

ACTS: I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH (PART 22)

Paul has by now received messages from several of his friends that his visit to Jerusalem will be difficult and dangerous. Most recently in Caesarea, the prophet Agabus bound his own hands and feet with Paul's girdle and told the apostle that he would be bound in Jerusalem. Of course, the believers have begged Paul not to go. But Paul told them that he was prepared to die for the name of Jesus if necessary!

Acts 21:13-14 Then Paul answered, What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done.

“I’m not going to play it safe – I’m going to do the will of God!”

Acts 21:15-22 And after those days we took up our carriages, and went up to Jerusalem. There went with us also certain of the disciples of Caesarea, and brought with them one Mnason of Cyprus, an old disciple, with whom we should lodge. And when we were come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present. And when he had saluted them, he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord, and said unto him, Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law: And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs. What is it therefore? the multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that thou art come.

The brethren received Paul gladly, and glorified God for what was happening among the Gentiles ... BUT they were still yielding to pressure from the Judaizers in Jerusalem! There were thousands of Jews who now believed in Jesus ... BUT this group was still more concerned about whether the Law of Moses was being honored than about how many Gentiles were entering the Kingdom!

The same GRACE that gave the Gentiles freedom to ABSTAIN from the Law of Moses also gave the Jews freedom to OBSERVE the Law of Moses, as long as they didn't trust in the Law for salvation ... BUT that wasn't enough for the Judaizers! They wanted to “police” the Apostle Paul, and had effectively mobilized the “rumor mill” against him before he even got back to Jerusalem. And the elders in the Jerusalem church were so concerned about possible division that they enlisted Paul's help.

Acts 21:23-29 Do therefore this that we say to thee: We have four men which have a vow on them; Them take, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads: and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law. As touching the Gentiles which believe, we have written and concluded that they observe no such thing, save only that they keep themselves from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from strangled, and from fornication. Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself with them entered into the temple, to signify the accomplishment of the days of purification, until that an offering should be offered for every one of them. And when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews which were of Asia, when they saw him in the temple, stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him, Crying out, Men of Israel, help: This is the man, that teacheth all men every where against the people, and the law, and this place: and further brought Greeks also into the temple, and hath polluted this holy place. (For they had seen before with him in the city Trophimus an Ephesian, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.)

The elders asked Paul to accompany four men who were taking a vow of purification in the Temple, so the rumors about Paul dishonoring the Law of Moses will be proven false. Even though Paul knows and teaches that the Old Testament Law has been fulfilled, he agrees to inconvenience himself and submit to their request because of a higher principle:

1 Corinthians 9:19-23 For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.

However, despite the elders' good intentions, their plan was a miserable failure. The Judaizers didn't intend to stop spreading rumors, and they were watching for any excuse to trap the Apostle Paul. In the temple stood a wall beyond which no Gentile was allowed to go, bearing this solemn inscription: "No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Anyone who is caught so doing will have himself to blame for his ensuing death." Some Jews from Asia saw Paul in the temple and immediately jumped to the conclusion that he had polluted their sacred Temple by bringing past the barricade the Gentiles who had accompanied him to Jerusalem. It was totally untrue, but it was totally effective ... and it resulted in a riot!

By the way, it is this “wall of partition” that Paul later refers to when he writes the book of Ephesians ...

Ephesians 2:8-22 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father. Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

- “by grace are ye saved through faith” isn’t an alternative to Acts 2:38, but an explanation of why we don’t have to keep Old Testament law!
- “not of works” isn’t telling us that we don’t do good works, because the next verse tells us we are created in Christ Jesus “unto good works”!
- “the middle wall of partition between us” refers to the old barrier that stood between Gentiles and Jews in the Jerusalem Temple
- not only can we ENTER the Temple, we now ARE the Temple of God

The mob seized Paul and would have killed him had the Roman guards not intervened in the nick of time. Thankfully, at least 1,000 soldiers were stationed in the Antonia Fortress at the northwest corner of the temple area at any given time. When the captain tried to interrogate the crowd, most of them didn’t even know the cause of their agitation, so he removed Paul from immediate danger and took him into the fortress. He at first thought Paul was an Egyptian rebel who was wanted by the Romans for inciting a revolt, but once Paul explained his background he actually allowed the Apostle to stand out of harm’s way on the stairs and address the crowd below. Paul always took every opportunity to preach!

Acts 21:30-40 And all the city was moved, and the people ran together: and they took Paul, and drew him out of the temple: and forthwith the doors were shut. And as they went about to kill him, tidings came unto the chief captain of the band, that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. Who immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down unto them: and when they saw the chief captain and the soldiers, they left beating of Paul. Then the chief captain came near, and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and demanded who he was, and what he had done. And some cried one thing, some another, among the multitude: and when he could not know the certainty for the tumult, he commanded him to be carried into the castle. And when he came upon the stairs, so it was, that he was borne of the soldiers for the violence of the people. For the multitude of the people followed after, crying, Away with him. And as Paul was to be led into the castle, he said unto the chief captain, May I speak unto thee? Who said, Canst thou speak Greek? Art not thou that Egyptian, which before these days madest an uproar, and leddest out into the wilderness four thousand men that were murderers? But Paul said, I am a man which am a Jew of Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city: and, I beseech thee, suffer me to speak unto the people. And when he had given him licence, Paul stood on the stairs, and beckoned with the hand unto the people. And when there was made a great silence, he spake unto them in the Hebrew tongue, saying,

This is the second of three times in Acts that we have testimony of Paul’s dramatic conversion, and this is certainly a dramatic setting for sharing it!

Acts 22:1-10 Men, brethren, and fathers, hear ye my defence which I make now unto you. (And when they heard that he spake in the Hebrew tongue to them, they kept the more silence: and he saith,) I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day. And I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women. As also the high priest doth bear me witness, and all the estate of the elders: from whom also I received letters unto the brethren, and went to Damascus, to bring them which were there bound unto Jerusalem, for to be punished. And it came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and was come nigh unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me. And I fell unto the ground, and heard a voice saying unto me, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And I answered, Who art thou, Lord? And he said unto me, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest. And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me. And I said, What shall I do, Lord? And the Lord said unto me, Arise, and go into Damascus; and there it shall be told thee of all things which are appointed for thee to do.

Note how Paul lists his Jewish credentials: he was a Jew, a native of Tarsus, brought up in Jerusalem, trained by Gamaliel, a follower of the Law, a zealous persecutor of the church, and a representative of the Sanhedrin. How could his countrymen not respectfully listen to a man with that kind of record! Instead of accusing them of participating in a riot, he commended them for being "zealous toward God." He admitted that he too had been guilty of having people arrested and bound, and even killed. He had them so spellbound by this point that they continued to listen even when he began to speak about his conversion.

Acts 22:11-21 And when I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of them that were with me, I came into Damascus. And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good report of all the Jews which dwelt there, Came unto me, and stood, and said unto me, Brother Saul, receive thy sight. And the same hour I looked up upon him. And he said, The God of our fathers hath chosen thee, that thou shouldest know his will, and see that Just One, and shouldest hear the voice of his mouth. For thou shalt be his witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard. And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord. And it came to pass, that, when I was come again to Jerusalem, even while I prayed in the temple, I was in a trance; And saw him saying unto me, Make haste, and get thee quickly out of Jerusalem: for they will not receive thy testimony concerning me. And I said, Lord, they know that I imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed on thee: And when the blood of thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him. And he said unto me, Depart: for I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles.

The Lord had told Paul to leave Jerusalem quickly, because the people would not receive his witness. But first, Paul debated with the Lord! He wanted to show the Jews that he was a new person and tell them that Jesus was the Messiah, and He was alive. If Paul won some of them to the Lord, it would perhaps help to compensate for all the damage he had done. But the Lord's command was, "Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles!" Paul was about to explain, but the crowd would not listen to anything else he said after he uttered the word "Gentiles."

Many in the crowd were Jewish believers, holding Moses in one hand and Jesus in the other. They were so prejudiced that ...

- They didn't care that the Gentiles didn't know the one true God
- They didn't care that the prophets foretold the Gentiles coming in
- They didn't care that God was visiting the Gentiles by His Spirit
- They didn't care that they were persecuting God's messenger
- They didn't care that God was grieved by their actions and attitude

Acts 22:22-30 And they gave him audience unto this word, and then lifted up their voices, and said, Away with such a fellow from the earth: for it is not fit that he should live. And as they cried out, and cast off their clothes, and threw dust into the air, The chief captain commanded him to be brought into the castle, and bade that he should be examined by scourging; that he might know wherefore they cried so against him. And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said unto the centurion that stood by, Is it lawful for you to scourge a man that is a Roman, and uncondemned? When the centurion heard that, he went and told the chief captain, saying, Take heed what thou doest: for this man is a Roman. Then the chief captain came, and said unto him, Tell me, art thou a Roman? He said, Yea. And the chief captain answered, With a great sum obtained I this freedom. And Paul said, But I was free born. Then straightway they departed from him which should have examined him: and the chief captain also was afraid, after he knew that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him. On the morrow, because he would have known the certainty wherefore he was accused of the Jews, he loosed him from his bands, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down, and set him before them.

When the captain saw the riot was starting again, he took Paul into the barracks for "examination by torture." The apostle had not yet mentioned his citizenship, but it was unlawful for a Roman citizen to be scourged. Once Paul exercised his rights, he was considered "innocent until proven guilty" – so the captain commanded the Jewish council to hear the case and decide if he had broken their law or if he was worthy of punishment.

When Paul was converted, God gave Ananias a prophetic word about this former persecutor of the church, that his ministry would include great suffering, and would take him before Gentiles, Jews and even Kings. At this point in Acts, the fulfillment of that word begins to accelerate ...

Acts 9:15-16 But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.

Acts 23:1-5 And Paul, earnestly beholding the council, said, Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day. And the high priest Ananias commanded them that stood by him to smite him on the mouth. Then said Paul unto him, God shall smite thee, thou whited wall: for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law? And they that stood by said, Revilest thou God's high priest? Then said Paul, I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people.

History records that this particular high priest was one of the most corrupt men ever to hold the office. He stole tithes from the other priests and did all he could to increase his authority. He was known as a brutal man who cared more for Rome's favor than for Israel's welfare. In calling the high priest a "whited wall," Paul was simply saying that the man was a hypocrite. As to why Paul didn't recognize him, this was an informal meeting of the council and perhaps the high priest was not wearing his traditional garments. Paul had also been away from Jerusalem for many years and probably did not know many of the men now on the council.

Acts 23:6-10 But when Paul perceived that the one part were Sadducees, and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee: of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question. And when he had so said, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees: and the multitude was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both. And there arose a great cry: and the scribes that were of the Pharisees' part arose, and strove, saying, We find no evil in this man: but if a spirit or an angel hath spoken to him, let us not fight against God. And when there arose a great dissension, the chief captain, fearing lest Paul should have been pulled in pieces of them, commanded the soldiers to go down, and to take him by force from among them, and to bring him into the castle.

Paul now wisely inserted a doctrinal issue into his testimony, declaring that the real reason he was being persecuted was his faith in the doctrine of the Resurrection. Paul knew that the Pharisees and Sadducees violently disagreed over this issue, and that it would divide the council and get the members disputing among themselves. So violent was the response that the captain and his men had to rush down to the floor of the council chamber and rescue their prisoner for the second time!

Paul wasn't just "playing politics" – he was absolutely right when he said that the real issue was the doctrine of the Resurrection. He wasn't referring to "resurrection" in general, but the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The entire testimony of the book of Acts centers on the Resurrection!

Acts 23:11 And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.

Paul has received a word from the Lord before, during times of danger or discouragement. Here, Jesus lets him know that no matter what happens in Jerusalem, he will eventually get to preach the gospel in Rome. God is always walking with us, even if our difficulties seem insurmountable!

Acts 23:12-22 And when it was day, certain of the Jews banded together, and bound themselves under a curse, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. And they were more than forty which had made this conspiracy. And they came to the chief priests and elders, and said, We have bound ourselves under a great curse, that we will eat nothing until we have slain Paul. Now therefore ye with the council signify to the chief captain that he bring him down unto you to morrow, as though ye would enquire something more perfectly concerning him: and we, or ever he come near, are ready to kill him. And when Paul's sister's son heard of their lying in wait, he went and entered into the castle, and told Paul. Then Paul called one of the centurions unto him, and said, Bring this young man unto the chief captain: for he hath a certain thing to tell him. So he took him, and brought him to the chief captain, and said, Paul the prisoner called me unto him, and prayed me to bring this young man unto thee, who hath something to say unto thee. Then the chief captain took him by the hand, and went with him aside privately, and asked him, What is that thou hast to tell me? And he said, The Jews have agreed to desire thee that thou wouldest bring down Paul to morrow into the council, as though they would enquire somewhat of him more perfectly. But do not thou yield unto them: for there lie in wait for him of them more than forty men, which have bound themselves with an oath, that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him: and now are they ready, looking for a promise from thee. So the chief captain then let the young man depart, and charged him, See thou tell no man that thou hast shewed these things to me.

Paul's life had been in danger from the very beginning of his ministry, when he witnessed for Christ in Damascus (Acts 9:22-25). During his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion, the Hellenistic Jews tried to kill him (Acts 9:29). The Jews drove him out of Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:50-51) and threatened to stone him in Iconium (Acts 14:5). Paul was stoned in Lystra (Acts 14:19-20); and in Corinth, the Jews tried to get him arrested (Acts 18:12-17). In Ephesus, the Jews had a plot to kill him (Acts 20:19), and they even planned to kill him at sea (Acts 20:3). Paul truly suffered many things at the hands of his own countrymen – and now, more than forty of them have vowed not to eat until they kill him!

What are the chances that Paul's nephew would overhear this plot?!

It doesn't appear from history that Paul's sister and her son were even Christians, but God used them to protect Paul. He also used a pagan Roman captain, who didn't want to lose a prisoner in his custody, so he decided to send Paul to Caesarea and place him under the authority of the Roman Governor Felix. And in light of the evil plot that had been discovered against Paul's life, the captain even decided to give him an official military escort to protect him from the conspirators!

Acts 23:23-35 And he called unto him two centurions, saying, Make ready two hundred soldiers to go to Caesarea, and horsemen threescore and ten, and spearmen two hundred, at the third hour of the night; And provide them beasts, that they may set Paul on, and bring him safe unto Felix the governor. And he wrote a letter after this manner: Claudius Lysias unto the most excellent governor Felix sendeth greeting. This man was taken of the Jews, and should have been killed of them: then came I with an army, and rescued him, having understood that he was a Roman. And when I would have known the cause wherefore they accused him, I brought him forth into their council: Whom I perceived to be accused of questions of their law, but to have nothing laid to his charge worthy of death or of bonds. And when it was told me how that the Jews laid wait for the man, I sent straightway to thee, and gave commandment to his accusers also to say before thee what they had against him. Farewell. Then the soldiers, as it was commanded them, took Paul, and brought him by night to Antipatris. On the morrow they left the horsemen to go with him, and returned to the castle: Who, when they came to Caesarea, and delivered the epistle to the governor, presented Paul also before him. And when the governor had read the letter, he asked of what province he was. And when he understood that he was of Cilicia; I will hear thee, said he, when thine accusers are also come. And he commanded him to be kept in Herod's judgment hall.

Paul has now been delivered to Antonius Felix, the procurator of Judea, and he is under arrest until his accusers come to Caesarea to appear at his hearing. It is a frustrating waiting game, to say the least, and he has no idea how it will end. It would seem that his entire fate at this point is in the hands of unsaved men who may just decide to kill him on a whim.

But wait a minute! Paul traveled the sixty-five miles to Caesarea accompanied by a bodyguard of 2 centurions, 200 hundred soldiers, 70 horsement, and 200 spearmen – a total of 472 people. And Paul didn't even have to walk this time – they gave him a beast to ride on. God knows how to protect you physically, and even more so spiritually!

David wrote these words in his “diary” when he was fleeing from Saul:

Psalm 34:1-8 I will bless the LORD at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul shall make her boast in the LORD: the humble shall hear thereof, and be glad. O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together. I sought the LORD, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears. They looked unto him, and were lightened: and their faces were not ashamed. This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them. O taste and see that the LORD is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him.

And Paul uttered these words when all the other Christians were afraid:

Acts 20:24 But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.

“I’m not going to play it safe – I’m going to do the will of God!”