did. It was amazing. I encourage you to check it out.
 1. A week or so before last Christmas 2025, Sasse was diagnosed with metastasized, stage-four pancreatic cancer—which, in case you didn't know, is a death sentence.
 2. Doctors said he probably had about 90 days to live.
 3. Thanks to an experimental drug that's ripping the skin off his face but shrinking the tumor a bit, he's still alive.
 4. He's also a solid Presbyterian Christian from what I can tell.
- B. And, while the interview was excellent on many levels, for our purposes here, one of most profound parts of the interview came at the very end . . .
 1. That's when the interviewer asked him about his wife and kids and how he processes the fact that he won't be around much longer.
 2. Here's what Sasse says: “I'm incredibly blessed. My wife Melissa, we've been married 31 years. We're going to be apart for a time. But she's tough and gritty and theologically rooted and she's going to be fine. My daughters are 24 and 22 and they're extraordinary. I want to walk him down the aisle when they get married. That's not likely to be. That's not the math of my time card. My son—we have a providential surprise—he's a decade younger than big sisters. He's 14 and he's going to be fine. He'll have other wise men and women to put a hand on his shoulder. But I'm super bummed to not be there at 16 and 18 and 20 years old in his life. I want to give him more advice than he wants and I want to put my arm on his shoulder and I want his shoulders to get taller. But it's not a surprise to God.”
 3. With that, the interviewer asked one final question: “And God, you believe, has a plan?”
 4. To which Sasse responds: “Absolutely. There are no maverick molecules in the universe.”
- C. And that's where the interview ends. “There are no maverick molecules in the universe.”
 1. He's borrowing the phrase from R.C. Sproul. It refers to the absolute sovereignty of God over all things. There are no molecules running loose outside of God's control.
 2. In the context of our suffering, it means: Whatever comes to you comes through him.

- a. Cancer didn't sneak up on Ben Sasse behind God's back. As he said: "It's not a surprise to God."
 - b. No, instead it came with his awareness and permission and decree.
 - i. Whatever comes to you comes through him.
 - ii. And whatever comes through him comes to you with loving intent and good purpose—no matter how hard it feels in the moment.
- D. In an earlier interview conducted by Ross Douthat, Douthat asks Sasse: "I assume you've prayed for healing [Sasse nods]. God hasn't answered those prayers yet. Are you angry at God?"
- 1. Here's what he says: "No."
 - 2. "Not at all?"
 - 3. "No. I wouldn't want a sovereign God to defer to all of my prayers with a 'yes,' because I'm not omniscient. I don't know what the weaving together of the tapestry of full redemption should look like."
 - a. He does. And I trust him. Even when it hurts.
- E. I thought of what Oswald Chambers says in his famous little devotional: "Our lives are in the hands of God like a bow and arrow in the hands of an archer. God is aiming at something we cannot see. He stretches and strains, and every now and again we say, 'I can't take it anymore.' God doesn't waver. He goes on stretching until his purpose is in sight. Then he lets the arrow fly. 'Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him' (Job 13:15). Trust yourself in God's hands. Maintain your relationship to Jesus Christ through . . . faith. Faith is not a pathetic sentiment. It is vigorous confidence built on the fact that God is holy love. It is the heroic effort of your life" (Utmost, May 8).
- F. So I don't know what kind of hardship you're facing in your life today. I don't know all the ins-and-outs of your pain and your grief.
- 1. But I do know at least a couple things:
 - a. Number one, he's with you in it.
 - b. And, number two, he's aiming at something good. He's got a gracious purpose.
 - i. Let him stretch. Let him strain. Because, in time, he will let that arrow fly!
- G. How does Paul endure such suffering? How do we get through these things when they inevitably come?
- 1. Past Grace. Future Grace. And Present Grace.
 - a. Jesus is right here. Let's go to him now!