

One of the things that I have realised on different levels during this past year of COVID, has been the way in which we use our time. I'm sure I'm not the only one who considers that it's only been in the past year that we've spent a lot more time with our loved ones. We spend our lives running around a lot, or at least I do, and for what? How much time has there been in the past year to put aright some of the time that has been wasted. I don't want to be too morbid, but this past year has seen a lot more death than I would ever have expected. And it does bring you to the point of considering what on earth have we done with our time. In the funeral service there is a prayer which is said and it's as follows : *'Grant us, Lord, the wisdom and the grace to use aright the time that is left to us here on earth'*. Every time I say those lines I am struck about my own life that I would use the time wisely, and if I was to narrow it down to one or two things it would be this – our lives need to be motivated and driven to do God's will and to walk in his mission.

The reality is that the world around us, our flesh, and Satan (who is very real) will conspire to destroy and stop God's will in our lives, but our reading today from Acts 23 shows that no matter what the opposition, God will always in his divine providence weave his overall desire to be fulfilled. So what is the providence of God? Well it refers to God making all events fulfill His original design.

I'd actually like to take us away for a few minutes from Acts and actually delve into the Old Testament into the book of Esther to see God's providence at work. If you haven't read it before then I would recommend you do so. It's a book where God's name isn't actually mentioned and yet God weaves his plans through a terrifying story of potential genocide on the Jewish people.

Esther is a beautiful young Jewish girl living with her uncle still in Babylon after their exile. She hides her identity, but then after a call by the King of Persia she and many other virgins move into the King's quarters to serve him in whatever he wanted. What an incredibly vulnerable position to put yourself in. King Xerxes is so powerful that he would even kill people immediately who enter his presence if they have not been summoned by him, and what doesn't help is that he had a fond liking for wine which may have influenced some of his decisions. And yet God even in this terribly scary situation was working out his will. Who would have thought that the King being so obsessed with Esther's beauty elevates her to the role of Queen of Persia. Then we read that Esther's uncle Mordecai hears of a plot to kill the king and saves his life. Next an Agagite called Haman who is a selfish man is elevated by the king to a very senior position and expects everyone to bow before him. Mordecai refuses and so when Haman finds out that he actually is a Jew he then convinces the king to enact a decree to kill every Jew across the land. It's a mass genocide, and as such the deeper story is you know the powers of darkness behind all of this, because if it is successful then it removes any chance of a promised Messiah from being born, therefore God's will is thwarted. When warned of this, Esther's actions ensure that the Jewish people are saved and Haman ultimately pays with his life for his manipulating actions. God's providence is at work in everything.

And yet here is a girl who I am sure had many doubts about what she was getting involved in. Did she even realise how God would use her? And I wonder can we consider for a moment my earlier point, how God wants us to do his will and to follow his plan for mission,

even when the outlook seems very scary and bleak. Maybe that fear goes through your mind, maybe you think you are not equipped enough to be used by God, that in some way the stories of people in the bible are the giants of faith, and that there's no possible chance that God can use ordinary people like you and me for incredible things? Are you afraid to be used by God? You see if we stay in that place we end up living dry pointless lives, whereas God has so much more in store if we are willing to submit to his perfect will. So what I hope you receive this morning from our message is the courage to start living out God's will, especially when we come out of lockdown with a new perspective on mission.

But why do we need courage?

The answer is because Satan is going to fire everything at you and me to stop you from fulfilling God's purposes. I actually think that's a very real threat for us as a church as we step more into God's purposes at this time. But the easy way out for Christians is to just coast along through life without putting yourself under any real pressure. That's not the Christian life. It's going to be tough folks. We are soldiers for Christ, and we are going into spiritual battle all the time.

You see Paul knew early on that to be the instrument called by God to proclaim his name would mean that he would suffer much – that's what the Lord declared to Ananias when he came to meet Saul after his encounter with Jesus. Here's what the Lord said to Ananias in Acts 9:15, *'But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. <sup>16</sup> I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."* Many also had pleaded to Paul not to go to Jerusalem because of the trials that would await him. But Paul knew that for the sake of Jesus he had to go even if it meant great suffering. And the only difference that might actually exist between us and Paul is that he knew what God's will for his life and said, "Right where do I sign up? Let's go". Folks, let's not think that we can never be a Paul. He was just an ordinary person but he was grounded in the purpose, the mission and the will of God.

And so Paul is sitting the barracks, having just experienced a violent angry mob who would have literally torn him into pieces, and God stands beside him it says in verse 11 and declares to him, "Take courage. As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome". In other words, "Paul in the midst of your suffering, there's still more to be done. I have things still planned for you". How many of you believe that God has a plan in mission for you? Now it might seem impossible in your mind to accomplish but God has a plan. Never forget that.

Maybe for some of you today God's will is that you get alongside your children every day to shape them into Godly men and women who will go on to serve God in an incredible way. There's your mission, and that's a tough one, because the world and Satan will do everything to steal your children from knowing God. Before you know it they're grown up and they're away from home and the opportunity has been missed. Now it's your mission that he's called you to.

Maybe for some of you today God's will is that you will serve him in areas within our church family that maybe have been a passion you've had but you've never had the courage to step

up and speak with me about serving the Lord in this way. And so the battle of doubt or ability has crept in and you've never taken that step. And yet that's your mission that he's called you to.

Maybe for some of you God's will is that you would serve him by getting alongside with me to pray about how we can more effectively share the Gospel in Ballynure, to reach into the many homes around us. And it's a scary prospect to have a door slammed in your face, and yet God has put it on your heart as he has in mine that he desires to see souls won for Christ in our village. You'll get a name for being one of those evangelicals. And yet that's the mission he has called you to.

It's my prayer that for everyone of you listening you would ask the Spirit of God to stir up in you what he has called you to be in his service. There's no point in me trying to convince to get up and serve; I hope instead the Holy Spirit is stirring you right now. And yes it will be difficult, like Paul you may face trials and attacks along the way, but that's the nature of mission today. So be open today to his will on your life, and respond.

It takes courage to step into the will of God, but remember that you are not alone. You go with the power of God around you. We need God by his Spirit to give us the power and the strength to face those things that are tough. Do you remember that Paul ministered alongside a man called Mark who was like this. He said he couldn't do this any more so he abandoned the mission and went back to what he was comfortable with. But God picked him back up and put him back into the mission again and he was used in an incredible way. That's what God wants to do with many of you today as we see this plan for reopening after COVID. He's got a mission for everyone of us if we are willing to get involved. Hear me folks, the Church of God is not designed to be this static, introverted model. It is a living breathing organism that lives out Acts 1:8 that we will be God's witnesses to the very ends of the earth. It's challenging and it's hard, and we must have courage to do it.

You know as Paul felt the presence of God beside him that night in the Barracks, I wonder how if we were in his position we would have felt as God was saying 'take courage. You're in the right place and you're going to do more before we are finished'. I think for many of us we would have been hoping to hear God say, "Take courage. It's alright. I'm going to get you out of this place and you will be safe'. But that's not what is happening here. And for each of us if we are facing something very worrying – maybe an illness, or a financial issue, or a major decision now, how would it make you feel if God is saying "Take Courage, you're in the right place. You are where I want you and you're going to do more before we are finished". It doesn't fill most of us with confidence. Some of you know exactly what I'm talking about, and you are begging for God to give you an instantaneous answer. I wonder have you ever considered that it might be where God wants you to be right now? Think for a moment about the life of Job. What happened to him; God allowed it. And as he goes through the trials we hear Job accept his lot in life. His own family are wishing that he would reject God and so he responds to them, "Should we accept only good from God and not adversity?" As I said before, the Christian life is not an easy life, but the task for us is to see what God is wanting to do in the middle of whatever we are dealing with. We've got to trust him.

Remember when Jesus was saying farewell to his disciples and commissioning them for his mission, his final words here were not 'Go and make disciples'. No, after that he says, "I am with you always to the very end of the age". In other words, trust me, you are not alone, I have not abandoned you. So folks, you are never alone in raising your children to become followers of God, you're never alone in fighting for your marriage, you're never alone when you follow what God has put on your heart.

And we've got to trust God that he knows more than we do, and through his providence he will weave his will and his desire to be fulfilled. Back to our passage today, we don't know and we have no background to tell us how Paul's nephew found out about the plot against him. But we do know that he was quite young, as it says the Commander took him by the hand, and that must mean he's still a boy, that he is considered insignificant. And yet God uses him. This boy would have had an incredible amount of courage as a young Jew to go to the Roman Barracks, which is bound to have been intimidating, and through him the Roman commander was able to have Paul escorted off the property safely to Felix the Governor. That's the providence of God at work in every situation, all the little minute and mundan events so that God's will and Paul's mission would be fulfilled so that Paul would reach Rome and the Gospel would be heard there.

It's refreshing as we think of that little boy, at how God has a track record of using the weak. Remember the great people in the Bible; Moses stuttered. Abraham was a liar. David was an adulterer, the Apostle Peter was just a fisherman, Paul was a self righteous religious zealot. And yet God used all of them to see his Kingdom extend and his will done. We are all just like them, we are weak, but we've got to be ok with that. 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 in the Amplified Bible God says this, "[My] power is being perfected [and is completed and shows itself most effectively] in [your] weakness. Therefore, I will all the more gladly boast in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ [may completely enfold me and] may dwell in me. So I am well pleased with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, and with difficulties, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak [in human strength], then I am strong [truly able, truly powerful, truly drawing from God's strength]".

I think personally it's a better place to be to feel weak, because then God becomes strong. He doesn't want a cocky Christian who thinks they are someone. He doesn't want someone who thinks he could do a better job at leading the church. He wants humility and servanthood that feels weak and not equipped enough, but is humble enough to serve his Father God wherever and however that will end up.

Let's conclude with the story of Esther again. Mordecai reports to Esther that every Jew in the kingdom is going to be murdered, and therefore God's will is not going to be fulfilled. And Esther knows that if she walks into the King's presence there is a danger she will be killed immediately. Here's what Mordecai says to her, and I'm reading from the Message Translation here, "Don't think that just because you live in the king's house you're the one Jew who will get out of this alive. If you persist in staying silent at a time like this, help and deliverance will arrive for the Jews from someplace else; but you and your family will be wiped out. Who knows? Maybe you were made queen for just such a time as this."

## 7<sup>th</sup> March 2021 – Acts 23:11-24 The providence of God

Have you ever considered that maybe you were made to be here for just a time as this? Some of you know God's will but you haven't followed it. Some of you haven't asked God what he has planned for you? Maybe you're frightened, maybe you think you're not equipped, or maybe you're worried that his answer may be to stay where you are right now which makes you feel rather uncomfortable. Remember that God has placed you in this town, in this church, in that job for such a time as this. He has raised you to be his servant to do his will now. So what will it be says Mordecai, will you just remain silent, or will you step up? You know for me in my last job I spent almost 5 years not willing to ask God that very question, because I was worried that his response would be to stay another 5 years in the job. I wanted back home to Northern Ireland, but God had other things planned for me. And it was to stay in England. And it was actually through those next 5 years that I discovered his bigger plan for my life. Friends today, take courage, God hasn't finished with you.