

29. The God who Provides, Promises and Protects

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[0 : 00] the part of the world that we're dealing with now, as Paul moves from Athens to Corinth. Acts chapter 18 then, verses 1 to 17, a passage all about the God who provides, promises, and protects.

Paul's short journey from Athens, with a population of about 10,000, to Corinth, with a population approaching three quarters of a million people, was a move from the intellectual capital of ancient Greece to its capital of commerce.

Something, I suppose, like a move from the Cambridge Fens to the city of London. And if Athens was full of a rather cultured form of idolatry, Corinth was replete with a much more crass, sensual idolatry.

The name of Corinth was a byword in the ancient world for fast and loose living. It was certainly a strategic destination for Paul, sitting as it did on the isthmus that connected mainland Greece to the Peloponnes Peninsula.

It had a seaport on either side of it. So it was a key trade hub for distribution, not just east to west, from Rome to the cities of Asia, but also north and south by land as well.

[1 : 24] There wasn't a canal then across the isthmus as there is now. One was built in the 19th century. But even at that time, goods were landed at one port and then hauled across land to the other port to avoid a rather treacherous extra 200 miles journey all around the peninsula.

So it was a very strategic place to plant the gospel and to disperse it all through the ancient world. But it was no doubt also a very daunting place for Paul.

Corinth was a fiercely proud city. Proud of its wealth, its influence, its reputation, not least for the Isthmian games that were held there every two years.

And it was a promiscuously immoral city, inspired as it was by the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love that towered just behind the city. There were a thousand temple prostitutes who lavished their attentions on the seamen and the merchants of that city.

And so armed with a gospel that can only slay all human pride, pointing to the cross of Jesus Christ alone as the humiliating road to salvation, and a gospel which declares clearly that the sexually immoral cannot inherit the kingdom of God without true repentance and holiness, it should be no surprise to us, should it, that Paul himself wrote later on that he approached Corinth in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.

[3 : 03] 1 Corinthians chapter 2. He steeled himself for a ministry that he knew would be scorned and rejected as mere foolishness, as a total stumbling block to many of his hearers, and yet he resolves himself to know nothing except the genuine gospel of Christ and him crucified, regardless of what he knew that reaction was going to be for many people.

And I'm sure as he trudged those Corinthian streets, Paul felt very small, very insignificant, very, very weak, a real fish out of water in the midst of a huge and unfamiliar and very unfriendly, no doubt, city.

I remember how daunted I felt when I first moved from a little provincial town in the northeast, from Aberdeen to the great city of London. I felt very lost indeed as I trudged the streets and looked through the estate agent's windows trying to find somewhere to live.

Although in God's goodness I hasten to add that I find it to be a very, very warm and welcoming place and great fellowship there. But Paul, I'm sure, had no such expectations of Christian fellowship when he went to London.

Only a very different expectation that he tells us in his own words later on in Acts chapter 20 came directly from the Holy Spirit of God. What? That in every city, he says, imprisonment and afflictions await me.

[4 : 30] And don't forget that his arrival in Corinth arrived after many months of grueling travelling by both land and sea, that he had already come through much hostility, much opposition, vicious beatings, imprisonments, much exhausting ministry labour.

And since Berea, remember, he'd been travelling on his own. Silas and Timothy had been left there. And despite, in Acts 17, verse 15, Paul's plea that they would join him in Athens as soon as they could, they'd never yet arrived.

They hadn't turned up. And his whole Athenian ministry had been a solo effort, all by himself in the midst of that cynical and scornful intellectualism that we saw last week.

I don't wonder that Paul felt very vulnerable alone, as he felt the prospect of much more draining ministry, all by himself in the midst of that hedonistic city of Corinth.

Frontline ministry is very draining, you know. Just ask some of our missionaries if you doubt that for a minute. Sometimes a very, very lonely place to be in. And that sense of real weakness, that sense of fear and of trembling is far from unusual, I can tell you.

[5 : 52] In fact, if Paul's example is in any sense a pattern of what real ministry and gospel mission is like, it's very much the norm. Read 2 Corinthians chapter 4, for example, when you get home later.

And so verse 1 here of Acts chapter 18 may seem to be just nothing more than a little geographical detail, but it's actually overflowing with a reality that this man is no superhuman.

He's no automaton, with no feelings and emotions, with no frailties, with no human needs like the rest of us. He is just like the rest of us. Frail flesh and blood.

Just the same human appetites, just the same needs, just the same symptoms of discouragement, of loneliness, of doubt, of bodily fatigue, as every one of us has.

Paul left Athens, verse 1, and went to Corinth. But he did so all alone, and by his own admission, he did so in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.

[7 : 02] And that's why I think that the first thing that Luke tells us about his arrival in Corinth is so very significant and so very wonderful. At first sight, again, it seems just like an incidental detail to us.

This apparently chance meeting in verse 2 with Aquila and Priscilla. And indeed, this whole passage is a wonderful reminder that our God is not a God who just issues commands to his servants and then leaves them to it, leaves them all by themselves in a hostile world.

He's not like that. Sometimes when we're feeling alone, sometimes when we're feeling fearful and trembling ourselves, we can start to think like that, can't we? We can think that God is very distant from us and just leaves us.

Maybe you felt like that yourself at times. Maybe even right at this very moment. Well, if that's the case, friend, this passage is exactly for you.

Because in it, Luke reminds us how God deals with his servants. And he shows us, by the way, that he deals with Paul in this chapter that our God is a God who loves to say, fear not.

[8 : 12] He's a God who provides and promises and protects always but very especially when his servants are perhaps flagging and feeling very near the end of the tether.

So tonight, I want to look at this text and just see what Luke wants us to be certain about.

Remember, that's why Luke writes that we should be certain about the God that we've been taught about.

What does he want us to know about this God, the God of Paul, the God who we follow? Well, first look at verses 1-5 where he tells us about God's great provision for his fearful servant.

Surely these verses are here to teach us that amid all the personal hardships of ministry, God wants us to know that we have a God who is sovereign over even the most basic human needs and he cares for all his precious servants.

These verses are almost a worked example of the words that Luke records in chapter 12 of his gospel. We read some earlier. He cares, our God, for the birds. He cares for the lilies of the field.

[9 : 29] How much more then will he care for you? You who are of much more value than many sparrows. Don't be anxious, says Jesus. He knows your needs.

Seek first the kingdom and I will provide all that you have needed, says the Lord. And these verses here before us speak of two wonderful provisions for Paul, God's fearful servant arriving in Corinth. First, this provision of Aquila and Priscilla, a couple whose partnership in the gospel was to become such a blessing to Paul and in fact such a blessing to the whole church. Their home was open to

him.

They were fellow tent makers and the fit could not have been more perfect, could it? Paul was very probably penniless as he arrived in Corinth and yet at once he has both somewhere to stay and people to share fellowship with but also the means to apply his very own trade and so to replenish his funds and fund his ministry.

What an amazing provision from God. And just think how God has prepared the way for what seems to us just to be a chance meeting. If you've ever doubted that God is absolutely sovereign, working everything for the good of those that he loves, then just look at this.

[10:50] Look how he sovereignly directed every stage, every step of these human lives. We're told that Aquila and Priscilla began in Pontus, that's north Turkey on the southern shore of the Black Sea.

But then God had directed their path all the way to Italy and there it seems in Rome they had heard the gospel known out from travelling Christians who had reached the heart of the empire and shared the gospel with them.

But then when they'd had to flee from Rome they'd chosen Corinth as the very place for them to settle and to start their leather business. We don't know why they chose that but God clearly knew. And look also how God is completely sovereign over even the imperial decrees of a Roman empire. Verse 2 The Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome almost certainly because of the rumpus that Christianity was causing in Rome because of the opposition of the Jews.

We know that from Roman historians. And humanly speaking of course it seemed a disaster because all the Christian Jews were also cast out of Rome. seemed a disaster just like the dispersion of Acts chapter 8 seemed a disaster.

[12:04] But again God knew what he was doing. Not the first time is it that Luke has recorded God's sovereignty over the imperial decrees of Rome.

Remember back in Luke chapter 2 the Emperor called Caesar Augustus who made a decree that all the world should be taxed and that a census should take place.

What a pain in the neck that was for everybody having to travel back to their places of birth for their census and to be counted. But it just happened to take a certain Mary and Joseph to a place called Bethlehem far, far away from their home of Nazareth for a birth that had been arranged for that particular time and place and history from before the very creation of the world.

And just so here. For the very sake of God's precious servants God is sovereign even over the rulers of the empires of the world even the greatest ones.

They're just his servants to accomplish his purposes to put Aquila and Priscilla right in that place for Paul right at that moment. Just as God said through Isaiah the prophet in Isaiah 45 Cyrus the Persian emperor is my servant to do my will.

[13:33] So also with Claudius the emperor of Rome. And God had even prearranged that Paul's trade background and that of Aquila and Priscilla should be just exactly the same.

All to make this great provision for a fearful servant in a strange city. Do you think that sort of thing is far fetched? Do you think I'm plucking at straws there?

Well if you do think that then you just don't know well enough the God of the scriptures. It's just so characteristic of him to order the universe in that way for the good of his particular people.

I could tell you dozens of stories personally of things just as extraordinary. Let me just tell you one. Just earlier this very year for example a couple came to this church here.

She was from Canada that was her background and she was Jewish. And he was from Scotland and was Christian. And they were hoping to get married and she was searching intently for the truth about Jesus.

[14:40] She came to see me after one service and said do you have something specially for me to help me understand Jesus because I'm Jewish? I said well we've got exactly the thing. It's called Christianity Explored. It explains how Messiah Jesus is the answer to all of your scriptures.

And they came to Christianity Explored and they came to church week by week and she was opening up to the message of Jesus. One day she said to me there's just one thing I would really love and that would be to speak personally to another Jewish person who's become a Christian. I would just love to hear their story and hear what they said. I just couldn't think of anybody in our congregation here in that particular situation. At any rate after a time they were moving away from here up to the highlands of Scotland and we were able to put them in touch with the church where

they could go.

After just a few weeks I heard from the minister of that church that they'd been there and on the very first week that she was there the very first person that she spoke to introduced themselves to her and she said to them well I'm actually from a Jewish background in fact I'm a seeker from the tribe of Benjamin.

Well he said how amazing I'm from a Jewish background and I'm a finder of Christ from the tribe of Levi. And just a few weeks later I heard that she was professing faith in the Lord Jesus and sharing the Lord's Supper with the Christian people there.

[16:07] Could we have possibly arranged that in the highlands of Scotland for all places? No but God can and he did.

And he moved heaven and earth here in just the same way in advance for his faithful servant Paul going ahead of him to make great provision for him at just a time of such particular need.

And by the way notice again just the importance that Luke's showing us about open homes in the spread of the gospel. In Philippi remember it was Lydia who opened her home. Then it was the jailer.

In Thessalonica it was Jason's house who was open to Paul. Here in Corinth it's Aquila and Priscilla their house and then later on in verse 7 it's Jason's house or Justice's house rather. Our God is the great provider.

He's the sovereign over even our very basic human needs. And so often that provision is people, friends, to give a deep and lasting sense of partnership in the gospel.

[17:17] And that's what it was here. And it's people too who are the second great provision of Paul in these verses. Verse 5 the arrival of Silas and Timothy so long awaited.

What a tonic that must have been to Paul. But it's not only their presence it's also what they brought with him. Verse 5 isn't as clear in the ESV but the NIV says when Silas and Timothy arrived Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching and the implication I think is that he no longer had to work with his hands to support himself in his ministry.

He was freed up now for full time missionary labor. And that's no doubt because Silas and Timothy brought with them gifts of money to enable them to do so.

2 Corinthians 11 verse 9 Paul tells us himself later on when he's writing to the Corinthians that support came to him from the churches of Macedonia from Philippi. It says it also to the Philippians in chapter 4 of that letter.

And it seems you see that Silas and Timothy's delay was well spent. They were raising support for Paul's ongoing mission. Paul may have wondered where they got to what had happened to them but what a blessing now when they came.

[18:31] What a great provision for the Lord. God's sovereign provision. Again, notice the human side of it. David Gooding helpfully draws attention to the place of business and trade also in the spread of the gospel.

And he draws a contrast. In Philippi, I remember, there were men there who were exploiting religion for their own personal gain, exploiting that slave girl to fill their own pockets. Alas, of course, there are still today, aren't there, charlatans calling themselves Christians who do exactly that, exploiting people for their own personal gain.

I was watching the other week there, some of the rascals on God TV doing exactly that, lining their own pockets. But of course, real gospel people do exactly the opposite.

These business workers like Lydia and others in Philippi, they use their wealth from their business not to line their own pockets but to serve the gospel by giving it from their pockets to Paul.

And the result here was that he was liberated. He was able to devote his time totally to mission in that great city of Corinth. God's great provision.

[19:47] Friends, fellowship, and co-workers, and support, just when Paul needed it most. Christ. Now you just might think that all of that's rather trivial.

But ask anybody serving in ministry or mission, especially somebody who's serving the Lord far away in a foreign country, far from friends and from family, and they will tell you just how much that kind of support means to them.

The huge encouragement of kindred spirits with them on the ground in the mission field to share that burden. The wonderful encouragement of people far, far away sending them assurances of support, not just in their prayers, but also in their financial support.

It means everything. It's enough to lift the heart from fear and from despair, to give new energy, to give great encouragement. fulfillment. And isn't it wonderful to know that we have a God who cares and who provides for his servants and whose providential care is so intimate and so absolutely perfect to meet just every individual situation with its needs.

He knows the very hairs on our heads and numbers them, says Jesus. He cares for the flax, he cares for the sparrows and he cares for you much, much more even than that.

[21 : 21] And Paul received that care. And he needed it because, as always, there's a great but of opposition and rejection from his ministry. In verse 6, the ESV translates it and, but it's much better to translate it but, as it is in verse 12.

And yet Luke's second point, in fact, is just as encouraging. Because wherever there is a but of the opposition of man, there is a far greater but God in this story.

And so the real focus of these next verses, verses 6 to 11, is not on man's rejection, but on God's great promise. God's great promise for his far-reaching kingdom.

Verses 6 to 11 remind us that amid the perplexing heartbreaks of ministry, God wants us to know that we have a God who is sovereign over his unfolding plan and purpose for all history, including our own history, including every single person that we encounter in life.

And even when it seems a great mystery to us that many people seem to refuse the gospel and refuse obedience to Jesus Christ, even some of those that we love and care for most deeply, we're to remember Jesus' words in Luke 12, 32, that it is the Father's goodwill, his good pleasure to give the kingdom to his chosen flock.

[22 : 51] And we're not to fear. He has his people. He has a great multitude that no one can number, and they shall be his, says the Lord, when he makes up his jewels.

Even from the most unlikely places, even from the most unlikely backgrounds, from dark and depraved, large commercial cities like Corinth, like Glasgow.

No surprise, is it, in verse 6, that the Jews oppose and revile Paul and his Lord, the Messiah? Paul's seen it all before, many times. But friends, that does not make it any less painful.

There's many things in pastoral ministry that I've seen before, and that I know will always happen, and I know will happen again. But let me tell you, they're terribly painful nonetheless. The keen inquirer who comes and is hungrily seeking the gospel, comes to devour the messages in church, comes to Christianity Explore, just seems to be opening up to Jesus.

And then they just disappear and fade away and it all comes to nothing. Or the keen young student who comes and is zealous to learn and gets stuck into church and release the word and then they swerve off, beguiled by teaching that you know in the end is just going to cause them damage and harm.

[24 : 22] Plenty of other things like that and it's always happening and I know it's going to happen and I know it'll happen again, but you know it's going to be painful every single time these things happen to us.

And the rejection of the gospel by the Jews in the majority was a heartbreak for Paul the Apostle. Read Romans 9 to 11 and sense the emotion as he even explains the great mystery of it all.

I have a great sorrow, he says, unceasing anguish in my heart. I could wish that I myself were accursed, cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen after the flesh.

That's agony, isn't it? Not unlike the agony that some of us feel over deeply loved ones who at present are rejecting the Lord Jesus.

Painful. There's perplexity and there's heartbreak in these things. Every time such a rejection thrusts itself upon us and every time that rejection thrusts itself on Paul's consciousness, he felt it.

[25 : 33] And yet, Paul has understood from God, from his understanding of the whole scriptures, that nonetheless, despite it being a mystery, God is sovereignly using this as part of his marvelous plan of salvation for all the world and for all its peoples.

God's word has not failed, he says, in Romans 9 verse 6. God's dealings with Israel and even their refusal of Christ may be a great mystery. It's still a great mystery today.

But God is sovereign, says Paul. He knows what he's doing. It's in this way. He's planned and purposed from before all worlds to make known his mercy to all his call, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles.

And that's what Paul explains in Romans 9 to 11. He quotes the prophets, Hosea. Those who are not called my people, says the Lord, I will call my people.

Those who are not beloved, I will call beloved. Those who are not my people will be called sons of the living God. And even now, Paul says, God is calling out a remnant from Jewish Israel who do believe, but also through the very rejection of them, mostly of the Messiah, God's grace is overflowing to the whole Gentile world.

[26 : 57] And many, many wild olive branches, he says, are being grafted into the life-giving sap that belongs only to the true people of God. And all that Paul was able to write there later in his letter to the Romans is what God was revealing here to Paul before his very eyes in Corinth, in the face of yet more perplexing heartbreak in his ministry to these recalcitrant Jews, to his own kith and kin who were rejecting him.

And God reassured him of his gracious promise for his far-reaching kingdom, both in what he showed Paul with his eyes and in what Paul heard with his own ears in this special vision of God. You see, first God demonstrates visibly that he is unmistakably gathering together one new people to be his in Christ his Son, a people of both Jew and Gentiles, through the very rejection of the Jews that was so painful and so puzzling to Paul.

How sadly Paul must have acted out this sign of condemnation and judgment in verse 6, shaking the very dust of his garments out on them, saying to them, your blood be on your own heads. He knows he's quoting words from Ezekiel chapter 33 where Ezekiel's watchman was told, you must bring the good news to God's people and if they reject, the blood is on their own heads.

[28 : 32] But if you fail to bring the message, then it's upon you. And Paul had brought the message to repent, but they had rejected. Later on you might want to read Ezekiel 33 and 34.

It's very striking that immediately after that passage about the watchman, God goes on to speak about how he himself will come and be the true shepherd of his people, gathering his flock from all the countries of the world to be his flock who will be with him forever in a great covenant of peace. And then he says, and surely this is very significant in the light of verse 10 here in our passage, then God says, they shall know that I, the Lord, their God, am with them.

And that they, the house of Israel, are my people. But how sadly Paul must have spoken these words and left the synagogue in verse 7 for Justice's house next door.

And yet, the very first thing that we're told about this new ministry caused by his rejection by the Jews is what? Verse 8.

[29 : 48] The very ruler of the synagogue and his whole household come to believe in the Lord. And not only that, we're told many of the Corinthians who now, as total pagans, are hearing the gospel outside the synagogue, they also come to real faith and are baptized and join the people of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus.

God is working his purpose out. His great promise is for a far-reaching kingdom of Jews and Gentiles, of male and female, of slave and free, his one family of faith, my people.

And Paul receives from God a great visible reassurance of that promise and that plan. And then in verse 9, the Lord Jesus himself appears to Paul in a vision to add his very personal verbal word of reassurance and comfort to him.

See, it's one thing, isn't it, to understand the theology of the way God works, even to see it being played out right in front of your very own eyes, to know the truth in your head and to see it in your own experience.

But sometimes, sometimes it still feels so difficult to grasp, doesn't it? It's because our hearts are so fickle and we're so weak.

[31 : 08] At least I am. See, I know what Christian discipleship and ministry is like. I know what Jesus taught us about the parable of the sower, to expect many disappointments, many sorrows all the way along, as well as the joys that we see.

And I know that to see those sorrows and disappointments and to have them isn't a sign of failure in ministry. But it's the pattern that the Lord himself has promised would be.

But I still find those failures and sorrows very, very hard. And they still make me doubt sometimes. And certainly for me, the many, many encouragements that there are so often in ministry just seem to me to be so small in comparison to the huge discouragements that just fill your whole mind and occupy your thinking all the time and distort your vision of what God is really doing.

Am I alone in that? Is that just me? Don't think so. Because you see, all God's servants are vulnerable human beings who share many of those struggles.

Paul certainly was. Read 2 Corinthians 4. I feel like we're being put to death all the time in my ministry, he says. Sometimes I feel I'm just at an absolute end of myself, he says.

[32 : 36] The perplexing heartbreaks of our personal ministries for Jesus sometimes make it so hard to feel that God's great promises really are true.

And feel that God really is still there and still is on the throne working out his plan and purpose in our lives and in the world. And you know the great thing is that we have a God who knows that. We have a high priest who's not unable to sympathize with our human weaknesses. And he cares. And from his throne of grace he draws near. And sometimes, sometimes, in a time of special need, in a time of real discouragement or weakness or sorrow, sometimes he does give us very personally a special token of his presence to reassure us, to affirm that all his promises of grace that we know in our heads are true.

To know that they're real. To know that we will never, ever, in the end, be truly disappointed in him. And you know that.

[33 : 56] Sometimes it's just the word of a hymn or a song that we sing in church and it just grabs you and you feel as though it's just been sent directly from heaven to you, just for your need that very day.

Or just a phrase in the reading or in the preaching. Sometimes it's just a word from a friend or something they say in a letter or an email or a text to you. And you just say, the Lord, thank you. Thank you for that word of encouragement. It's just for me. And that's what Paul experienced here. A wonderful word of promise from God in those words, fear not.

So often, God speaks that word to his servants. It's one of the most recorded words in the Bible of God to his people.

Fear not. Fear not, says the Lord Jesus to Paul. Go on preaching the gospel. Keep on doing it right here because there are many here who are my people.

[34 : 57] What you're seeing is not an accident, Paul. It's my plan and my purpose. Don't miss the significance of that word, my people.

He's saying, yes, even among these rank pagans in Corinth, in this filthy, immoral city, there are people who are my true Israel. Yes, some of them are filthy.

But they will be washed and sanctified and justified in my name and by my spirit, says the Lord. And it's going to happen, Paul, through your ministry.

Fear not, I have a plan. I'm at work through your life and your witness. However heartbreaking, however perplexing it may seem to you right now, don't give up.

Keep trusting. And mystery will give way to marveling. Marveling at my grace. Marveling in my perfect time when you see and you understand.

[36 : 09] Well, as many a perplexed servant of the Lord has received just that kind of personal assurance of his promise in times of personal disappointment and perplexity.

And maybe it's a promise that some of you need to hear right here tonight. Maybe that's why God brought you here this evening, just to hear that, because he wanted you to hear those words that he spoke to Paul all that time ago.

Fear not. But hold on, friends, to those great promises. God is at work in all things for the blessing of those who are his people, who he is calling to himself.

And those who so in tears, bearing much pain even now in the present time, will reap with shouts of joy. That's his promise. When the seeming mysteries of his ways are at last visible to us, as the sheer marvels of his redeeming grace.

Well, rather like Elijah's meal from the ravens, which gave him strength for forty days, this wonderful reassurance of God strengthened Paul.

[37 : 22] And we're told that he went on ministering there, right in that place for another eighteen months, verse eleven. Perhaps when he felt he couldn't go on one more day. And the fruit of that labour is seen in his letters to those churches, but it'll be fully seen on the great day of the Lord's appearing.

God's great provision and God's great promise. And finally and briefly, verses twelve to eighteen, God's great protection for his fledgling church in Corinth.

Amid the public hostility of mission, God wants us to know that we have a God who is sovereign over every force in this world that is arrayed against his church and that none shall ever destroy those who are under his great protection.

Remember again, Jesus' words in Luke twelve, don't fear those who can only kill the body. Fear God and you'll have nothing else to fear. Remember Matthew sixteen, I will build my church, says the Lord Jesus, and the very gates of hell themselves shall not prevail against it.

And we need to remember that when another but comes in verse twelve. This Jewish opposition won't stop. And this time actually it's much more serious. It's not a city governor that's coming against Paul, but the proconsul of the whole region.

[38 : 51] An adverse judgment then, in this case, would put the whole province potentially out of bounds for the gospel. Perhaps a knock-on effect, even worse, right through the Roman Empire. It seems likely that the Jews took advantage of the coming of a new governor, this Gallio, to try and have Christianity banned as an illegal religion, whereas the Jewish synagogue was allowed under Roman law.

It's really rather like what some of the Eastern Orthodox churches do to try and shut down evangelical churches in the former Russian republics or in some of the other Central Asian countries. But look again, verse fourteen, at God's sovereign intervention.

Remember in Luke chapter twelve, Jesus promised his followers that they would have just the right words when they're hauled before the courts and before judges. But here Paul didn't even need to have any words.

Because just like Claudius the emperor, Gallio the proconsul was like clay in the hands of God. It's a wonderful example of an earthly ruler being, as Paul puts it in Romans 13 verse 4, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

I'm not getting involved in your religious quarrels, he says. See to it yourself. And so verse 16, he kicks them out of his courtroom and as a result the crowd of Corinthians who didn't have much time themselves for the Jews, they seized the opportunity for some rather nasty reprisals of their own.

[40 : 20] And the new ruler of the synagogue, this Sosthenes, he gets a good public beating right in front of the proconsul. He just deliberately looks the other way.

Rather unsavory. But boy, if ever a wicked plot backfired, then it was this one. Not only was the church not proscribed as illegal, but in effect, because of this it received the official recognition of the Roman authority.

And this fledgling community of believers in Corinth, the Lord's people, would be protected so that they could be established in peace. And that's exactly what happened as verse 18 tells us.

Paul stayed a long time teaching them to do just that. God's great protection for his fledgling church. Isn't that marvelous? Isn't that reassuring?

Not, of course, that it means that God's people will never suffer and be persecuted. Of course they do. Paul saw plenty of that. We've seen it already. It's not that the church will never suffer and that there will never be martyrs.

[41 : 32] But that his church is under God's sovereign protection. And where he purposes that it will be established and that it will grow, then none, whether it's jealous, mob violence, or whether it's lawful officialdom, none shall be able to stand against it.

And that's what Luke wants us to be certain about in this chapter. I, for one, give great thanks to God that he caused Luke by his spirit to record this for us.

In a great commercial city like Corinth, as we see Paul and all that he faced there, conscious of his own frailty, acutely conscious of the personal hardships, the perplexing heartbreaks of that city center ministry.

Not so different for us, is it? We also face rising public hostility. Aren't you glad, then, that our God is this same God of Paul's?

The God of great provision for his servants. God of great promise for his kingdom. And a God of great protection for his church. A God who loves to say, fear not, go on.

[42 : 58] Well, I don't know about 18 months, but I think that's enough to make me go on for at least one more week.

And I hope it is for you, too. Let's pray. Lord, how we thank you for your great provision and your great protection.

and above all, for your wonderful promises, which in Jesus Christ, our Savior, are all yes and amen. Help us to know them.

Help us to trust them. Help us even, Lord, when we need to, to feel them. That every part of us might know with every fiber of our being that you are the God that we can trust.

the God of great, great faithfulness. For Jesus' sake. Amen.