

The Book of Acts: The Spirit Moving

Afflicted But not Abandoned Part II / Acts 23:12-35 / August 30, 2026

Introduction

One thing is certain about the book of Acts: Luke doesn't gloss over suffering in the early church. Last week we saw Paul standing before the Jewish crowd in Jerusalem. He had been accused of profaning the temple, and when he was allowed to speak, Paul didn't spend his time defending his reputation. Instead, he told them about Jesus, about God's mercy toward him, and about how the Lord had saved him, transformed him, and commissioned him to take the gospel to the Gentiles. And their response was not repentance; it was rage. They wanted Paul dead, but the Roman tribune rescued him from the crowd, and Paul eventually found himself standing before the Sanhedrin. There, the religious leaders were divided over the resurrection, and the meeting became so violent that the Romans had to remove Paul for his own protection. But then, after all of this, Christ came to comfort His servant.

¹¹ 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)

Although Paul was afflicted, he certainly was not abandoned. But just because Jesus had promised Paul that he would testify in Rome did not mean the road to Rome would be easy. In fact, the very next morning, Paul's enemies formed a conspiracy to kill him. Sometimes we assume that if God has called us to something, He will remove every obstacle standing between us and that calling. But Acts teaches us something different. Sometimes God doesn't remove obstacles but instead walks with us through them. Likewise, He may not immediately remove affliction but instead gives us grace to endure it. He stands beside us in the storm and can even use the storm to advance His purposes for our lives. And this morning, I want us to see some truths about what it means for God to walk with us through our affliction.

I. God Works Through Ordinary People and Circumstances

A Plot to Kill Paul

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. ¹³ There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. ¹⁴ They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul. ¹⁵ Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. And we are ready to kill him before he comes near." (Acts 23:12-15)

These men are so committed to killing Paul that they make an oath before God that they won't eat or drink until he is dead. Luke tells us there were more than 40 men that went to the elders and chief priests to approve of their plan to lure Paul back to them and murder him while on his way. Unlike the burst of outrage at the temple in the previous chapter, this was organized and deceptive opposition with a deadly goal. And humanly speaking, Paul is in serious danger. But notice what happens next.

¹⁶ Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. ¹⁷ Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him." ¹⁸ So he took him and brought him to the tribune and said, "Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you." ...²² So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, "Tell no one that you have informed me of these things." (Acts 23:16-18,22)

The subsequent verses through verse 21 recount what Paul's nephew said to the tribune, a retelling of what Luke shared earlier about the plot to kill Paul, after which the tribune sends the boy away. As far as

Paul's nephew is concerned, this is all Luke tells us. We don't know his name, how old he was, or how he discovered the plot. We don't even know how often Paul had contact with his family, let alone that he had a sister. Luke simply tells us that Paul's nephew heard about the plot and came to warn him. I love the simplicity of what happened. Sometimes we imagine God's providence has to look dramatic. We expect miracles or visions or supernaturally perfect timing; something unmistakable. But, in this case, God's providence looks like a young man hearing a conversation and caring enough to tell his uncle. At that time, Paul was likely estranged from his family because of his faith. Most commentators point to passages like Philippians 3:8 where Paul states that "For [the Lord's] sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ". Likely, part of that loss was his own relatives. And yet, that didn't stop his nephew from coming to his uncle's aid when his life was in danger. In this instance, the Lord works through something completely ordinary, like love for family, to push forward his plans for Paul, and He works like that all the time. Sometimes God's providence looks like a phone call, or a conversation. Sometimes it looks like an opportunity that just happens to come at exactly the right time. We have a tendency to divide life into categories. We have "spiritual things", and then we have everything else. We think of things like prayer, the Bible, and Church as spiritual. But what about things like a conversation with your neighbor, a new job opportunity, a relationship, a decision your employer makes, or a conversation between two people that you weren't even present for? Do you look at those things as spiritual? Scripture doesn't give us that kind of division. God is sovereign over all of it, and He is working through ordinary means to accomplish extraordinary purposes. Paul's nephew doesn't preach a sermon or perform a miracle. He simply hears something and tells the right person, and God uses him to preserve Paul's life. But there's another detail here that I think is worth noticing. Paul doesn't know the Lord's whole plan for how he is supposed to get to Rome. In fact, he doesn't know a lot of things, like the identities of his would-be attackers or what's going to happen to him next. He simply responds to what God has placed in front of him by telling a centurion to take his nephew to the tribune. So many times in my life, when I've been going through hardship, I've had that feeling of wanting God to show me the whole picture; as if I'll trust Him more if He let me in on what was going to happen. But God rarely does that. More often than not, He gives us enough light for the next step. Likewise, Paul doesn't know the future. All he knows is what to do next and that eventually he will go to Rome. Similarly, we don't know what God is going to do in our lives five years or even five days from now. Trusting God's plan for your life does not require you to understand everything He is doing. But do you trust Him enough to be faithful today? II. God's Protection Does Not Mean the Absence of Danger Once the tribune hears about the plot, he acts immediately.

Paul Sent to Felix the Governor

²³ Then he called two of the centurions and said, "Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night. ²⁴ Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor." (Acts 23:23-24)

All in all, the tribune sends 470 men, almost half of the Roman armed forces occupying Jerusalem; quite an escort for one prisoner. The tribune isn't taking any chances on getting Paul out of the city. With great urgency and strength, they are transporting Paul the 78 miles to Caesarea, the major coastal Roman administrative capital of Judea. The purpose of this enormous military escort was security and speed, and the inclusion of these details by Luke shows us the seriousness of the threat that Paul was facing. This reminds me that sometimes we may imagine that God's protection means nothing bad will happen, but that's not what Scripture teaches. God's protection doesn't always mean that danger disappears, but rather that He brings us safely through danger either physically or spiritually. In Paul's case, it's both, yet he still faces the challenges of being a prisoner under guard; he's facing accusations and heading toward another trial. But he's alive, and more importantly, he's moving toward Rome just as Christ had told him he would. Luke is showing us how God is accomplishing that promise. The same Roman government that

imprisoned Paul is now providing the protection and transportation that gets him out of Jerusalem. The same empire that will eventually execute Paul is, at this moment, protecting him from being murdered by his own countrymen. God is not limited by the motives of the people He uses, and He is powerful enough even to use the sinfulness of human hearts to accomplish His will. Just as Joseph's brothers intended evil against him, God used it for good. Or as Pharaoh thought he was controlling Israel's future, God used the hardness of his heart to display His power. The enemies of Jesus thought they were putting Him to death, but God used that to give eternal life to all of those who trust in the forgiveness of sins provided by His grace and mercy. It is just as Paul had written, ²⁸ *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)* God uses "all things", even men who think they are going to kill Paul. But God had already promised Rome, and their plans cannot overturn His promises. That's the comfort of God's promises; if He has determined to accomplish His purposes, no human conspiracy can stop Him. Above all the plotting of man is God, whose purposes prevail. So then, when you read a promise from God in Scripture, do you trust that that promise will come to pass? Do you trust that He will be what He has told us He is and do what He tells us He will do despite opposition or circumstance? Be faithful as you wait on the Lord to fulfill His promises.

III. God Works Through His Design for Our Lives

²⁶ *"Claudius Lysias, to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings. ²⁷ This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen. ²⁸ And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council. ²⁹ I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. ³⁰ And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him."* (Acts 23:26-30)

Here's another detail in this passage that connects directly with what we saw last week. Paul is a Roman citizen by birth, and last week, that inherited citizenship delivered him from being flogged. This week, that same citizenship contributes to his protection and transfer to Caesarea. Think about how remarkable that is. Paul didn't know when he was born that his Roman citizenship would one day be used by God to preserve his life and advance his ministry, but God knew. The circumstances of Paul's birth were part of God's providence. That means even things in your life that seem completely disconnected from God's purposes may actually be instruments in His hands. We don't have to imagine that God begins working in our lives only when we become Christians. He is sovereign over the whole story, and He can take things that we didn't choose for ourselves and use them for His purposes. Even if some of what happens to us is uncomfortable, painful, or hard to understand, we can trust that God is powerful enough to work through those things. You may not understand what God is doing, but you can know that He is always working. And because He is good, wise, and sovereign, you can trust Him even when it doesn't make sense right now. IV. God Is Faithful to His Promises

³¹ *So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. ³² And on the next day they returned to the barracks, letting the horsemen go on with him. ³³ When they had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul also before him. ³⁴ On reading the letter, he asked what province he was from. And when he learned that he was from Cilicia, ³⁵ he said, "I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive." And he commanded him to be guarded in Herod's praetorium. (Acts 23:31-35)*

The plan works, and the 40 assassins never get their opportunity. Paul reaches the halfway point, Antipatris, safely while the foot soldiers return to Jerusalem. And eventually Paul arrives in Caesarea with

the cavalry. But after Felix reads the letter and briefly questions Paul, Luke tells us that the governor ordered Paul to be guarded in Herod's praetorium. Now, after reading that last sentence, if you were Paul, do you think you would be thinking: "This is wonderful news! I'm still a prisoner!" Paul has been delivered from one danger, but not delivered from imprisonment; he is safer, but still afflicted. But God's faithfulness should never be measured by how quickly our circumstances improve. The Apostle is still in custody, but exactly where Jesus wants Him to be: one step closer to Rome. We must resist the temptation to define God's faithfulness by whether He gives us the outcome we wanted. Biblical faithfulness is deeper than that, and we must cling to this truth in the midst of hardship: God is faithful when He gives us what we want, and God is faithful when He doesn't. God was faithful when delivering Peter from prison in Acts 12, and He was faithful when Peter eventually died for his faith. God was faithful when He rescued Paul from the assassins, and He was faithful when Paul eventually laid down his life for Christ. God's promise to His people was never, "You aren't going to suffer." His promise is, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." He is with us always, even to the end of the age. Through every step, the risen Christ keeps His word to His servants, preserving them and forging a path for them to accomplish what was planned. At this point, I want us to return to verse 11, because it's the key to understanding everything that happened today. ¹¹ *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) The Lord had stood beside Paul and said, "Take courage," because Paul had a mission. And now, as we read verses 12–35, we see Christ's promise unfolding. The Lord didn't tell Paul how He would get there; only that he would. And that's enough. Just like Paul, we too don't need to know every detail of God's plan for our lives. We just need to trust that Jesus is faithful. You may be in a season right now where you don't understand what God is doing, afflicted in some way, or confused about what to do next. You may be praying for deliverance and wondering why God hasn't answered yet. Looking at your circumstances, you may think, "Lord, if You are with me, why is this happening?" Acts 23 reminds us that God's presence is not disproved by our affliction. Paul was suffering, imprisoned, threatened, and uncertain about what was coming, all the while Christ stood beside him. The presence of suffering does not mean the absence of Christ. In fact, sometimes our deepest awareness of Christ's presence comes when we have no other place to turn. As Paul would later write: ⁸ *We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;* ⁹ *persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed* (2 Corinthians 4:8-9) I want us to remember something this morning: following Jesus does not guarantee a trouble-free life. Paul had the calling of God, the presence of Christ, and the promise of Rome, yet still had 40 men plotting to kill him. Even though those men had a plan, God had a purpose, and their oath could not overturn His promise. Their hatred could not silence the gospel; their best-laid plans could not separate Paul from the presence of Christ. So if you are afflicted this morning, don't conclude that you have been abandoned. If you're confused, don't conclude that God has lost control. If your prayers seem unanswered, don't conclude that God isn't working. Look at Paul. God was working through circumstances that probably looked very ordinary from Paul's perspective. But through all of it, Christ was keeping His promise. Paul's future was secure because Christ had spoken, and our future is secure for the same reason. He has promised that nothing can separate us from His love and that those who belong to Him will be raised on the last day. He has promised that our suffering is temporary, but our glory is eternal. If you don't yet belong to Christ and trust that He is both your Savior and Lord, and if you sense that God's plan for your life is to trust in the perfect forgiveness and security given to us through Jesus, then respond to God's calling on your life today. Repent of your sin and believe that His forgiveness is a promise you can trust in. Or maybe you came here today feeling like God has abandoned you in your affliction. Remember and trust that our hope isn't in God's ability to make our circumstances comfortable. Our hope is in the risen Christ who stands beside His people. So take courage, keep going, keep testifying, keep trusting, and keep following Christ. He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it.