

Hidden Grace

Acts 25:1–12

May 26, 2002

“I am standing before Caesar’s tribunal, where I ought to be tried; to the Jews I have done no wrong, as you know very well. If then I am a wrongdoer, and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death; but if there is nothing in their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar.” The grace of God—the active, powerful, saving grace of God—is hidden in today’s reading from the book of Acts. We have to admit that. Maybe God’s grace is hidden in our lives.

There is no mention of God in today’s reading. There is no mention of Jesus Christ. There is no mention of the gospel. There is no mention of the Christian faith. There is no mention of the Christian church. There is no mention of any friends of Paul. There is just Paul, alone, already in prison for more than two years at that time. There are his accusers. There is the new governor, Festus, not knowing, perhaps, quite what to do. In fact, Festus could have executed Paul as a way of gaining favor with the locals. He could have made a good start with this. He may have sensed his opportunity.

And yet, as always, there is the hidden grace of God. This grace of God granted Paul escape from death. This grace of God worked in mysterious and wonderful ways. There was no blinding light this time. There were no heavenly visions or voices. There was no earthquake. But God’s grace was there. God was in control of thoughts, actions, and outcomes. Quietly, secretly, without fanfare or detection, the hidden grace of God redeemed the situation, turned the course of events beyond the control of those in power, and saved Paul’s life. Without that having happened, we would not be here today. With it having happened, with the hidden grace of God, Paul was carried even to Rome, before rulers to whom he otherwise had no access, to bear witness to God’s Christ and to his resurrection. And so the good news came down through the centuries to us.

Where is the good news in this story? Where is the gospel of Jesus Christ? Where is the mercy of God unto salvation? We have to say that it is behind the story, it is underneath the surface, it is hidden from the eyes of disbelief, and yet, it speaks to us, as surely as the heavens declare the glory of God (Psalm 19:1). From this we can learn confidence in the grace of God to sustain even us in time of danger. We can look beneath the surface of life for God’s mercy. We can learn to pray and to call upon God for his hidden help (Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*).

“I am standing before Caesar’s tribunal, where I ought to be tried.” This, in and of itself, is remarkable. Paul could have been beaten to death by the mob in Jerusalem. He could have been flogged to death by the centurion. He could have been torn to pieces by the council. He could have been ambushed by the Jews, any of several different times. He could have been executed by Felix. His life was in danger at every moment.

And yet, there he was, standing before Caesar’s tribunal, standing before Caesar’s governor, where, in fact, he ought to have been tried. This was no accident. This was not fate. This was not blind luck. This, again, was the hidden grace of God. Even while Paul was under arrest, God was protecting him. Even while Paul was hindered from preaching to the churches, God was preparing him to proclaim Jesus Christ before the rulers of the world.

How is the hidden grace of God working in both the opportunities and the restrictions of our lives today? Can we see the limitations of our lives not only as barriers to be overcome but as gracious boundaries protecting us from the unknown? Can we realize that the opportunities which we have—the opportunities to bear witness to God, the opportunities to say a good word for Christ, the opportunities to articulate the gospel, the opportunities to invite someone to church, the opportunities to love someone in the name of Christ—can we realize that these are not coincidences but are gifts of God, the direct results of the hidden grace of God working in our lives? Can we realize that? Can we act on that?

There are even echoes here at Paul's trial of the trial of Jesus Christ. The priests and governors then had thought they were in control of Christ's life, too, but God was in control of their actions. They thought they were ridding the world of Jesus, but God used his death to save the world. Their lie that he was still dead was replaced with the truth of the resurrection. So, here, at Paul's trial, the priests and governors again thought that they were in control of the life of the servant of Christ, but God was quietly in control of all their actions. They thought they were squelching Paul and his message, but God used his imprisonment to spread the good news.

Is it possible that the hidden grace of God is using whatever suffering we experience in our lives to the greater good of the gospel and even to the glory of God? Could it be? Perhaps even the hardships and the horrible losses we suffer are not signs of any victory of the devil but are part of God's plan for good.

"To the Jews I have done no wrong, as you know very well." Indeed, as Paul had said earlier, "Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I offended at all." If he had been guilty of anything, this trial would have been a lot shorter. If the trial had been shorter, it would have ended in a quick execution. If Paul had been executed at this point, his ministry and his message would have been cut short. The gospel itself could have been injured. But thanks be to God that Paul was innocent of wrongdoing in his Christian life and ministry. I am not saying that he was not a sinner. He was, and he knew it.

However, he was innocent of wrongdoing in his Christian life and ministry. He was blameless of the matters of which he was being accused, and he stood and took the insults they hurled at him. He had not incited riots. He had not profaned the temple. He had not spoken badly of the Jews. He had not threatened the throne. All he had done was to preach the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That was what made people so mad that they were ready to kill him. But Paul's innocence prolonged his trial and so multiplied his opportunities to bear witness to Jesus Christ. Again, the hidden grace of God had been at work in his life, restraining him from wrongdoing, to bring him to this point. Without it, he would have been undone. But with God's grace, Paul's innocence brought honor to the gospel.

Does the hidden grace of God restrain us from wrongdoing? Does the hidden grace of God work within our hearts to turn us back from evil desires and impulses? Does the hidden grace of God sustain the members of the church in their faith and faithfulness? Does the hidden grace of God sustain the leaders of the world in their hard duty and restrain them from evil thoughts and actions? It is important for us have a clear conscience before God and to be ready to defend ourselves before accusers (Calvin, *Commentary on Acts*). It is important for us to live our lives in such a way as to bring honor to the gospel. We cannot do that on our own. We need the grace, mercy, and help of God. Pray for God's hidden grace.

"If then I am a wrongdoer, and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death." Not only was Paul innocent, but also he was a man of integrity. This

had to have made an impression on Festus. At least it held him back for the moment. It made him hesitate. It made him think. God held back Festus from hasty judgment. And one way he did it was with Paul's integrity. Paul was not trying to get out of anything he had coming to him. Paul was not trying to escape any just punishment, if he had done anything wrong, which, in fact, he had not. Paul simply wanted a fair trial. He wanted to speak the truth. He wanted to make his case known. He wanted to tell again of the resurrection of Christ. Despite the efforts of his accusers to implicate him falsely, despite the desires of his detractors to ambush and kill him, the hidden grace of God sustained Paul's integrity even under this distress, and his integrity won the day.

Is your integrity under attack? Your life may not be in immediate or obvious danger, but is your integrity in danger? What eats away at it and threatens to destroy it? Is the hidden grace of God at work in your life to carry you through the hard times?

"But if there is nothing in their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar." Thanks be to God, Paul was a Roman citizen! Years before, he had been born a citizen of Rome. This gave him important rights and privileges. In this case, the right of appeal to a higher court saved Paul from the weak inclination of the governor to give him over to his murderous accusers. God gave Paul an out. The hidden grace of God gave Paul an out, and Paul was smart enough to use it.

Paul submitted himself to the court of Festus as long as he could. So long as there was a chance of receiving a fair trial, Paul stayed there before him. But once it became clear that that was no longer a possibility, he made use of the human aids placed before him and appealed to a higher court. God allows Christians a legitimate use of the courts (*Calvin, Commentary on Acts*). We do not have to withdraw from the world and to depend upon the direct grace of God. Instead, we can live in the world and seek the hidden grace of God even there. Paul's life and trials are good evidence of that.

"You have appealed to Caesar; to Caesar you shall go." There may have been an air of resentment about this. Festus thought he was free to use Paul to gain favor with the Jews. But with the appeal, Festus found that his hands were tied and there was nothing he could do about it. Suddenly, the matter was beyond him. It was to be taken to a higher court. Surely Festus did not realize in how high a court it was already being played out. But he knew it was beyond him. This phase of the trial was over.

"I am standing before Caesar's tribunal, where I ought to be tried; to the Jews I have done no wrong, as you know very well. If then I am a wrongdoer, and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death; but if there is nothing in their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar." Where is the good news in this strange story? Where is the loving gospel of Jesus Christ? Where is the mercy of God unto salvation? It is behind the story, underneath the surface, and hidden from the eyes of disbelief.

There is no mention of God in today's reading. There is no mention of Jesus Christ. There is no mention of the gospel. There is no mention of the Christian faith. There is no mention of the Christian church. And yet, the hidden grace of God—the active, powerful, saving grace of God—saved Paul's life, ministry, and witness. It promoted the proclamation of the gospel around the world. And this same, hidden grace of God is still at work in our lives today. Pray for the hidden grace of God, that we, too, may live to bear witness to Christ.

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220