

Acts

Part 54 – “Captive for Christ”

Acts 21:27-36

Luke devotes a substantial amount of space to Paul's imprisonment (21:27-26:32 and, indeed, to the end of the book if one counts the entire episode of Paul's imprisonment). In fact, he gives more space to Paul's Roman captivity than he does to the apostle's missionary journeys – six of 28 chapters. That amounts to more than one-fifth of the total narrative of Acts.



The Importance of the Narrative of Paul's imprisonment:

1. It establishes as a major theme of the rest of the book of Acts the hard-heartedness of the Jews, their determination not to believe in Christ no matter what. They had no case and still they came after Paul, willing to invent testimony to see him destroyed. This may be intended to be a further justification of the Gentile mission and of Paul's eventual dismissal of work among the Jews. It certainly confirms the picture Jesus painted in his preaching and the justice of that judgment that would befall them in A.D. 70.
2. It demonstrates the power of the Christian witness to Christ and his resurrection. "These things were not done in a corner," Paul will tell Festus and Agrippa in 26:26. Paul is tried again and again but no one is able successfully to attack his basic premise, that Christ is risen and is gathering his people from all nations. In that sense Acts ends where it begins, with unbelievers unable to quell the flood of new converts.
3. It offers instruction concerning God's providence coming to the assistance of Paul and the gospel, a great encouragement to those who find themselves in the thick of the battle.
4. It casts Paul in the role of a witness for Christ and the gospel and demonstrates the character and nature of that witness.

Vs.29 – Jews from Asia were almost certainly from Ephesus. They may well have been some of the same who had raised a near riot in Ephesus against Paul. What is more they apparently recognized Trophimus. The accusation was that Paul was undermining, if not positively attacking, the great symbols of Jewish national solidarity: the race of the Jews, the law, and the temple. The charge is ironic, given that Paul was at that time undergoing purification precisely so that he would not defile the temple!

Vs.32 – The Roman garrison was stationed at the NW corner of the temple area and was connected by two flights of steps to the Court of the Gentiles. The garrison in Jerusalem was a "cohort," consisting normally of 760 infantry and 240 cavalry and commanded by a Tribune. In this case the Tribune acted promptly forcing the crowd to fall back and stop their beating of Paul.

Vs. 33 – Paul was arrested as the cause of the trouble and chained, so fulfilling Agabus' prophecy in 21:11.

Vs. 36 – The same cry they had made regarding Jesus, some twenty-seven years or so before (Luke 23:18).

Paul's Dilemma

The Apostle had been urged (told?) by James and the elders of the Jerusalem church to quell the rumors against him by going through ritual purification at the temple and to join with (and pay for) four of the brothers in taking a Nazarite vow. Scholars are divided over the propriety of Paul's decision to go through with the instruction. Was it an acceptable accommodation or did it represent a compromise of the gospel? Whatever the case, Paul was motivated by a passion for

1) the salvation of his fellow Jews and 2) the unity of the church. Paul's dilemma raises questions about how far we should go in seeking to advance the gospel. Where must we be inflexible and where may we bend. It is the dilemma that all Christians seeking to win the lost to Christ will face regularly.

The Accusations Against Paul

There were two accusations that came from the mob against Paul. The first was that Paul was leading "everyone everywhere" to abandon the Law of Moses and the temple. Second, Paul was accused of defiling the temple by bringing Gentiles into the inner precincts. Both charges were entirely scurrilous. There is also an irony to the entire event given that Paul was going to great lengths, even risking his own message to appease the demands of the Jews. It was they, not Paul, who defiled the temple by their dishonesty and violence.

The Intervention of the Civil Authorities

On the northwest corner of the temple was a Roman fortress which gave the authorities a clear view of and quick access to the temple in case of trouble. In this case at least 200 infantry and cavalry were able to forcefully end the mob action against Paul.

1. What we learn from the Jerusalem mob:

a) Slander is essentially an act of violence.

The physical violence of the mob is merely an outworking of the essential nature of slander.

b) Slander is essentially dishonest.

Slander is the shaping of information for the purpose of doing harm. Slanderers gladly makes use of falsehood in order to pursue what they believe to be their righteous cause.

c) Slanderers are rarely appeased.

Paul's experience is axiomatic of all efforts to appease slanderers.

2. What we learn from Paul:

a) Paul never expected faithfulness to Jesus to be a shield against suffering.

From his experience as a former persecutor of the church Paul knew that suffering accompanied faithfulness to Christ in a sinful world. It is interesting to note that Luke's narrative of Paul's experience in Jerusalem closely parallels that of both Jesus and Stephen.

b) Paul understood the place of suffering in his life.

From prison Paul will write: "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (**Philippians 3:8-11**).

c) Paul entrusted himself to the providence of God.

Paul was perfectly willing to accept the intervention of the Roman authorities as God's kind providence working for his safety from the mob. Paul was no fool. He did not believe that suffering in and of itself was spiritual. If suffering could be avoided without compromising the gospel then Paul was happy to do that. In the event described in chapter 21 for instance, Paul takes advantage of his citizenship in Rome to avoid unnecessary suffering.