

At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them.¹⁷ But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth.¹⁸ The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (2 Timothy 4:16-18)

What did the Lord Rescue You from this Year?

Did you have any near misses this year? Once or twice a month, my wife tells me about some stupid thing that someone did while she was driving to or from work. Some of them could've become terrible accidents. Thankfully, so far God has preserved her from that. What about you? Of course, highways aren't the only places near misses happen. Did you deer hunters have any near misses this year? Did you have any false alarms at the doctor's office – did he send you in for some tests because he was concerned about something that turned out to be nothing? Did you come close to losing your job? I could stand up here all night listing situations that could've been bad, but weren't. But I think you get the point. 2014 has only got a few hours left and it's traditional for us to gather here on New Year's Eve and think about the last year. Tonight, we want to use some of the very last words that the Apostle Paul wrote to help us reflect on what God has done for us this year. To use St. Paul's words, **what did the Lord rescue you from this year?**

I.

St. Paul knew about rescues. He had spent years traveling around the Roman world preaching the gospel and facing persecution and violence. In one of his letters he lists how many times he was arrested and flogged and how many times he was in danger from storms at sea and criminals and so on. Tonight's letter was written several years later and the numbers had only gone up. But in these verses, Paul points to one specific escape. He was in prison in Rome. Christians were being executed for their faith and Paul had been put on trial for preaching the gospel. It was a tough day and no one came to his first hearing. There was a sizeable Christian church in Rome and the members knew Paul. But they were afraid to come to his trial. Why? Because there was only one way the trial was going to end. They were going to find him guilty of preaching this false religion and undercutting the Roman state and execute him. The Christians there in Rome were afraid of what might happen to them if they were associated with him.

Let's not be too judgmental about their fear. Paul wasn't. He says, **"May it not be held against them."** He understood why those believers were afraid. But the really amazing thing is that the hearing didn't go the way everyone expected it to. Paul says, **"But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth."** God enabled Paul to use that moment of persecution and intimidation to proclaim the good news that Jesus is the Savior to the very enemies of Christ who were putting him on trial. Jesus promised that would happen when we're persecuted. The Holy Spirit opens our mouths and who knows how many persecutors have been converted in this way? Even those who reject that testimony have to be shaken by the fact that they can't intimidate Christians. They will have no excuse when they are on trial before the Lord on Judgment Day: they heard the gospel from the very people they persecuted.

That trial did not end in a conviction. Now, it must not have ended in an acquittal either, because Paul was not released. In fact, he makes it clear in this letter that he expects to be executed soon. But he says that he was delivered from the lion's mouth. The trial was delayed or a new trial was ordered or Paul's testimony caused his enemies to go back and have to rethink their approach. But Paul was rescued from death at that moment. It was a near miss. All the power of the Roman government was stacked up against him. His friends were too afraid to come to him. He stood alone – and God stood by him and opened his mouth and threw the court into confusion.

Paul goes on to make a very specific application from that. He says, **"The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack."** How could he say that? He was still in prison. He knew he was going to die soon for his faith. He knew the devil would never stop attacking him or his message. Yet, in his prison cell, he could write to his friend Timothy and say, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack." What did he mean? First of all, he meant it could've been worse. He was still alive and every day that God gave him life and breath, God

had rescued him from that day's evil. The truth is, every day that we live here, the devil attacks us. He wants to destroy our faith. He wants to drag us down to hell. If he can't do that, he wants to inflict as much pain and sorrow on us as he possibly can. Every time God frustrates his efforts, he rescues us from an evil attack. And what Paul says here is true for every one of us: God will rescue us, not just from some of those attacks, or most of those attacks or the worst of those attacks. God will rescue us from every evil attack.

We don't even know how many near misses we've experienced. We don't know how many car accidents we missed because that frustrating driver in front of us was poking along so we weren't in the intersection when someone else ran a red light, and so nobody went to the hospital that day. We don't know how many times someone might have done or said something that would have devastated us, but God kept it from happening. We don't know how many times we could've lost our jobs or had to mourn our children or had to live without one or more of our fingers, but God rescued us before it happened. But the near misses we do know about make us realize God is doing more for us than we can even imagine.

But what about all the times God does let something bad happen? The hospitals are full of Christians and so are the funeral homes. How does that square with "God will rescue me from every evil attack"? God only allows those things to reach us which he uses for our good. Every sickness, every defeat, every loss of things and people we love, every pain and sorrow of this life God consciously allows into our lives and he turns all of it to our good. Not necessarily our good here. But our eternal good. He uses all of it to get us home to heaven. The devil means for all of it to hurt us. But God never lets his hurt be permanent. God only allows things of this life that will bring us home.

How do we know that's true? In the years that I've been a pastor, I've heard members tell me heartbreaking stories of children lost, of physical pain, of emotional and psychological trauma. Only rarely could I tell them what God was doing. But God does offer proof to us. One the one hand, he calls us to do what Paul did: look at all the times he rescued us and we know it, look at all the near misses, and recognize who was behind those moments when life should've hurt even more. Every one of those rescues is a token of God's love. Every one of them is real life testimony that God is watching and doing what is best for you and me.

But in the end, we still can't always see that there is more good than bad in our lives, because sometimes, there is more bad, more hurt, more evil and loss here in this life than there is blessing and joy and happiness. It takes faith to sit in prison, like Paul did, and say, "God will rescue me from every evil attack." Most people would've said he was crazy! And he was going to die because he wouldn't roll over and deny Christ – which would almost certainly have gotten him released. Where does faith like that come from in his life and in ours? From Jesus. A week ago, we gathered here on Christmas Eve to celebrate the gift of the Christ child. God gave us his dearest treasure. He sent his one and only Son into this world to die for us so that we will live. Jesus embraced that role. Jesus pushed us out of the way and he jumped into the path of death and hell when they came for us. He died for you and me. He suffered hell itself in our place. Then he rose to tell us that all our death and hell are over and done with forever. We will live and reign with him.

If he did all that, he promises that he will not abandon us here. He will not let hurt and sorrow in this broken world win. He will turn every attack of the devil and every moment of pain and loss into blessing, if not in this life then in the next. His death and his resurrection prove that. Every near miss and every rescue in this life points you back to the eternal love of Christ. **What did the Lord rescue you from in 2014? He will continue to protect you in 2015.**

II.

All that is true. But it doesn't change the fact that we do still live in a sinful and broken world. Paul didn't get released from prison when God rescued him from the lion's mouth and we are still going to face the lion's mouth in our lives too. The final and supreme fulfillment of this promise can only be seen if we remember the full sentence. Paul said, **"The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom."**

There in prison, waiting for the Roman government to hand down the final sentence and carry it out, Paul knew that there was nothing he could do to change his circumstances. Even the courage he had shown at his previous hearing was all God's doing. The Lord would rescue him and the Lord would bring home. You and I need to recognize the same thing. It's easy for us to think that if we just try harder, if we're just more organized, or more disciplined or more creative, we can escape from the problems and hurts of this life. But the truth is, sin is a steamroller that will flatten us. Only God has the power to rescue us.

And he uses it. He brings us safely to his heavenly kingdom. There are so many times when our faith is in jeopardy. There are so many times when it seems like we will not be able to get through this. Every year for our New Year's Eve service, we have our Remembrance Rite where we list the names of those members who God called home to heaven this year. Tonight, we only have one name on the list. But most of us have had a year when we lost someone we loved. If that someone was a spouse or a child or a parent, it may have hurt so much that we didn't see how it could ever stop. But even though we can't see how, God does. Those of us who have healed from that kind of loss realize that God does have the power to deliver us. We will all safely pass through this life. God will keep our faith whole and intact through all evil and suffering and hardship. He will bring us home to his heavenly kingdom.

Once we get there, there will be no more danger to our souls. Once we get there, all pain and sorrow will cease and at long last, we will be able to see that God kept his promise, that he made everything work for our good, that we were indeed rescued from every evil attack. And we will praise our God for all eternity. What does the new year hold? Only God knows. But you know what happened last year. **What did the Lord rescue you from in 2014? He will bring you safely to heaven, when the time is right.** Amen.