

Paul faced a lot of persecution throughout his ministry for preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. In every area that he ministered, the Jews opposed him, and tried to harm him because he taught things that were contrary to traditional Jewish faith. You cannot be in a right relationship with God simply because you were born in a Jewish family. Obedience to the law cannot save you. Following the traditions of the Jews has no bearing on a person's salvation. We are saved by God's grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, and Him alone, and it is the same for Jews as it is for the Gentiles.

Perhaps the greatest opposition that Paul had to face came from the Jews in Jerusalem. The traditional Jews as well as those who had received Jesus as Lord and Savior, still fervently held on to the traditions of their faith. When Paul first got to town, the elders of the church warned him, and encouraged him to demonstrate that he also held to the traditions of the Jews, by entering into the purification rights of four men, and paying their expenses.

Paul gladly embraced the recommendations of the elders, but near the end of the week, during the feast of Pentecost, some Jews from Asia spotted Paul, brought accusations against him, and stirred up the Jews, who congregated for the feast, into a riot against Paul. They tried to beat him to death, but God delivered Paul at the hands of the Roman soldiers.

When Paul made his defense, and shared his testimony with the crowd, they tried all the more to kill him. He had equally disappointing results when he addressed the Sanhedrin. In frustration the Roman guard put him into protective custody, until they could figure out what to do. In a time of great discouragement, the Lord appeared to Paul to encourage him, and to give him a promise. Paul was going to Rome to testify to the people there, concerning the gospel of Jesus Christ.

His journey to Rome, however, was long and difficult. It begins with a plot by the Jews to kill Paul and the story is full of twists, turns, and intrigue. Please read along with me, Acts 23:12-22.

It was good for Paul to receive a direct word from the Lord; otherwise he might have given up as his circumstance began to unfold. There was a conspiracy to take Paul's life. The bitterness and hatred that the Jews held towards Paul might be better understood from the perspective of how they were willing to test the power and will of Rome in order to rid themselves of Paul. They completely defied Roman authority. The Roman officials were afraid to punish Paul because he was a Roman citizen by birth. The Jews didn't care. They plotted to kill him anyway. Their hatred clouded their judgment so that they were willing to break many of God's laws, justifying their actions by saying that they were trying to protect the law.

The law says do not covet, and yet we have seen repeatedly that much of the Jewish hatred towards Paul stemmed from their jealousy of his ministry. The law says do not bear false witness, but there was nothing honest in their words or their deeds. The law says don't kill, and yet they were determined to murder Paul. All the while, in their minds, they justified their actions by their interpretation of the Law.

Even today, people sometimes use the word of God to justify their actions, even when they are clearly outside of God's will. They pick and choose scriptures, and twist their meaning in order to force the word to give them permission to do things that they ought not do. People sometimes justify a lifestyle of drunkenness because Jesus turned water into wine, and he drank wine with His disciples. I have heard people say that the bible doesn't say anything about marijuana, so they justify in their minds that it is all right to get high. Some claim that the New

Testament doesn't say anything about tithing, so they don't tithe. Others develop dogmatic doctrines that choke the power of the gospel to change lives.

We have to be honest with the scriptures. Context is essential for understanding. We have to be honest before God, and allow His Holy Spirit to convict us, and to lead us into all righteousness; otherwise we might find ourselves fighting against God, and His will, and miss out on the blessings of and in opposition to His grace.

Forty men took an oath not to eat or drink anything until they killed Paul. The context is that their oath was to God. God would hold them accountable if they ate or drank anything before they killed Paul. How twisted. The text tells us clearly that God's will was that Paul would preach in Rome, but these men really thought that they were doing God a favor, when all along, they were completely outside of His will.

We might wonder how they could be so off base, but then the text reveals that they had the complete backing of the chief priests, the elders, and the whole Sanhedrin council, as they conspired together to set a trap for Paul.

I am not defending the men who had it in their hearts to murder Paul, but I am condemning the religious leaders for joining in, encouraging, and becoming a part of the conspiracy. To fulfill my role as one of your pastors, with God's help, I have to provide some leadership. By my actions, I have to earn your trust. I know that sometimes you give the pastors the benefit of the doubt even if something happens that doesn't seem right at first. I appreciate your willingness to do that, and I will never purposefully betray that trust. But, no pastor is perfect, and not every religious leader has a pure heart before God.

This is why it is so important that as members of the body of Christ, each one of us has a grasp of the true meaning of the contextual word of God. We must always be growing in our relationship with the Lord, sensitive to His Holy Spirit, and disciplined to His revealed will, lest we get caught up in a conspiracy against the Lord's will.

Paul was in dire circumstances. The fix was in. He was to be killed. By including the Sanhedrin, over a hundred men were in on the evil plan. There was no doubt in the conspirators' minds that if the Sanhedrin requested that the guards bring Paul in for further questioning, they would. As the guards transported Paul, they would kill him. That meant that they might have to kill a guard or two to get to Paul.

Of course they never took into account the hand of God protecting Paul. God set up the circumstances of Paul's nephew so that he heard about what they planned to do. He went to Paul and told him all about the plan, and then reported it to the commander.

I take great comfort in the principles found in this passage, for they affirm the sovereignty of God, which gives us hope when we are in hopeless circumstances. Paul was about to be murdered, but God had other plans for Paul, and he worked in Paul's circumstances to deliver him, and to protect his life.

Our faith in Christ brings new meaning and purpose to our lives. While we find encouragement from the example of others, we must be true to ourselves, and to God, and be the person that God wants us to be. If God has a purpose for our lives, the best we can do is to fulfill His purpose. When we strive to fulfill God's purpose, He keeps His hand on us, and works in our circumstances, so that we are able to do all that He wants us to do.

To illustrate this, I will use Brother Carl and myself as an example. We love one another in the Lord, but we are two very different people. We have different personalities, different gifts, and different callings. But, we are united through our faith in Jesus Christ, and in our individual roles as members of the body of Christ. Brother Carl is an extrovert. He is gregarious, and is

comfortable, in any setting, to share the truths of God's word, with whoever will listen. The words seem to just flow from within him. He loves the different venues that God has opened for him: radio, TV, books, and personal appearances as a preacher, or teacher.

I, by nature, am much more introverted. While God has gifted me to preach and teach, and God uses my personality, gifts, and life experience to fulfill His calling upon my life, I am much more at ease in quiet reflection at home, than I would be in front of camera lights. While Brother Carl is an inspiration, and a great example, I cannot try to be Brother Carl. God's specific purpose for Brother Carl's life is different than his specific purpose for my life. God's specific purpose for you is also different. We are unique creations, who are to submit to the Lord's will so that collectively we become His body in the world.

Brother Carl travels a lot, and he is pulled in many directions, so I pray for God's hand of protection upon him as he seeks to do whatever he believes in his heart that God has for him to do. In the same way, as a part of my personal relationship with the Lord, I pray for myself, that God will protect me as I seek to honor Him with my life, and to fulfill His purpose in all that I do. In many ways, Brother Carl and I are moving in different directions, but as members of the body of Christ, we are moving as a unit towards the center of God's will, and fulfilling His purpose.

This concept is extended to every member of the church. God will be pleased when every member embraces the Lord's will for his or her life, and becomes committed to His purpose. We encourage one another in our individual ministries. We share in one another's victories. We try to follow godly examples, but ultimately our goal is to be who God created us to be, and to fully embrace life according to His revealed will.

When we do this, God will have His hand of protection on us, and upon our church, until He accomplishes all that He desires to do in us, and through us. When we are the body of Christ in this way, the old devil will put up a fight, and try to mess everything up. We can count on it. The good news is that so long as God has a purpose for our lives, and we try our best to live for Him, He will always reveal the devil's plans, and make a way out, and a way forward.

While this is an encouraging principle, we have to remember that there are consequences to our actions that often have to run their course. If you have faith, and your heart is right before the Lord, He will keep His hand on you, but that does not mean that we will never have to suffer in this world.

You know about my speculation that Paul might have avoided a lot of trouble if only he had sent the offering to the church in Jerusalem by other hands. No matter what God's perfect plan was in Paul's circumstances, we see that he suffered as a result of going to Jerusalem. As we move forward we will see Paul imprisoned for two years, before he faces additional hardship as he makes his way to Rome, in fulfillment of God's will to preach the gospel in that city.

Beyond the book of Acts we know that Paul became a Christian martyr at the hands of Emperor Nero, this after a great deal of time in a Roman prison. Paul suffered much, faced many trials, but to the best of his ability he lived His life to honor the Lord, and to fulfill His purpose. The Lord never left Paul, but saw him through. Based upon what Paul wrote in 2 Timothy, we know that God richly rewarded him in eternity.

The Christian life is not always easy. It is full of challenges, but there is nothing in this world that beats having a personal and intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. There is great comfort in knowing that He is always with you. There is fulfillment in finding His purpose for your life. There is peace in receiving forgiveness of our sins. There is hope in the promise of eternal life.

God took on flesh, and lived as a man. He sacrificed His physical life as a sin offering, so that we might be forgiven. Jesus death resulted in victory by His resurrection from the grave. He is coming again to take those who belong to Him, to be with Him forever. If you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. If there is anyone here who has more questions about the Lord, and His will, I would love to talk with you at length.