

TROUBLE AT JERUSALEM

by Ray C. Stedman

This morning we return to the twenty-first chapter of Acts. Last week, you remember, we left Paul in Jerusalem where he had absolutely no business to be. It is almost incredible to us that this mighty Apostle to the Gentiles, with his earnest and fervent hunger to serve God, his matchless devotion to the cause of Jesus Christ, could be so overpowered by desire to have a ministry to Israel, his brethren according to the flesh, that he would be deceived by his own flesh and find himself disobeying a direct command of the Holy Spirit. But, as we saw in our studies together last week, this is exactly what he did. And, much as we would not like to admit that, there seems to be no adequate way of explaining this Scripture otherwise.

What a lesson this is for us! It is wonderful to see how honest Scripture is in its accounting of the ones whom we look up to as the leaders and heroes of faith. We know about the murder that Moses committed, and about David's twin sins of adultery and murder. We know of the plotting, scheming, and manipulating of Jacob. We know of the lie Abraham told about his wife, and of the drunkenness of Noah. We know about Peter's denial of our Lord, and of his later defection at Antioch when he turned back from a proper expression of Christian faith and love.

Scripture does not hide any of these incidents from us because it is frank and honest, and tells it like it is. It does so, not in order to degrade or defame, but simply to recount accurately what happened to men and women of God in the past as they struggled in faith. So when it comes to the Apostle Paul's mistake, the Bible sets it forth. It does not trumpet it abroad, or make a lot of fuss over it, but just quietly tells us that Paul, too, could miss the will of God and the mind of the Spirit.

Here he is in Jerusalem -- after the Holy Spirit, through the disciples Paul had encountered on his way there, had given him the direct command: "Stop going up to Jerusalem!" But, because he had a passion in his heart to reach Israel, and recognized an opportunity in the gathering of Jews from all corners of the earth on the day of Pentecost, he resolved to be there.

Paul probably felt that the time had come which God had decreed for Israel to be reached. He well knew, as a prophet of God, that the world would never solve its problems until that nation accepted its Messiah.

That is still true. One of these days Israel is going to turn to Christ. And when it does the world will be a different place in which to live. There is absolutely no hope that we will ever solve the population explosion, the ecological and pollution crisis, the political crises, the wars, or any of the other pressing problems of our day, until Israel turns to God, through Jesus Christ.

So we understand what Paul felt, and why he was there!

When he came into the city, the Jewish Christians there were eagerly hoping to clear up a difficulty that many had with Paul. Many of them were still involved in the temple sacrifices. And they felt that Paul, in his teaching, was tearing down the Law of Moses. But Paul never did. He insisted only that Gentiles not be subjected to the Law in order to become Christians. To allay these suspicions Paul took upon himself the responsibility of going into the temple with four young men who had taken a Nazarite vow, and of paying their expenses until they could complete the prescribed rites and shave their heads. It was when this was nearly accomplished that trouble began.

Luke now picks up the account for us, beginning with Verse 27:

When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, who had seen him in the temple, stirred up all the crowd, and laid hands on him, crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching men everywhere against the people and the law

and this place; moreover he also brought Greeks into the temple, and he has defiled this holy place." For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. {Acts 21:27-29 RSV}

Notice who instigates this trouble. It is not the Jews in Jerusalem; it is those from Asia. The capital of the Roman province of Asia was Ephesus. So it was undoubtedly the same Jews who had caused all the disturbance in Ephesus which resulted in a riot that drove Paul out of the city. Here they are again, hot on his trail, these riot engineers traveling around from place to place, deliberately stirring up trouble, determined to destroy the tremendous work of the apostle.

Naturally they were upset by what had happened in Ephesus. The liberating power of the gospel had hit that region with such impact that it had demolished the structure of the superstitious pagan religious worship in that city. As a result the trade of the idol-making silversmiths fell off and so they rioted, led by one of their number, Demetrius. And now here they are in Jerusalem. Very likely Alexander the coppersmith, who had caused Paul so much trouble in Ephesus, is here as well.

It is quite evident from this that the Lord Jesus had desired to avoid the trouble that Paul is now going through. This is why he said through the Spirit that Paul was not to go to Jerusalem, because he knew these troublemakers were there. He knew the volatile character of the Jewish nation. He read, far more clearly than Paul, the stubborn resistance of the Jewish heart to the gospel, and he knew it would be a fruitless and hopeless attempt to reach this stubborn people at this time. But Paul could not see that.

The Lord would have allowed Paul to continue his great ministry throughout the Gentile regions, where he now had a freedom he never experienced in the early part of his ministry. After the decision made by the Roman judge at Corinth, Paul had access to every Roman city to preach the gospel, and he could have gone on proclaiming Christ in liberty. But now his presence in Jerusalem makes him subject to attack and awakens the possibility of this riot.

Notice the palpably false charge thrown against him. It is purely circumstantial, cooked up out of false evidence. He is charged with being anti-Judaistic, i.e., against the religion of Judaism. And further, they invent the accusation that he has defiled the temple by bringing Gentiles into it.

Some years ago an archaeologist exploring the ruins of Jerusalem dug up the actual copper plaque which had been affixed to the wall that divided the court of the Gentiles from the inner temple courts available only to Jews. It stated, both in Greek and Hebrew, that any Gentile daring to set foot beyond this wall was subject immediately to the penalty of death.

So the Jews were incensed at the very idea of any violation of the temple. And, since they had seen Paul with a Greek in the streets of Jerusalem, they reasoned, "Well, if Paul would walk down the street with a Gentile, he would also take him into the temple." That was enough to result in an immediate explosion, as we will see:

Then all the city was aroused, and the people ran together; they seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. And as they were trying to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. He at once took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them; and when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the tribune came up and arrested him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd shouted one thing, some another; and as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd; for the mob of the people followed, crying, "Away with him!" {Acts 21:30-36 RSV}

It is obvious that Luke is an eyewitness to this stirring and colorful scene. There is probably no description in the New Testament more dramatic than this one right here.

A couple of years ago, I stood in Jerusalem on the site of the Roman fortress of Antonia, overlooking the

temple courts. Looking down into that arena, I tried to reproduce in my imagination the vivid, colorful, tumultuous scene, as this whole area, packed with Jews gathered for the great day of the feast, had been churned into turmoil when they were aroused and enraged by the accusation that Paul had brought Greeks into the sacred temple courts.

They seized him and began to beat him with their fists and kick him with their feet, trying to knock him down so they could stamp the life out of him. They were prevented only by the intervention of the Roman guards. The sentries on the wall, seeing the tumult, sent word to their commander, the Roman tribune whose name, Claudius Lysias, is given a little later in Acts. Evidently the governor was in Caesarea, the capital, down on the coast, and Claudius Lysias was in charge of Jerusalem. When the word came, he immediately took centurions, who were captains of hundreds, and gathered soldiers, evidently two or three hundred of them, and charged down into this crowd.

They shouldered their way through the enraged mob, surrounded the apostle, and picked him up and carried him out on their shoulders. The crowd was so enraged that they battled the soldiers all the way and even this large force could rescue the apostle only with the greatest difficulty. The Romans to the rescue! What a tremendous scene this was! Paul was never nearer to death than at this point. The mob had actually begun to beat him to death. But next we get an amazing account which shows the courage of this great apostle.

He makes a bold request of the centurion:

As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, "May I say something to you?" And he said, "Do you know Greek? Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?" Paul replied, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city; I beg you, let me speak to the people." And when he had given him leave, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people; and when there was a great hush, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, saying: {Acts 21:37-40 RSV}

How remarkable that Paul would ask leave to speak to this enraged mob which had just been ready to tear him limb from limb! I am sure that if I had been in his shoes I would have been trying to get out of there as fast as possible, quite content to let the mob go. But Paul recognizes this as his opportunity. He has come to Jerusalem determined to speak to his nation. Out of the urgency of his love for them he wants to be the instrument to reach this stubborn crowd. So he seizes the only opportunity he has, hoping the Lord will give him success.

The tribune is very startled when Paul addresses him in Greek, because this rough Roman officer thought he knew who Paul was. He thought he was that Egyptian who, according to Josephus, a year or so earlier had led a band of desperate men out to the Mount of Olives, promising them that he had the power to cause the walls of Jerusalem to fall down at his command. Of course he was unable to deliver on his promise, and the Romans had made short work of the rebels, killing most of them, but the Egyptian leader had escaped.

But when this tribune heard the cultured accents of Greece he knew that Paul was no Assassin. (The rebels were called that because they had concealed daggers in their cloaks, and as they mingled among the people they would strike without warning, killing people at random in cold blood. They were utter terrorists, trying to strike terror into the Jewish populace and thus to overthrow the Roman government.) And so, impressed by something about the apostle, the tribune lets him speak to this crowd. Amazingly, when Paul indicates with his hand that he wants to speak, a great hush falls.

Now we have Paul's defense, in Chapter 22. We get the introduction in the first five verses:

"Brethren and fathers, hear the defense which I now make before you."

And when they heard that he addressed them in the Hebrew language, they were the more quiet. And he said:

"I am a Jew, born at Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of

Gamaliel, educated according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as you all are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brethren, and I journeyed to Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished." {Acts 22:1-5 RSV}

Everything in this paragraph is cleverly yet earnestly designed to win a hearing for what the apostle has to say. He reminds them that he himself is a Jew. He speaks to them in their own language. Aramaic, a dialect of Hebrew, is spoken throughout the city. He says he was born in the fine university city of Tarsus, and brings in the honored name of Gamaliel, his great teacher. Gamaliel, who had died only a year or two before, was one of five Jewish rabbis regarded as the greatest of all time. His nickname was "The Beauty of the Law," so highly was he honored by these Jews because of his insight and understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul is trying to impress them that he was tutored at the feet of this godly man, in order to make them listen.

He reminds them that he, too, was as filled with zeal as they, and he even commends them for the zeal they are manifesting. Even though it was mistaken, nevertheless it was sincere. He says "I know just how you feel. I felt that way too when I persecuted this band of Christians that you call 'the Way.'" He tells them that the whole Sanhedrin can bear witness that he was genuinely, sincerely, honestly zealous against the Christian cause, breathing out threatenings and slaughter.

He goes on from there to tell them the simple story of his conversion:

"As I made my journey and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' And I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.' Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me. And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.' And when I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus." {Acts 22:6-11 RSV}

The apostle makes no attempt to preach to these people but instead falls back upon what is basically the most powerful form of witness -- simple testimony to what happened to him. That is very solid ground.

Whenever you give your witness, your testimony of what Jesus Christ has done for you and of how he has changed your life, you are the world's greatest authority on that subject.

So Paul could speak with absolutely unassailable logic and conviction. He simply recounts the story, doing his best to lay hold of the hearts of these stubborn Jews. He tells them that despite his hostility to Christianity he was converted against his will. This is the testimony of a hostile witness, which, in a court of law carries greater weight than any other kind.

We will not go through the details again, having examined them earlier in Acts. But what an arresting effect the story must have had upon this crowd, which had never before heard it from his own lips! Then he recites his commission as an apostle:

"And one Ananias, a devout men according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing by me said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.'" {Acts 22:12-13a RSV}

I have always been impressed with the courage of Ananias. How would you like to be sent to Public Enemy Number One, to the head of the Mafia, to welcome him, put your arms about him, and call him "brother"? Paul goes on,

"And in that very hour I received my sight and saw him. And he said, 'The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Just One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'" {Acts 22:13b-16 RSV}

Notice how the details of this event are etched into the memory of the apostle. Though it occurred thirty years before, he has never forgotten a single detail. He recalls it all as vividly as if it had happened yesterday. This was the moment he was chosen to be an apostle, and Ananias conveyed the commission to him. It had three parts, three aspects of ministry, as Paul clearly details.

First, he was chosen to know the will of God, and from that he obtained the power by which he was to minister. You see, Paul was sent out as a pattern Christian. That is what apostles are. They are not special people living at a high level of spiritual life, to which none of us can ever expect to attain. They live at the very level we are to live on.

The first thing that Paul was taught was to know the will of God. Now, that was not where God wanted him to go, or what God wanted him to do. What Paul had to learn was that the will of God is a relationship to his Son. When Paul understood that, he had all the power he needed to do anything God asked him to do. That is the will of God.

I find that so many young Christians struggle at this point. They think that the will of God is some kind of itinerary they must discover, that if they can just find where God wants them to go, and what he wants them to do next, then they can do the will of God. No. The Scriptures make clear that the will of God is a relationship. It is your attitude of expectancy that Jesus Christ, living in you, will work through you. When you expect him to do that, you are in the will of God. Everything you do is in the will of God. Do anything you like, then, because it will be in God's will, unless the Holy Spirit within you indicates otherwise, according to his Word. That is what Paul learned -- the power by which a Christian lives his life.

Then, on that basis, he was to see the Just One, the Lord Jesus. Paul looks back and says, "This is what made me an apostle. I have seen Jesus Christ many times. He has appeared to me, and talked to me. He told me, directly and personally, the things that the other apostles learned when they were with him as disciples. That is how I know them." And, motivated by the love of Jesus Christ and an awareness of the majesty of his Person, Paul pushed on ceaselessly, out into the far regions of earth, performing his apostolic ministry.

Finally, Paul was to hear a voice from the Lord's mouth. That was his message -- to declare what Jesus Christ had said to him. It was the same message Jesus had given to the twelve, in the days of his flesh. That is how they knew that Paul was a true apostle -- because he knew what they knew. And that constitutes the same message that God has for all of us today -- the words of his mouth, which Jesus had given to the Apostle Paul.

In the next section Paul recites a very strange thing. It is the confrontation he had with Jesus in Jerusalem:

"When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him saying to me, 'Make haste and get quickly out of Jerusalem, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' And I said, 'Lord, they themselves know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in thee. And when the blood of Stephen thy witness was shed, I also was standing by and approving, and keeping the garments of those who killed him.' And he said to me, 'Depart; for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'" {Acts 22:17-21 RSV}

It is strange that Paul should include this episode in his account on this occasion. Perhaps he is trying to explain why he ultimately went to the Gentiles. But in a sense he is testifying against himself here. He is recounting an episode which had occurred some twenty-seven years earlier when, three years after his conversion, he came back to Jerusalem to be the self-styled apostle to Israel and to preach to this nation about Jesus Christ. Convinced that he was equipped with all it took to reach Israel with the gospel, he nevertheless had found it necessary to be let down over the city wall at Damascus in a basket. Discouraged by that, he still thought he would get somewhere in Jerusalem. He came there to preach to Israel, but even the Christians

would not receive him. The apostles would have nothing to do with him.

Brokenhearted, he came into the temple to pray. There the Lord Jesus met him and said, "Get out of Jerusalem. Make haste, get out! They will not accept your testimony!" The strange thing is that, twenty-seven years later, here he is in Jerusalem again, and Jesus is saying the very same thing to him: "Get out! They will not accept your testimony. You should not have gone up to Jerusalem." Though Paul had been warned through the Spirit, he had tried anyway, and now he has come to exactly the same place. One word about going to the Gentiles and the place explodes, blows up in his face:

Up to this word they listened to him; then they lifted up their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he ought not to live." And as they cried out and waved their garments and threw dust into the air, the tribune commanded him to be brought into the barracks, and ordered him to be examined by scourging, to find out why they shouted thus against him. {Acts 22:22-24 RSV}

This poor tribune has not understood a word that Paul has said to these people, because he has spoken in Aramaic. And when the place all of a sudden erupts he does not know what to make of it. So he thinks, "We'll get the truth out of him -- we'll scourge it out of him!" This was a brutal and bloody process of beating a man on the bare back with leather thongs in which were imbedded pieces of metal and bone. It would have torn Paul's back to a bloody pulp. That was the cruel method the Romans used.

But we are told here what it was that offended these Jews. The point of pride which Paul had touched was the idea, the very idea, that God would even consider going to the Gentiles and bringing them into the same blessings the Jews had enjoyed. Their rejection of this notion was complete. But what a twisting and distorting of the divine program that represented! The nation Israel had been called of God to be the vehicle by which the nations should be reached. And instead of obeying that call they had selfishly gathered it all to themselves and said, "God has chosen us; therefore we must be a superior people. He doesn't have any interest in the rest of the world. Let all the Gentiles go to hell; we're the people of God, the chosen instruments of God! And we don't like anybody who suggests that God is going to save those dirty dogs, the Gentiles, on the same basis that he does us Jews!" When Paul told them that the Lord Jesus had sent him to the Gentiles, their pride boiled up and the crowd exploded and threatened him again.

This was the rankest form of racial prejudice, on a par with the worst of the hatred of whites for blacks in our country today. But what strikes me as I read this account is how closely it parallels much of the evangelical isolationism which the church has been going through, as well. To a great degree we have done the same thing. We have felt that God is not interested in the world, that he wants only us, that we are the favored people of God. We have gathered our robes of self-righteousness about ourselves and drawn into our Christian ghettos and said, "Let the world go to hell! We are going to enjoy God's favor and blessing." And we have resisted the chance to reach out to the lost, fragmented humanity around us. But God always judges that. He is judging it in our day. He judges this self-righteous pride which says, "We are especially favored," which refuses to recognize that we are nothing but guilty sinners like anybody else, and are just enjoying the grace of God. That grace is as much available to anybody, anywhere, as it is to us. We have the responsibility to share it!

Well, the last section shows the protection God provided for his apostle:

But when they had tied him up with the thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman citizen, and uncondemned?" When the centurion heard that, he went to the tribune and said to him, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen." So the tribune came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" And he said, "Yes." The tribune answered, "I bought this citizenship for a large sum." Paul said, "But I was born a citizen." [A bit of one-upsmanship here.] So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him instantly; and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him. {Acts 22:25-29 RSV}

The law of Rome said explicitly that no Roman was to be bound without due process of law. Furthermore,

they were not to be beaten under any circumstances, even if convicted. The penalty for doing so was death. So this tribune knew he was in trouble. He was very frightened when he learned that Paul was a citizen and realized that he had both bound Paul and was on the very verge of beating him with the terrible, bloody scourge.

Here God used the state to protect his apostle. The state, also, is the instrument of God, and we must remember that. The powers that be are ordained of God, and God uses them -- as he did in this case to preserve the life of Paul.

As we review this account I cannot help but think of the phrase Paul uses in his second letter to the Corinthians: "struck down, but not destroyed," {2 Cor 4:9b RSV}. God will sometimes let us stumble, in our folly, into disasters from which we must suffer and must reap results which will haunt us, sometimes, for days and weeks and months and years. But he never abandons us. He never leaves us all alone. He finds a way to work it all out and he brings us back.

In our next study we will see how graciously the Lord Jesus restores his mighty apostle. Though he must remain a prisoner of Caesar, in the hands of the Roman authorities, nevertheless he will be permitted to carry on his great ministry in power and blessing, with renewed influence throughout the Roman Empire. God never abandons his people!

Prayer:

Our Father, we are so grateful for this reminder that when, in our unutterable folly, we sometimes stumble into things we know we ought not to do, you never abandon us either. You are there to strengthen us and to find a way to bring us back, to restore us and straighten us out, and to make us walk with you again. We rejoice in that. Thank you, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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