

God works his purposes

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[0:00] And Paul has that privilege of being a player in what God is doing.! Now let's just recap a little bit of the story, not of the whole book, but a little bit so far.

Paul has completed three missionary journeys, he's been planting churches, he's been strengthening! Christians, and at the end of his third journey, he feels compelled to go to Jerusalem. He wants to give them a financial gift, money he's raised from the churches. But he gets warned, he gets a warning from a prophet who tells him, if you go to Jerusalem, Paul, you are going to be bound up. That's what's going to happen to you. And Paul's response is amazing. He says this, why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. He says, I don't mind if I get bound. I'm ready for worse than that. I'm ready to die for Jesus in Jerusalem. He goes to Jerusalem. He gets accused by the Jews of making the temple impure through bringing non-Jews in. He's mobbed.

The whole city, Acts 21 30 says, the whole city is aroused and the people come from every direction, seizing Paul, and they drag him out of the temple, and they try to kill him. And eventually Paul gets taken away by the authorities, and they're about to punish him. And he says, and here's his kind of secret power. He says, I'm a Roman citizen. I've got rights. So the authorities have to do things properly, and he needs to be questioned. And now we see Paul standing before the Jewish authorities, the Sanhedrin, for investigation. And throughout this passage, we see that God is at work.

[1:58] He has a purpose. He's got a plan, sometimes unexpected, sometimes working despite what Paul is doing. Paul's running ahead and, you know, causing some issues. We'll see that in a minute.

But God's at work, sometimes working directly with Paul, sometimes providing the protection that Paul really needs. And I hope this morning we can be encouraged by God's purposes in the mission of Paul, because as churches, as Grace Church, and as Calvary, Evangelical Church, we are on mission in Brighton, aren't we? We are on mission in Brighton. We don't believe in apostles today, but we certainly do believe in the apostolic mission that is ours, the great commission of sharing the gospel, and seeing people saved and baptized, teaching them all that Jesus commanded. And we believe in the apostolic mission, but also the apostolic being devoted to apostolic doctrine as well, or apostolic. So this morning, I want to think about how can we see God's purposes in our mission in Brighton from this passage? I'm going to try and pull out four lessons that we can see from this passage. The first thing I'd like to point out is that God's purposes prevail despite our mistakes in mission. God's purposes prevail despite our mistakes in mission. Now, I believe we're going to see Paul make a mistake here, and this should encourage us, because if the great apostle Paul gets it wrong, then there's grace for us if we get it wrong. So Paul is standing before the authorities, and the Bible says, Acts 23 verse 1, Paul looks straight at the Sanhedrin, and he said, my brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day. He says, I fulfilled my duty to God. I'm a faithful Jew. I follow what God wants. I follow Jesus, the King of the Jews. I'm in good conscience. And what happens next? In verse 2, please follow along with me. In verse 2, at this, the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. What do you think is going to happen next? There's something that Jesus said in his ministry that is pretty relevant at this point. Paul has just been struck on the mouth. Anyone know what it is? What does Jesus say that is kind of a bit helpful if you get struck by someone? Turn the other cheek. Jesus says, if anyone hits you on the cheek, offer the other one also.

[4:48] Now let's see if Paul responds in the spirit of Jesus. Okay, let's see. Verse 3, then Paul said to him, God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall. You are sitting there judging me according to the law, and yet in violation of the law, are you ordering me to be struck? God is going to strike you.

Very strong words. Now are those words true? Are they true words? Well, yes. Paul's actually quoting from Ezekiel. He's quoting from Ezekiel 13.10, where the prophet talks about a wall that is being plastered with whitewash. Imagine someone kind of whitewashing a wall. The wall itself is not going to stand up. It's not got the foundation to stand properly. It might be crumbling, but you're spraying it on the outside. You're kind of glossing over that. You're just treating the outside. Paul's saying, they are like that. It looks good from the outside, but actually, who you are, you're not based on Christ, the foundation, who is Jesus Christ. What's the point in repainting a wall if the wall is broken?

Paul says, the Jewish leaders, you need a foundation. You need Jesus. So it's true, but there are also other questions we need to ask of this. Not just is it true, but is it wise?

Is it gentle? Is it said in love? Now, am I saying that we should never criticize or use firm words? Not at all. Jesus himself spoke to the Pharisees using similar content of speech. He says, woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. You are like whitewashed tombs, the same sort of idea, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of the bones of the dead and every kind of impurity. But Paul, I think here, when he says, God is going to strike you, your whitewashed wall, I think he's responding and reacting in vindication to get his own back. He's been struck and he goes, God's going to strike you. He's responding in that way. It's zeal, but it's not humility.

It's passion, but it's not love. I don't know if you can relate to that in your Christian life. I would say when I was first saved, sadly, I had a lot of zeal, but not a lot of humility.

[7:26] And I was like, yeah, we need to, you know, I remember saying I was first saved and I brought up in a Christian home and I said to my parents, I'm a Christian now. Come on, let's pray together. Come on, let's pray. Why aren't you getting me to pray with you? You know, we want to pray. I'm saved.

Come on. And that kind of caused a bit of a reaction from my parents. There's a lot of zeal, but not a lot of humility. And Paul is a bit like that here. Maybe you can relate to this in the context of mission. Maybe you've been too harsh with someone, too concerned with making sure people have the truth rather than genuinely interacting from love. I love what Jesus, I love the comment that Mark makes when Jesus ministers to the rich young ruler. Jesus, it says this, Mark 10 verse 21. Jesus looked at him and loved him. Jesus looked at him and loved him. Now, love doesn't mean we don't give the truth. Jesus does. But we have to love to give the truth in the way God wants us to give the truth. Jesus looked at him and loved him. One thing you lack, he said, go sell everything you have, give to the poor and you'll have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me.

Now, this instance of Paul getting slapped by the Jewish authorities reminds us of Jesus. Very similar instance that happened in the life of Jesus. And you can read about it in John 18.

John 18 verse 22. One of the officials nearby slapped Jesus in the face. Is this the way you answer the high priest? He demanded. If I said something wrong, Jesus replied, testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me? Do you see?

Jesus confronts. He criticizes. We don't just take that response that Jesus, the slapping that Jesus received. But he doesn't communicate in the way that Paul communicates in Acts 23. A very different reaction. Firm, assertive, but not full of rage.

[9:52] Well, how does Paul respond to this at his outburst? In Acts 23, 4 and 5, those standing nearby said, do you dare revile God's high priest? I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, replied Paul. For it is written, you must not speak evil of a ruler of your people. So Paul effectively apologizes. And the good news is this. Despite Paul's ungodliness, God's purpose is to keep him alive. God's purpose to keep him alive in Jerusalem prevails. Despite his mistake, God's purpose continues. He could have died in Jerusalem. In fact, the godliest person there ever was who responded in grace and kindness did die in Jerusalem. But here's Paul acting in ungodliness, and he doesn't die in Jerusalem.

Why? Because it's not God's purpose. God's purpose prevails, and Paul will eventually leave Jerusalem. God's purpose prevails despite our mistakes in mission.

I wonder what your missionary mistakes are. You might have tried to reach out to a neighbor, a friend, a family member, and maybe it just went wrong. Like Paul had a way back in, God can give us a way back in with those we want to share the gospel with. A few months ago, I was sort of reflecting, and I've been two years not in school teaching, and I was reflecting going, I'm not putting enough effort into maintaining the relationships that I did have with school teachers, kind of relationships with non-Christians. And I realized that I was at fault for not, you know, seeking those relationships. But despite that, over the last couple of weeks, it's been amazing that I've had some really, really good opportunities that have come out the blue.

People that have come into my path through various bits and pieces. Me and the kids were out last Monday and met someone that I was trying to share the gospel with, and we just met up, and, you know, God reconnected us. And there was another guy who we got reconnected for various different reasons.

And I've seen the Lord work. Despite my mistake in mission, God's purpose has prevailed, and he can work despite our mistakes, which is good news. Being a missionary doesn't hang all on us, does it? We want to create opportunities to share the gospel rather than just wait for them. But at the same time, we have a God who works despite our mistakes.

Okay. Second one. Second thing I want to say, God works his purposes by giving us wisdom in mission. God works his purposes by giving us wisdom in mission. So have a look at verse 6. Verse 6 says, Paul continues, then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, my brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. [12:58] I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead. Verse 7, when he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided.

Verse 8, the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things. There was a great uproar, and some of the teachers of the law who were Pharisees stood up and argued vigorously. We find nothing wrong with this man, they said. What if a spirit or an angel had spoken to him? The dispute became so violent, the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them, and he ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks. Think about Paul standing there before the Sanhedrin, possibly fearing his own life, and then he realizes a way out of the situation. He is given wisdom to talk about the differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees who were present. And I can't help but think about Jesus here, because Jesus says in Matthew 10, 16, Jesus says this, I'm sending you out like sheep among wolves, be as shrewd or as wise as snakes, as innocent and as gentle as doves. And maybe, and this is conjecture, okay, but maybe Paul was thinking, I haven't been very dove-like. I haven't been very gentle, but I know a way to be shrewd.

I know a way to be wise. I'm going to play on the differences between the Pharisees and Sadducees in a wise way to get out of this situation. Maybe that's what he was thinking. But even if he wasn't necessarily thinking that, we know that wisdom is something that God gives. Wisdom is something that God gives. James says, if anyone lacks wisdom, you should ask God who gives generously to all without fault. And it will be given to you. And so for us as missionaries to the city, we want to be constantly depending on God for wisdom to engage with people. And this is how God wants us to relate to him, doesn't he? He doesn't want us to think, well, I've studied the Bible. I've got the training.

I'm off. I can do the job. I can do the task. But no, Lord, I've studied. I'm prepared. I've hopefully been equipped. And I need your wisdom moment by moment, every step of the way to share the gospel in the way you want me to. Give me wisdom on a moment by moment basis. I need to depend on you for that. Despite everything I know, despite my track record, despite everything else, I need you in this moment to know how to answer every single one. Notice also how this passage here is a bit of a parable for our time. Those who don't know Jesus, Sadducees and the Pharisees, they're divided. They're very divided. And although some people say the church is divided, the most severe divisions happen amongst those who don't know Jesus. The most severe divisions are out there in the world. And we can see what's happening, you know, in the West, of divisions between

kind of the hard left and the hard right. And as the church, we've got that responsibility of pointing out to the world, there's a better way. There's unity in Christ, a way out of division through faith in Christ. Let's learn to lean on God, the missionary wisdom.

Thirdly, God's purpose is to give us courage through Christ for the mission. God's purpose is to give us courage through Christ for the mission. Have a look at verse 11. Such a short, small proportion of the whole text, but a wonderful verse. The following night, the Lord stood near Paul and said, take courage. As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.

[17:13] The Lord stood near him and spoke those words to him. Incredible. And that was God's purpose for Paul. In fact, when Paul was first met Christ, Jesus speaks about that he will stand before kings.

In Acts 9.15, he's going to stand before kings. And Jesus hasn't forgotten his purpose. He's going to bring it about. Paul will testify to the resurrection. He will be a witness to that. Two kings. How is Paul made courageous for the mission? How does that happen? How can we be made courageous for mission? I hope you feel it's something you need. I feel that I need that every day. More courage. You know, some Christians would say, well, to be courageous, we need more information. We need more teaching. Other Christians would might say, to be courageous, we need an encounter.

More encounters. We've become more courageous through that way. How did Paul become more courageous? Well, two things are mentioned here. The words of Jesus. The words of Jesus take courage.

And the presence of Jesus. He stands near Paul. And I don't think you can separate the two from each other. You can't separate the words of Christ from the presence of Christ.

The words of Jesus, as they're spoken there, his presence is ministered. And Jesus speaks in this way. He talks in John 15 about remaining in him and his words remaining in us. Something about his presence that's along with his words. The reality is that, you know, the teaching, the preaching, the reading of God's word can make us more courageous for the Lord because they are not only words.

[19:00] Jesus comes near to us in his word. Jesus comes near to us in his word. I wonder if we realize that the presence of Jesus is ministered through his words. What do we think in terms of teaching content?

You know, it's about a program or, you know, it's just about learning. The presence of Jesus comes through the teaching of the word. Jesus is amongst his people and he speaks as the word is taught. You know, you see a lot of people that might read this passage and think, oh, I'd love Jesus to do that for me. I'd love him to show up like this and just speak to me in that way.

And there are times in church history and in severe times of persecution when that kind of does happen. But we can't miss that the weekly preaching of Jesus is his words and presence being ministered to us. You know, Ephesians 2.17 is a really powerful verse and I'll read it out. It says this. It says, Paul says to the Ephesian church, Jesus came and preached peace to you who were far away.

But Jesus never went to Ephesus. He never went to the Ephesian church. He never preached there. What does Paul mean? He means as I preached the word, it was Christ at work preaching through me.

What a great encouragement. Do you realize that as you are listening to faithful preaching in this church from the Bible, that Jesus is preaching to you. Jesus is walking among you. Jesus is serving you. It's easy for us to harden our hearts to the word, not receive the full benefit of it. We can do that as Christians, fall into that trap. But if we have faith to receive the word, we receive it not just as the word of men, but as the word of God. It's the word of God being spoken to us. You might think, yeah, but this command to be courageous, you know, is given to Paul in Acts 23.11 and it's specific to him, isn't it? You know, so he can go to Rome. But we have this same need, don't we, of courage?

[21:13] Whether people are trying to kill us or not, we have the same need of courage. And Jesus wants to assure us that he is with us all of the time. We don't need to rely on experiences like Paul had.

Jesus is with us all the time. He says this very thing in the apostolic mission that's given to the disciples and to the church. All authority in heaven and earth is given to me, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

teaching them to observe, to obey everything I've commanded you. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. And if you're like me, a little bit too task-orientated sometimes, you go, right, what do I need to do? I need to make disciples and I might need to go as a result of making disciples. I need to baptize people. But we need to meditate and linger on that last part, don't we? Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age. It's no coincidence that he says surely. Or in other versions, remember.

Remember, remember, I'm with you always to the end of the age. How do we become more courageous in a mission? The more we believe that God is with us, the more courageous we will be. The more we believe that he is with us, the more courageous we will be. Fourthly and lastly, God protects us while he wants us to be on mission. Paul protects us while he wants us to be on mission. Verse 11, the verse we just looked at, Jesus gives the promise of protection. And in this next section, 12 to 35, we see that promise delivered, been given. We won't go through all the details that are here. Paul needed that promise because a band of Jews, they vow to not eat or drink until they've killed Paul in verse 12. And there's conspiracy against Paul in verses 13 to 15 with details of a planned ambush. And fortunately, Paul's nephew hears about the ambush, reports it to

Paul, who then passes the news onto a centurion, which in turn causes the Romans to organize Paul's safe travel. And Paul is smuggled out of Jerusalem at midnight with an escort of nearly 500 soldiers.

The outcome is security for Paul. His saviour dies in Jerusalem. He is released from Jerusalem with 500 soldiers, with the Romans keeping him safe. The outcome is security for Paul from the mob.

[23:59] And the proof that God is protecting Paul. Why is he protecting Paul? Because he has more work for Paul to be doing. His mission is not done. And the reality is for us, as long as we have work left to do for the Lord, God will give us the energy and strength to carry on. And when the work is over, over our life will end. Maybe in martyrdom, like it did for Paul. Maybe not. But the protection will last as long as we have good works to walk in. As long as we have opportunity to, and God's purpose to keep us sharing the gospel. But here's the really important thing.

Although God is at work protecting us, our lives, our lives won't be without suffering. See, God protected Paul. But God doesn't protect Paul through getting rid of the mob. God protects Paul by handing him over to suffering and imprisonment. That is Paul's protection. Suffering and imprisonment. And some people might think, why wouldn't God sort out everything for Paul? You know, the mob and get him out of prison. Why doesn't God just do the whole package deal? Do it all? Why doesn't God get rid of all the struggles? And one answer is that God's main purpose in our lives is not so much that we are missionaries for him. Not so much that we are sharing about him, but our main purpose is to become like him, become like Christ, the Christ who suffered and died for us. And in this passage, we see Paul is delivered from death. He knows he could die in Jerusalem if he goes. And he goes. And they try and kill him.

And he's protected. But on the other hand, Jesus knew as a certainty that he would die when he entered Jerusalem. He knew that he would take the punishment for sin. He knew that his road in Jerusalem would be his certain execution. He knew that if he took on himself our sin, that he did not deserve that protection because sin needs to die. And thankfully, if you trust Christ, your sin was taken and defeated at the cross. And more than that, our saviour rose from the dead. And so our sin is defeated and we can live our lives walking with him. This is why we have a mission as the church. Our mission is to spread this good news out into Brighton. But we do it relying on God, remembering he prevails over our mistakes, relying on him for wisdom, remembering his promise to be with us, and remembering that he will keep us from death until our parts are playing the mission is over. Let's pray.

Oh Lord God, we thank you for this passage. We thank you for the way you protected your apostle here, the apostle to the Gentiles sent to preach the word and build churches. And Lord, we recognize that as churches in Brighton, Lord, we long for the gospel to go out to more and more people in this city.

And so we pray, Lord, give us courage. Help us to know you are with us. Surely you are with us to the end of the age. We praise you for that. Give us courage, Lord. Give us wisdom. Keep us relying on you, we pray. Help us to know our mistakes are forgiven at the cross. Keep us depending on

you, we pray. May more and more people be one to our saviour who we love. In Jesus' name, amen.