

“PAUL IN CHAINS AGAIN.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Texts for the Sermon: Acts 21:27-39

Introduction.

How many of us hold the general belief that if we are devoted to God, if we are faithful and obedient to His Word, if we seek to live good and upright lives and do good to others, then our lives will be generally easy and pleasant, that it will go well for us?

If we just accept Jesus into our hearts, and love Him and obey Him and order our lives accordingly to His will, then all will be well, He makes everything come up roses.

So what are we to make of it when the opposite happens?

Paul did the purification rite requested by James and the elders to appease the Jews, he paid for four haircuts. It was meant to be an act of good will, to smooth the waters. He does the right thing, the best thing, what God wants him to do. And it all blows up.

I still remember so clearly 50 years ago this week, I had just surrendered my life to Jesus, I was on cloud nine, and a conflict with another Christian burst my naïve bubble and rattled my new faith.

God will not have us be naïve. Scripture again and again dispossesses us of any notion that being a Christian is the path to easy street.

From this point on through the final six chapters of Acts covering a period of a few years Paul will be in chains or prison, without trial or bail. He is going to be shuffled from one legal authority to another without due process or justice. There are no more miraculous escapes.

Why does Luke devote such a huge part of Acts to the trials of Paul? For the same reason he devoted so many chapters of his Gospel to the trials of Jesus.

Luke wants Theophilus and the Christian community to know Jesus was innocent and Paul was innocent. He is establishing the legality and legitimacy of the Christian faith. All accusations of crimes against the state and against humanity and against religion are false.

Luke devotes so much space to this chapter of Church history to prepare the church going forward for the troubles and trials that will certainly come, and to know that those troubles and trials are not because of something wrong with Christianity or the Gospel.

The providence of God had prepared Paul for what he was to suffer, he was willing to die in Jerusalem. And this Word to us this morning is the providence of God preparing us for whatever is in store for us. When the trouble comes, we can be confident in the sovereignty of

God over it. I think when the Roe v. Wade decision is handed down by the Supreme Court Christians should be ready for whatever might come. Our text today is God's providence preparing us.

Paul seized and laid hold of in the Temple by certain men from Asia.

These are not Jerusalem Jews, but Jews of the dispersion, Jews scattered about the regions where Paul's missionary journeys have taken him, Jews in those synagogues where Paul preached and was thrown out.

Notice they don't go to the authorities, the high priests and Pharisees, rather they incite a mob, which is much easier to do. Emotions are much easier to stir up than reason. Those most against Christianity are those governed by hate rather than reason.

There is nothing new here, there have always been those who are hostile to Christianity.

Why is that? Is it because Christianity is false, a lie, a grand deception? No, it is because Christianity is true. They hate the truth and are opposed to it. Darkness hates the light, falsehood hates truth.

Do people get up in arms about the flat earth society people or form mobs against it? No, it's all a lie, it attracts no attention. It possesses no threat to our worldview.

“Christianity shows its greatness when it is hated by the world” (St. Ignatius of Antioch).

What happens to Paul teaches us that we must not be surprised, but even prepared, for when our best and noblest of intentions don't have the favorable and successful outcomes we planned or expected.

I saw two or three incidents of this very thing just in our time in Bloomington, Indiana. A pastor doing something good, treated rudely. A pastor's daughter doing a good thing treated unfairly.

May we know that our actions are pleasing to God and have no regrets for doing the right thing, and leave the results to God. If we are just and we are treated unjustly, we are in good company with Jesus.

These Jews bring false charges and accusations against Paul, a half-truth and a lie.

They start by breaking a rule that I give to couples during pre-marital counseling on how to fight fair. Never say never or always, as in you never do this and you always do that. Never and always are always not true. Don't make sweeping, universal statements of accusation. This man is teaching everyone everywhere. Actually it is a nice compliment about how far reaching Paul's influence has been.

First, they charge him as a heretic, promoting false teaching against our holy people, our holy law and our holy place.

He says Jews and Gentiles are equal before God, and neither circumcision or uncircumcision is anything. The Gospel was the fulfillment of the Law.

Second, they charge him with a most serious violation of temple law, a crime punishable by immediate death. They jump to the false accusation that Paul had brought an uncircumcised Greek into the temple thus polluting the temple.

It starts with some people who passionately hate Paul and what he teaches. Their hatred is personal. Then stir into this misinformation, mixed with lies and slander. People who are already predisposed to be against someone are going to be quick to believe anything negative or false, that fits their preconceived categories.

Look at the power and danger of the tongue. False charges, false accusations driven by preconceived opinions are brought against an innocent man, and many are quick to believe it.

Two take aways here.

First, it happened to Jesus, it happened to the apostles, don't be surprised when this happens to us, to Christians. In today's cultural climate we will be labeled, slandered, mischaracterized, misrepresented. Plan on it and prepare for how you will respond.

The **second** take away, is don't be eager to believe the worst about someone, especially someone you are already bent to not like. We must be very careful with our words, our responses, our labeling others. How quickly do we believe lies especially when they fit our preconceived notions?

Don't come to make judgments about others based on suppositions. Here is a practical rule for Christians, when someone says something derogatory about another person, forget it, don't spread, don't repeat, don't believe it. Don't let Satan get a hook in us and destroy relationships.

Don't let your emotions and passions and opinions and prejudices get a hold of you and cause you to come to quick, unfair, unjust, uninformed judgments about others.

Let's apply this principle to what we think or say about politicians, government leaders, celebrities, athletes, etc.

Let us do unto others as we would want done to us.

The sovereign protection of God as Paul is rescued from the hand of the enemy.

In the midst of suffering and persecution we are reminded that God is always present, ruling and over ruling all things. In Paul's closest brush with death God is present.

The Roman tribune over the cohort, a military unit of 600 soldiers takes a couple of centurions and their two hundred men and stops the beating of Paul. The mob had no fear of God, but they feared the Romans, knowing what they were doing was wrong.

The profound goodness of God reaches down and delivers Paul and saves his life through the means of the Roman military.

When bad things seem to be happening, we should be greatly encouraged when we see the hand of God present, when we see His grace.

I have seen again and again the hand of God in the midst of the most unpleasant of circumstances.

God often lets us be afflicted or experience some great difficulty, even to the point of being overwhelmed, so that He can then work some miracle, some great grace, and we see it and He is glorified.

God has power and resources for every need and circumstance. He calls up two hundred soldiers at the drop of hat. Jesus could have called down a legion of a thousand angels to His defense. And we know that God owns the resources of cattle scattered on a thousand hills (Psalm 50:10). The earth is the Lord's and the fullness of it.

We have available to us the riches of His storehouses in glory. If He will not spare His Son for us, then will He not graciously give us all things. Such is our God.

The actions of the tribune, giving Paul permission to speak.

First to the tribune, then to the crowd.

What a reversal of events, from lynching to preaching.

Notice again the providence of God preparing the way. First to be delivered by Roman soldiers, but also the providence of God having Paul born a Roman citizen in Tarsus in Cilicia, perhaps the most important city in the Roman Empire after Rome, being born and raised when and where he was, learning to speak Greek. Imagine a conversation with his Jewish mother, "Why are you making me learn Greek?" "Son, just listen to me and obey, it will be useful one day, you will see."

How aware are you of God's hand on your life, when and where you were born, what family you have, what education you have, what experiences you have, how God has and is molding and fashioning all of that for His purposes, for His glory, for your place in His redemptive purposes here on earth? Don't discount or discredit or despise anything.

Paul has been beaten to the point he had to be rescued from the mob by hundreds of soldiers. He had to be physically carried by the soldiers. He is bloodied, bruised, broken, near death.

And he has one passion, to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and defend it from accusations and lies.

Pastor John Van Hemert. Everywhere, with everyone, in every opportunity he shared Christ. And yes to the embarrassment of his children over and over. Jesus was his passion.

Our dear friend Jack Dabney's wife, Susannah, was the same way. She had a contagious joy, and infectious faith. Every chance she could she would ask someone, "Have you heard the good news?" And who is there that doesn't respond, "No, what?" Jesus loves you.

Have you heard the good news? Do you believe it? Are you thankful for it? Has it made all the difference in your life? Would you be willing to step out in faith and share it with someone? Why do we hoard such a great treasure?

Lessons from Paul.

Western civilization is increasingly coming to a crossroads. In countries where previously the Gospel bore considerable positive influence, the tide is changing. Culture wars are gaining strength and boldness, becoming more hostile and hate filled. There is a real possibility if *Roe v. Wade* is overturned, things could become totally unhinged, mobs attacking churches.

In the culture wars, as darkness rails against light, they will always chose death over life, Barabbas over Jesus, the way of death over the way of life.

To take a stand for the Gospel and for Christianity, for truth and light, will call for greater courage, calmness and confidence in the providence of God.

Courage.

Do you think Paul was a man naturally endowed with courage, bravery, fearlessness?

Paul confessed to the Corinthians he came to them in weakness and much trembling (I Cor 2:3).

As many have said, courage is not the absence of fear, but the conquering of fear with the knowledge of something more important. Paul overcame his fear by a greater love for Jesus and the Gospel. He could die to himself for Christ's sake, because Christ died for him.

Calmness.

What enables someone to be a non-anxious presence in a tense, stressful, violent situation?

Paul had the absolute assurance that God is sovereign, God is in control, and that he is in His hands. If it was God's will that Paul perish in Jerusalem, then so be it. If it pleases God, it pleases him.

Paul believed what he preached.

Romans 8:38-39 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The fear of death had no power or hold over Paul, no bondage. To live is Christ and to die is gain.

If we are confident in the Word and that God will fulfill his promises to bless those who are persecuted we will rejoice and patiently endure.

Confidence.

Is suffering and persecution and martyrdom a result of sharing the Gospel, or are they part of God's design, purpose, strategy for spreading the Gospel?

It is an obvious fact that suffering and persecution and even martyrdom are a result of following Jesus and spreading the Gospel. Jesus said, you will be hated because of me, and if they persecuted me they will persecute you. So yes suffering will result from being a Christian.

But that's not the whole of it, there is something more significant and serious to consider.

Suffering is part of God's strategy, part of His purpose design. God intentionally means for suffering to be His method and means of spreading the truth of the Gospel.

“Suffering and martyrdom have to be seen as part of God's plan; they are His instruments by which He achieves His purposes in history and by which He will accomplish His final purpose with man” (Josef Tson).

This is both frightening and encouraging. It is frightening because I don't want to suffer, I am adverse to suffering, I want comfort and ease and no trouble or stress or pain.

But we can be encouraged, or take courage, that this is God's perfect and good purpose and plan and He is sovereign over it and our suffering is never in vain.

Jesus is our proof. He didn't come to earth to save us and then end up suffering and dying in the process. No, He specifically and intentionally came to earth to give His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Suffering and death was His very means and method of accomplishing our salvation.

Suffering and persecution and even martyrdom have always been part of God's plan and they still are.

John 16:33 In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.

He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.

In the light of this truth and with Paul as our example, may we have greater courage, calmness, and confidence in whatever God calls us to endure for His glory and for the spread of His Gospel.