

Acts 21:37-22:22 No. 46**“Tell the Truth”****September 25, 2016****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

As we left Paul last time, he had been beaten by a Jewish mob in the Temple’s outer court and then put in protective custody by the Roman tribune.

Text Comment

- v.38 Greek was the language of Egypt at this time, so the question that begins v. 38 might well be translated, “So, you must be the Egyptian...” Some three years before this, according to Josephus, an Egyptian appeared in Jerusalem claiming to be a prophet. He gathered a following – Josephus says 30,000 followers, but he frequently exaggerated numbers of that kind; the 4,000 is surely the more accurate estimate. This Egyptian promised that if they marched on Jerusalem the city walls would fall at his command and the Roman garrison would be overthrown. The Roman governor, unimpressed, sent a detachment of soldiers to deal with what he took to be an insurrection, killed four hundred, took some two hundred prisoners and the Egyptian himself wisely disappeared. The tribune now suspected that Paul might be this man, having returned to the scene of his crime.
- v.39 Paul’s response was that he was a Jew, a Roman citizen with legal rights, and hailed from Tarsus, not Egypt. That was enough for the tribune. He is presented here as a fair-minded man who was quick to change his opinions when he learned the facts.
- v.40 Addressing the crowd in Aramaic was an effective way to command their attention. [Bruce, 439] Many diaspora Jews – that is to say, Jews who lived outside of the Holy Land – could not speak Aramaic or Hebrew (variations of the same language, though Hebrew, was already disappearing as a spoken language). Philo of Alexandria, for example, could not read the books of Moses – on which he wrote vast commentaries – in their original Hebrew. Paul would have known all three languages: Hebrew and Aramaic – anyone who knew the one would have already some working knowledge of the other – and Greek.
- v.1 Notice Paul’s polite address, “Brothers and fathers.” He is respectful of his audience – men who had been beating him moments before – because he wants to gain a hearing.
- v.2 Hearing Paul speak in Aramaic quieted the crowd even more than the intervention of the army had. This man was more a Palestinian Jew than they had thought! [Peterson, 596]
- v.3 This is the only place where we learn that, while Paul was from Tarsus, *he was raised in Jerusalem*. He studied under Gamaliel, perhaps the most honored rabbi and eminent teacher of the day, the head of the rabbinic school of Hillel, whose disciple Gamaliel had been. That he was taught and lived according to “the strict manner of the law of our fathers” identified him as a member of the Pharisaic party. Remember, the accusation of

the mob was that Paul was undermining Jewish identity. He began his defense by emphasizing his credentials as a Jew. He was, in effect, saying, “I’m as Jewish as they come!” You remember that Paul, on another occasion, referred to himself as “a Hebrew of the Hebrews.”

- v.4 As this verse suggests and as Paul’s remark in 26:10 confirms, Stephen was not the only martyr to have lost his life at the instigation of Saul of Tarsus. The history we have in Acts is hardly exhaustive.
- v.5 The members of the Sanhedrin themselves could confirm the truth of what Paul was saying. He wasn’t asking them to believe his story on the strength of his word alone. The testimony of witnesses will be a feature of Paul’s defense throughout the chapters that follow. But he was also saying that he had moved in the highest circles of Jewish officialdom and was, perhaps, a member of the Sanhedrin himself. He was, as we would say today, “Connected.”
- v.11 Details are given here that are only suggested in the account of Paul’s conversion in chapter 9. Just as his companions heard a sound but were unable to distinguish the voice that spoke to Paul, so only Paul was blinded by the light. The other men were able to see and so lead Paul into the city.
- v.12 Ananias was likewise a devout Jew and was known to be so by the Jewish community in Damascus.
- v.14 “God of our Fathers” identified the God of Paul’s account with Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the words “the righteous one” identified Jesus as the Messiah.
- v.18 Only here do we learn about this subsequent vision. That it was given to Paul while he was praying in the temple, the very temple whose sanctity he had been accused of violating, may explain in part why it is mentioned here. History was repeating itself. Paul was endangered in Jerusalem once before and for the same reason, his new commitment to Jesus. We might well have thought Paul would leave this out – not wanting to offend his audience – but it provides the opportunity to report what he said to the Lord in return, a remark that further underlined his Jewish credentials.
- v.21 His ministry to the Gentiles was his special calling from God. The verb “I will send” is a form of the word from which we get “apostle.”
- v.22 Paul’s defense was cut short before he was able to say anything about the specific accusations made against him, namely that he had defiled the temple by bringing Gentiles into it. But that charge wasn’t the real issue, as the crowd’s reaction makes clear.

No one understood better than Paul that the Jewish resistance to his mission, to the ministry that he was conducting in the eastern Mediterranean world resulted from his willingness to embrace

Gentiles as Gentiles as the people of God once they had believed in Jesus. The problem was two-fold. *First*, there were many Jews who were adamantly unwilling to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah and the Savior of sinners as the Christians claimed. *Second*, there were even more Jews offended by the very idea that one could become a member of the covenant community, the people of God, without becoming a Jew. What, therefore, is made very clear in the verses we just read is that Paul did not design his defense with a view to getting himself safely out of danger.

His defense was certainly designed to demonstrate that “his mission [was] deeply rooted in the world of Judaism and [was] unquestionably the will of God.” [Peterson, 595] Just as the prophets of old, Paul had received a calling directly from Yahweh, had been given his marching orders and his message, and had faithfully fulfilled that calling. He was doing what God had told him to do, as every Jew would understand a Jew’s duty. It hadn’t been his idea, indeed far from it. He had been an enemy of the Christians until his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. Everyone knew that or could easily confirm it. Everyone in Damascus knew Ananias and could confirm easily enough the truth of the story if they wished to do so.

But Paul’s calling was to bear witness to Christ and to Christ’s being the Savior of the world, to the *whole* world – Jews and Gentiles alike. And there were two things that he, therefore, could not avoid saying, even though he knew very well how unwilling his audience was to hear them. *First*, Jesus was the Messiah. No one listening to Paul that day could have missed the obvious implications of what he was saying. 1) Jesus was the righteous one, the Messiah; therefore, 2) the Jews had committed a terrible sin in putting him to death. 3) He had, *in fact*, risen from the dead, as any Jerusalem Jew would have known the Christians had claimed for the last thirty years or so. *Second*, 1) it was the will of Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that Paul should be his apostle, just like it was God’s will that Isaiah or Jeremiah should be his prophet. And 2) it was thus God’s will that the Gentiles be called to faith in God in the way that Paul was calling them, *as Gentiles*.

It is surprising in a way, but so true to human nature, that they heard the first point without raising their voices – although those claims implicated them all as unbelievers and rebels against God – but only the last one created the uproar: that the Gentiles were welcome in the church of God *as Gentiles*. How often has it happened through the ages that people can listen, even attentively, to the most stupendous news – that God himself has entered the world to atone for the sins of mankind – without disturbance or outcry, but let someone tell them that God requires them to humble themselves before others, or that Christian faith requires them to acknowledge the claims of others, or that God isn’t nearly as interested in their sense of privilege as they are, and they get their backs up and will hear nothing more. One would think that if the gospel message were true, one would be prepared to believe and to accept any and every one of its implications, no matter how difficult or painful, but it is not so. In our small-mindedness and our foolishness, we can ignore altogether the great thing God has done and zero in with a laser-like focus on our petty self-interest. I know people who lost any interest in considering the Christian faith because it would have required them to be faithful to a marriage they wanted to leave, to begin to spend their time or money in a different way, or to acknowledge a wrong they had done, as if eternal life was not worth the aggravation or humiliation. So it was in Jerusalem that day. Paul had an amazing story to tell, but it was all forgotten when he mentioned the Gentiles and

the crowd remembered why they had been angry in the first place. He wasn't going to bring *those people* in here!

Paul, of course, knew that his story – however true, however impressive, however easily confirmed by eyewitnesses – was not what the crowd wanted to hear; but it was the truth, it explained why he was in Jerusalem with these Gentile men, and it was the calling to which he had been summoned by the Lord himself. He wasn't free to tell some other story. He was a witness and he was bearing witness. Like Stephen before him, he told the truth even knowing full well that the truth was very likely to get him into still deeper trouble.

The term Paul used in v. 1, “defense,” the Greek word ἀπολογία, from which we get *apologetics*, the defense of the faith, was a technical term widely used in the New Testament and, as a defense often if not usually does still today, involved witnesses and their testimony. Paul invokes a number of such witnesses here in making his defense. Some would be hostile witnesses, such as the Sanhedrin, the high priest and the elders, or perhaps the Jews in Damascus; others would be friendly such as Ananias. But the principal witness was, of course, Paul himself. He spoke of what had happened to him, of what he himself knew to be true because they were the events of his own life.

Remember, the Lord Jesus had prepared his disciples for this. In Luke's Gospel, 12:11-12, we read him say:

“...when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should *defend yourself* or what *you should say*, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what *you ought to say*.”

That is, Christ's disciples will be called to speak in the defense of their faith. And in chapter 21 of the Gospel, again we read:

“...they will lay their hands on you and persecute you [Paul's situation precisely], delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. [That had happened to Paul and was soon again to happen to him.] *This will be your opportunity to bear witness.*”

And, of course, the Lord told his disciples, just before his departure for heaven, that they would be his witnesses throughout the world. That is what it means for a follower of Christ to give a defense: to bear witness to what you know to be true about him. And this is what Paul did and what Christians have been doing ever since.

Now Paul began with his own dramatic, unprecedented experience. None of us, of course, has ever experienced anything remotely like what happened to Paul when Christ encountered him on the road to Damascus. So it is easy enough for us to think that we haven't anything to say. What story can we tell that's going to arrest anybody's attention, that's going to place Christ and his Gospel in a favorable light? It is easy for us to think, “Well, if I had a story like Paul's I'd shout it from the rooftops too!”

True enough, there are a lot of other wonderful stories of men and women coming to faith in Christ that make for an impressive argument for the Christian faith. I have heard many, I have read many more throughout my life. So many of them have been written down for others to read precisely because they make such an impressive argument for the Christian faith. Many of us have read the account of Augustine's conversion, told so memorably in his *Confessions*, a few years ago voted in a poll the greatest Christian book of all time. We know about the garden and the children playing on the other side of the garden wall and the verse at the end of Romans 13 that first met his eye when he opened his copy of the Bible. We have read the story of John Bunyan's conversion three times: once in *Pilgrim's Progress*, an account of his life told in the form of an allegory, again in *Holy War*, the same life told in the form of still another allegory, and finally in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, Bunyan's literal spiritual autobiography. We have read of John Newton's conversion, the former slave trader arrested by God in a great storm at sea and his embrace of the gospel taught him as a child by his mother but forgotten for years. Of course we have read *Surprised by Joy*, the conversion story of C.S. Lewis, as only a great thinker and writer like Lewis could tell it. Or the conversion of Simone Weil, the French intellectual, in her book *Waiting for God*. Or Charles Colson's conversion, President Nixon's former "hatchet man," so well told in his book, *Born Again*. There are so many more of those books that you have read or ought to read. But those are only the famous ones. There are many just as interesting, and in some ways just as compelling and convincing as those, but not nearly so well known.

Some of us have read the riveting story of our friend Marc Mailloux' conversion, which he tells beautifully in his book, *Discovery on the Katmandu Trail*. An American hippie, seeking the meaning of life, traveling to Asia as so many western young people did in the nineteen sixties and seventies, using drugs both to seek enlightenment and to fund his travels, but who, utterly to his surprise, encountered Christ on a dock on the banks of the Ganges River in Benares, India. Or we have read of the conversion of Ravi Zacharias, a sixteen year old Indian boy who had tried to commit suicide, and found the Lord in a Delhi hospital, to become in time a world renowned defender of the Christian faith. Or we have read the story of Christopher Parkening's conversion, at the time one of if not the greatest classical guitarist in the world. And I could go on and on.

Even here in the church, of a Sunday morning, we have heard from their own mouths the conversion stories of any number of people, from Ross Douthat, the New York Times columnist, to Eric Mataxas, the author and radio personality, to Frank Brock, the college president, to Ron Bergey, another American hippie who encountered Christ in a commune and ended up a professor of the Bible in France.

And, of course, some of you have remarkable stories to tell of you own encounter with Christ. And you ought to tell your story to others as a way of bearing witness to the Lord, as a way of giving a defense of your faith. From the beginning this is what Christians have done. "Come and let me tell you what the Lord has done for me!" Paul was only the first of a long line of Christians who would do what he did.

But what if your story isn't so remarkable. What if you grew up in a Christian home and don't even know for sure when you crossed over from death to life? That is *my* story. What if, though

becoming a Christian as an adult, you still aren't entirely sure precisely when you did, because the change seemed gradual rather than sudden or dramatic. Well most Christians are in your situation. From church fathers – Origen or Chrysostom – to Great Awakening figures like Jonathan Edwards, to the great missionaries – David Livingstone or William Carey – these men had no riveting conversion story to tell, nothing remotely like Paul on the Damascus Road.

But you have met Christ, every Christian has. You have come to know things about the Lord Jesus. You know what a difference he has made in your life. Remember, that is what a witness is: someone who has personal knowledge that he or she can relate. And every Christian has that! Every Christian knows the truth about God, about man, about sin, about salvation, and about Jesus Christ, the key to it all. And that is the point. Paul was not interested in telling the crowd about himself. He wanted to tell them about Christ and what Christ had done for him and what Christ was doing in the world.

My point is that you have both the opportunity and the means to do what Paul did on this occasion, to defend, to bear witness to your faith. Let me give you an example, what I have always thought is perhaps the best possible example of what I am talking about this morning because it relates so naturally to the text that we have read. It concerns Hugh Latimer, one of the principal figures of the Reformation in England. Latimer, like Paul, would eventually pay the supreme price for his loyalty to Jesus Christ and the gospel. He would, like Paul, defend himself and his convictions before church and state. His martyrdom remains one of the defining events of English speaking Christianity.

But, also like Paul, Latimer began his religious life as an enemy of the evangelical faith. When a student at Cambridge in the earliest days of the Reformation, he was an outspoken critic of the new teaching coming from Martin Luther in Germany, and not only a critic, an active persecutor of those who embraced the biblical gospel. His story, in striking ways, is similar to that of the apostle Paul. A former persecutor of the church, he became one of its greatest champions. Like Paul, Hugh Latimer, made no bones about his past. He admitted that, while a young man at Cambridge in the early years of the 16th century, he was as obstinate an enemy of the Reformation as could be found in the land. In fact, he thought that the Reformers were proof that the coming of the Antichrist was at hand. Indeed, when he gave an address on the occasion of the granting of his degree, it was a diatribe against Philip Melancthon, Luther's protégé and colleague. He urged fellow students not to attend the lectures of the few believing men then teaching in the university. His zeal for the corrupt and spiritually dead church of medieval Europe was such that he was honored for it in the University. [cf. J.C. Ryle, *Five English Reformers*, 95]

But one of Latimer's fellow students at Cambridge was a man by the name of Thomas Bilney. Bilney too would eventually be put to death for his faith, one of the earliest martyrs of the English church. But Bilney didn't have Paul's dramatic conversion story. He had become a believer, had embraced the evangelical gospel simply by reading some of Luther's works that were making their way to England and by reading the Bible. He'd become a believer, he'd embraced the evangelical gospel simply by hearing it and realizing it was true. He saw in Latimer a zealous man but one who simply didn't know what he was talking about. But how to get to him? How to make him sit down and listen. After Latimer's public blast against the

Melanchthon and the Reformation, Bilney hit on an idea. He went to Latimer and asked if he might make confession to him. Both men were young priests. Latimer was overjoyed and perfectly willing because he knew that Bilney was one of the heretics and assumed that he wanted to confess the error of his ways and return to the fold.

But what Bilney told him was the anguish in his soul that his own efforts had been powerless to remove, the inability of the church to help him, and the peace that he found when he believed that Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He described to Latimer the sense of sonship he had received and the privilege he now found in calling God his Father. Latimer, who expected to hear a confession, listened to all of this without suspicion, much as the crowd had quieted when Paul had addressed them in Aramaic.

But as Bilney continued, new thoughts began to form in Latimer's mind, thoughts he had never thought before. He would later say, "I learned more by that confession than in many years before. From that time forward I began to smell the word of God." Like Paul he had become a believer *for real* and immediately realized what great wrong he had done against the Lord and his Word, but Bilney consoled him. "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow." Two young college graduates, the one bearing witness, the other being convinced. How many times has that happened!

I say, you and I can do that. Whatever our story, remarkable or ordinary, however we were converted, dramatically or with little or no suspense or fanfare, we can tell others what Christ has done for us.

Paul knew very well that he wasn't going to persuade most of the people listening to him. Could Lysias, the tribune, even understand Aramaic?

But was there someone who heard Paul that day and went home from the temple thinking new thoughts about Jesus of Nazareth, beginning "to smell" the Word of God – whether a Jew or a Roman soldier – and were there several from that crowd who found their way the following Sabbath day to an assembly of Christians, now followers of Jesus Christ or hoping to be? I suspect there were, don't you? The Lord's word is powerful and at that time it was regularly exercising a powerful effect on people.

Tell the truth you know; God will do the rest according to his will.