

Title: Sovereignty and PPE  
Text: Acts 23.12-35  
Theme: How the Sovereignty of God motivates godly responsibility  
Series: Acts  
Prop Stmtnt: God's promises motivate responsibility, not complacency.

Read Text:

Is there anything that is outside of the control of God? In other words, is there a power, an event, a situation, even a pandemic, flooding or locust plague that happens that God is powerless over and is incapable of preventing or affecting? The answer from the Bible is clearly, "no." In Matthew 10.29-30, Jesus asks a question then makes a statement. "*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?*" What is the point? Sparrows are so plentiful that they are not worth much. But then Jesus says this, "*And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.*" But, this statement isn't ultimately about birds. He goes on. "*But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.*" Jesus is not only pointing out the Sovereign control of God over all things, including even millions of sparrows, but that this Sovereign God who oversees their flights values you. The book of Jonah speaks of God's control over a storm, a fish, a plant, a worm and the wind.

Since God is Sovereign, and knows when I will die should I bother with wearing a mask or taking any precautions about Covid-19? Since God is Sovereign does it matter what I do? If I trip on the sidewalk and cut my arm, should I be glad that I got that over with? This question is bigger than just what pertains to the personal precautions conversation. How does the sovereignty of God inform the way we think about human responsibility? Our text speaks to this issue, even as it continues to detail some fascinating aspects of the life and influence the apostle Paul. I have not conducted a survey with you about this, so I am guessing here, but my sense is that most of you are more familiar with the early stories of the book of Acts than you are of the later ones. The early days of the church, the initial spread of the gospel, some of the spectacular events and miracles are known to you, but after a while the church-planting trips by Paul, his arrest and the numerous court room appearances now start to all blur together. If that is the case, I am so hopeful that this series through Acts not only informs you, but that it engages you with these events that help you see how Paul, in particular, lived out the very truths that he wrote about. There is something so beautiful, so attractive, so heart-warming when the Lord puts someone in your life who is consistently the same person day in and day out. They do not surprise you with anything shocking or disappointing. That is Paul. And here is why I think that we need to stop and take note of this.

The book of Acts covers several decades as it tells us the story of how the gospel went from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and then throughout much of the Roman empire. But, the section that we are studying now does not cover years, but only covers a few days and even nights. Don't let that detail escape your attention, because it did not escape the Spirit of God who directed Luke to write like this. As you may recall, the book of Acts was written by Luke, a physician who often traveled with Paul. He wrote this book as the 2<sup>nd</sup> and companion work to his first work on the life of Christ, known as the gospel of Luke. Luke, at times does not give a lot of details about some of the things that happened to Paul. There are parts of his trips that are barely mentioned. But now, everything has slowed way down. ...

Here is the setting. Paul was unjustly accused by a group of Jews in the Temple court who caused a riot that almost got Paul killed. The local precinct of Roman soldiers rushed into the crowd and rescued Paul who pleaded with the tribune to be able to speak to the crowd. The crowd listened for a little while to Paul explain to them how as a Pharisee, he had persecuted Christians but that Jesus had appeared to him and he had become a follower of Christ and that Christ gave him a mission to take the gospel to the Gentiles. At that point, the crowd went berserk and the Tribune rushed Paul into the barracks where he would be safe from the crowd and where the Tribune intended to torture Paul in order to find out what crime he had committed, but when Paul informed the Tribune that he was a Roman citizen, the Tribune had laws he had to follow. The next day, Paul appeared before the Jewish Council (the Sanhedrin) where another riot broke out and once again, the Tribune had to rescue Paul from the midst of it.

The poor Tribune is really in a predicament. He needs the cooperation of the Sanhedrin to keep a lid on this city from blowing off. But, they want Paul's life, but Paul is a Roman citizen who is protected under Roman laws of due process. If Jerusalem blows up, the Tribune is in deep weeds with his boss and if Paul doesn't get a fair trial, the Tribune is in deep weeds with his boss.

Meanwhile, the Lord appears to Paul and encouraged him to stay strong because Paul would end up in Rome where he was going to testify. Jesus told Paul that his legal situation would go all the way to Rome. Last week I said that Paul was bulletproof until Rome. Now this. Over 40 Jews, who are religious fanatics (again that is simply an excuse for godless chaos), make an oath to not eat or drink until they had killed Paul. So, what do we have? We have the promise of God that sounds like it is being threatened by the promise and oaths of these men, who presumably made these oaths to God.

This event is full of drama, suspense and irony. The drama is that 40+ guys are determined to kill Paul or die. That's intense. They have a plan that looks like it will work. They convince the chief priest and the elders to ask for another meeting with Paul, so that these guys can kill Paul when he is en-route. So, let's get this straight. These guys who are so zealous for the law, are willing to violate the law in order to defend the law. And the chief priest who was so offended when Paul accused him of being a whitewashed wall, is demonstrating that he really is a whitewashed wall. He is all pomp and appearance, but has no character and integrity. Underneath the whitewash is mold and rotteness. He is willing to lie to the Tribune and pretend that he is attempting to "determine his case more exactly" when he has already determined his case.

### **I. Impressive oaths do not equate to godliness. (23.12-15)**

There are plenty of people in this world who are very committed to their causes. But, being disciplined, being committed, being zealous, being focused, true to your oaths does not make it right. If you are the type of person who is lazy, indifferent, apathetic, undisciplined and you therefore feel slobbish and sluggardly, it is tempting to be impressed with disciplined people who have a cause that they are living for and even prepared to die for. But, hold the phone, just because someone lives or dies for a cause, doesn't make the cause worth living and dying for. Just because a religion demands a lot of commitment from its followers and in return the followers feel a sense of fulfillment because of this mutual dedication to the cause, doesn't make

the religion or the cause right. Discipline and dedication are not the same as Christlikeness. Now, it is true that we grow in Christlikeness through spiritual disciplines like regular Bible reading, prayer, meditation, memorization, fasting, etc. But, these can all be done for our own glory and instead of bringing us to Christ, we can be so impressed with our discipline, that we think we are something instead of growing in humility. In the case of these guys, they willing to die for their cause, but it was the WRONG cause. Look, if you are going to live for something and die for something (and everybody does) make sure it is right and worth it. I would love to see these guys have similar fervency to see the gospel spread to the nations. Christianity started in Jerusalem because it was the God-planned, God-ordained, Scripture-fulfillment of the true Jewish faith. Christianity has Jewish roots because our Savior was born, lived and died as a Jew. But, the Jews of his day rejected Him and 27 years later, they are rejecting Paul. What was embraced as the “Jewish faith” was a perversion of the true Jewish faith and was now all about the superiority of the Jews instead of the glory of God. God’s plan was to use the Jews as a people whose joy, love and holiness was so compelling that it attracted people from all over the world to God. But, the perversion of the Jewish faith had become all about what I do, what family I am from, what standards I keep, instead of who Christ is and what he has done. The works-based righteousness (that wasn’t very righteous) of the Jewish system hated the grace-based righteousness offered by Christ through faith in him.

I knew a lady once who faithfully studied her Bible two hours a day, yet was very arrogant and condescending, particularly to her husband because he didn’t study the Bible as much as she did. I simply could not get her to see that her Bible study was pointless if she didn’t actually believe and obey what she was studying. For these 40+ guys, they may appear to be impressive because of this oath they have made but this oath was the antithesis of godliness! Discipline or sacrifice are not the same as living a life of faith-driven obedience to God. What are you disciplined about? What do you sacrifice for? What are the things or beliefs (or activities) that you are willing to do whatever you have to do, in order to make them happen? And, are they worth your soul? He’ll do anything to golf. She’ll do anything for her job. He’ll do anything for his career. She’ll do anything for her kids. He’ll do anything to hunt. She’ll do anything for a guy. He’ll do anything not to appear weak. She’ll do anything for attention. Anything? And can any of these people and things save your soul? Is it right to do anything for them? These guys made serious commitments to the wrong thing. What are you committed to and is it right? Does it matter?

## **II. God’s promises are not jeopardized by man’s resolve. (23.12-15)**

Now, let me give you a little bit of background here. There are several related things that I want to point out and this is as good as time as any. I want you to know that this threat by these 40+ fanatics is real. This was not mere posturing and intimidation. This is A.D. 57. We have already met the Tribune and we find out in v.26 that his name is Claudius Lysias. Now, the Roman emperor at this time is named Claudius. We are about to meet the governor of this region, whose name is Felix. As an aside, you and I often hear people say stuff like, “Oh the Bible is just made up by some guys.” And I think, hold the phone, before you simply wave the hand of your soul and dismiss this unarguably historically significant work as being unreliable, unverifiable, unauthoritative and therefore insignificant and meaningless, have you ever given this serious study? This account right here is tied to historical figures in historic places at specific times. If all of these guys actually lived at this time and were in these places, and were as the Bible presents

them, then is it possible that since all of the other details are true that these accounts are true? Of course the answer is yes.

Take for example this guy Felix. Felix was a favored freed slave and was appointed by the emperor Claudius to be the governor of this area and he ruled from Caesarea. It was politically correct to name things after government officials. The Sea of Galilee was known for a time as the Sea of Tiberius, etc. Well, this Felix dude was not from royalty, so he did the next best thing. He married the daughter of King Herod Agrippa I, who was the grand-daughter (possibly great-granddaughter) of the famous Antony and Cleopatra. Felix had been the governor now for about 4-5 years and was on his third wife, Drusilla, whom he had convinced to divorce her husband and marry him. Why do I tell you this? The Jews resented Felix and his “private” life gave them excuses to hate him even more. They were not only be ruled by someone who was not a Jew, but someone who had been a slave and he was certainly not of good character. So, they made life miserable for him and he in turn hated them and was ruthless in return. This only poured gas on the fire of the zealots and within 2-3 years, Felix was recalled to Rome because he couldn’t maintain peace in the region. This is the context. The threat of these Jews is real. They are capable of carrying out much violence. And history has demonstrated that they were very willing to do so even at the cost of their own lives. Nine years short years later (66 A.D.) from this event in Acts 23, this suicide-pact level of fanaticism had spread throughout Israel and war with Rome broke out. This time Rome was so exasperated with the Jews, that she destroyed the entire country. The fall of Jerusalem and the infamous burning of the temple took place in 70 A.D. and the last holdout of the Jews took place at Masada in 74 A.D., where the last enclave of Jews like many others were bound by a suicide-pact rather than surrender and be ruled by the Romans. It took the mighty Roman empire almost 8 years to re-conquer this tiny nation that they had already conquered. These people were capable of being that zealous. And then, for almost 1,900 years, there was no nation of Israel.

Think about this. Over 40 very determined, very angry and very zealous men have sworn an oath not to eat or drink until you are dead. In order to make a vow that serious, these have to be very desperate men who will seemingly stop at nothing in order to kill you. But even the wrath of man is a servant of our sovereign God. Even the out of control, desperate, maniacal plans of people are on a leash held by God. And even though these men have resolve and have devised a fairly clever plan to carry out, they (and no one else) can overthrow the promises of God.

Are there people who threaten you? Does Satan accuse you? Does your own heart accuse you? I have no doubt that Paul rehearsed to himself the very things he wrote to the believers in Rome just a few months earlier. And Romans 8, is a great chapter to preach to ourselves when we are threatened and the enemy of our souls accuses us. *“If God is for us, who can be against us? ... Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies...Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?...No in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”* God’s promises are never jeopardized by man’s threats because no man is a match for God. Why do we fear what man says or does when we have God? At the same time...

### **III. God’s promises motivate responsible actions. (23.16-22)**

It was not coincidental that Paul's nephew heard about the plot to kill Paul and Paul's response is instructive. He calls for one of the centurions and tells the centurion to "Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him." This is the only thing that Paul does in this text. But, he does something. Paul knows God's promise to him and he now knows about this very credible, plausible and planned plot on his life. Is Paul's life in danger? Not really, but at the same time, Paul is not passive. Paul has enough standing with the centurion and the Tribune that they pay attention to him and the Tribune listens to the nephew.

Paul had no need to panic, but that the same time, Paul did not use God's promises as a reason for complacency. Isn't God sovereign? Yes, and in the sovereign will of God, God allowed Paul's nephew to hear about this plot on Paul's life. I also think that it is possible that Paul's response is more than just looking out for himself. If the Tribune agreed to send Paul back to the council for another hearing, Paul would have been sent with an armed guard. These soldiers would be attacked in the ambush. Paul does the responsible thing and does what he can do in order to let the Tribune know about this. That really is all that Paul can do.

This is very instructive for us. God is going to carry out his plan. God is going to keep his promises. The plan and promises of God are never to be used as an excuse for complacency or disobedience, but as motivation for responsible action. God has promised to keep the believer and to guard his salvation. Do I respond to that by living sinfully? No, I respond to this incredible keeping, enduring and sustaining grace of God with a humble pursuit of holiness, not because my holiness will keep my salvation, but because I love God. His loving and amazing promises motivate godly action. Jesus has promised to build his church and has promised that even the gates of hell cannot prevail against her. Do, I respond to that with complacency and mediocrity and doing the least as possible? No way. Since the gates of hell cannot prevail against her, we can't lose! Throw yourself into the church because she is guaranteed! You see the point. God has promised to save all those who come to him through Jesus. God has promised that anyone who comes to him, he will never cast out. God has from eternity past, elected all those who will come and God will draw them. So, do I do nothing about sharing the gospel or praying for people to come to Christ, or being whole-heartedly involved with missions? NO! God is calling a people unto himself from every tribe, language and nation and gives you and me an opportunity to be involved in his plan that cannot and will not fail. As Mordecai said to Esther, deliverance is going to come. You can either choose to be part of it or not, but either way it is going to come. God's promises free us from panic, but at the same time motivate us to pray and act in a responsible way. The truth is...

#### **IV. God is always doing more than what we know in the moment. (23.23-35)**

In this scene, Paul is not taking action or initiating anything. Everything is now being done to him. Paul is now the boat without a sail or a rudder in the ocean. He is at the mercy of events that he cannot control. The immediate influence on his life is the government, but behind the scenes, the government is not out of control. Even a government that we are under is itself under the sovereignty of God. God uses the government as the means to keep his promise to Paul.

The Tribune takes the threat seriously. I told you last week, that a tribune was in charge of 1,000 soldiers. He sends about half of the soldiers (470) under his authority to accompany Paul. They

go through the night to the city of Antipatris which was about halfway to Caesarea. The next day, the foot soldiers returned to Jerusalem, while the horsemen safely escorted Paul to Caesarea where he was handed over to Felix with a letter from the Tribune, making the Tribune sound pretty amazing. Paul is granted a hearing, but it will wait for his accusers to arrive. We won't have to wait long. But for now, Paul was out of Jerusalem. What is going to happen? How will this turn out? What will he be accused of? What will Felix decide? Even when dams break, towns flood, homes and business are ruined, when a strange sounding pathogen from China disrupts our lives, we do not need to fear. We do not need to be anxious. Responsible? Sure. Fearful? No. God is sovereign.

God tells us what we need to know, but he doesn't tell us everything that there is to know. For example, Paul had already planned on going to Rome, but not this way. Paul's plan to go to Rome was in order to strengthen the local church there and to get some financial help so that he could go on to Spain and bring the gospel to that country. But, the Lord had another mission for Paul to go on in Rome. There were soldiers there and people in Caesar's household who needed to hear the gospel and they were going to hear it from Paul who was going to come as a political prisoner who had access to these soldiers. God ordained these events to do things that Paul did not know about yet. And Paul did not need to know about them. And neither do I or you. But we know this. God will use our faithfulness in this moment to carry out a plan that is so much bigger than us and so much better than we can dream up. It is such a good and sweet promise with a fulfilment that will be even better and sweeter than we know possible.

Conclusion:

Since God is Sovereign, and knows when I will die should I bother with wearing a mask or taking any precautions about Covid-19? Since God is Sovereign does it matter what I do? Honestly, I don't care if you wear a mask or not, that is not my point. If you wear a mask, don't trust the mask, trust God. If you trust God, there are certainly situations where your trust of God is going to be expressed in your love for others and for their sakes you will wear a mask, because people who trust God know that life is not all about them.