

Providence, Human Caprice, & The Gospel's Progress

By: Keith Keyser

But after two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul bound. Acts 24:27

The seemingly haphazard and unfair events of the world often puzzle and frustrate human beings. Consider Paul's plight: he was in prison on spurious charges of trying to incite a riot in the Jerusalem Temple and desecrating his ancestral traditions. Like his Lord, he was erroneously accused of being a threat to the state (cf. Luke 23:2, 5; Acts 21:28.) As the counsel for the plaintiff later put it: "...we have found this man a plague, a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. He even tried to profane the temple, and we seized him, and wanted to judge him according to our law" (Acts 24:5-6.) Sadly, Paul's experience was neither unprecedented nor rare among believers. From the first century onwards Christians have often been tagged with baseless accusations of political intrigue, ludicrous immorality (e.g. Cannibalism), and unfettered antinomianism (Rom. 6:1-2.)

Politics As Usual

While suffering this great injustice, Paul could have been freed at several points (most notably, Acts 26:32.) In the text that commences this article the unfairness of the apostle's position is clearly displayed. His unjust detention was seemingly prolonged because the Roman official Felix wanted to gain political advantage and goodwill from the Jews as he departed for his next post. As I. Howard Marshall explains:

Such an action would have added to the feeling against him and could have led to charges being made against him at Rome. This may well have been the underlying principal reason for his failure to take any action earlier regarding Paul. By a slight injustice to an unpopular individual he hoped to curry favour with the Jews (he certainly needed to in view of his other conduct!); when he left the province, he did in fact avoid being impeached by the Jews (except for one group from Caesarea whose charge was quashed).¹

No Innocence Project Available

Imagine Paul's opinion of this situation: "Here I am, rotting in jail! To what purpose? Merely to gratify the vanity of my enemies and advance the career of a venal politician!" Yet he was made of sterner stuff than this, for he understood that God's purposes outweigh momentary circumstances that pain us or appear to be major setbacks (2 Cor. 4:17-18.) What is more, he had

¹ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Vol. 5, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), p. 402.

the divine promise of the greater purpose which the Almighty was working through Paul's sufferings and incarceration. As God told him: "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome" (Acts 23:11.)

Like Paul, every Christian experiences injustice in this world – some more than others. There is a cost to following Christ in this world, and often it entails persecution (2 Tim. 3:12.) Nevertheless, whatever trials believers endure – even those things that stem from the frailty or cruelty of our fellow humans – ultimately serve the overarching purpose of advancing God's work in us. Romans 8:28-32 cogently reminds us of this providential purpose:

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to *His* purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *can be* against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?

As this well-loved passage points out, "all things" have their part to play in God's good purpose of conforming His redeemed children into His Son's glorious image. Even things that are seemingly unjust, painfully trivial, and apparently random are employed in the Lord's sovereign providence to turn our trials into gold.²

Doing Time For The Lord Jesus

When Paul eventually bore witness at Rome, the results were astonishing. The elite Praetorian guard – who divided their time between Secret-Service-like protection of the Caesar and guarding his political prisoners – were evangelized (Phil. 1:12-13.) Some in the royal household even came to faith in Christ (Phil. 4:22.) As he approached the end of his life, he summed up his incarceration and coming execution in this way: "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Tim. 4:6-8.) He viewed his pathway as a race to be run for the Lord, and saw his own life as a sacrifice to be offered up to God. He was not fixated upon the sorrows of persecution, but instead, he focused on the coming reward that he would receive from the returning Christ.

As for the human tribunal that he faced, he said this:

² "Trials turn to gold" is the title of a song by the late Christian singer Keith Green.

At my first defense no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them. But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that the message might be preached fully through me, and *that* all the Gentiles might hear. Also I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve *me* for His heavenly kingdom. To Him *be* glory forever and ever. Amen! (2 Tim. 4:16-18.)

Thus, he saw his imprisonment and legal trials as a means of advancing the Gospel and reaching the Gentiles with its message of salvation.

So today, believers must view all of life's events – the good, the bad, and the ugly – through the lens of God's providence. Instead of getting frustrated or angry with those who mistreat us or whose ignorance adversely affects us, we ought to commit it "...to Him who judges righteously" (1 Pet. 2:23.) In due time at His judgment throne, God will sort the truth from the error and set the record straight. In the end He will be vindicated, and we will share in His glory. Thankfully, He "...works all things according to the counsel of His own will" (Eph. 1:11.)