

Acts 21:27-36, No. 45
“Through Many Dangers, Toils, and Snares”
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I suspect there are a few of you who recognize my sermon title but are trying hard to remember where you have seen or heard that phrase before. Well keep at it for another week or two and I'm sure it will come to you. Paul is now in Jerusalem having brought representatives of his Gentile churches to meet the mother church. But, remember, before he arrived prophecies had been made that arrest and imprisonment awaited him in the capital. So far things have been peaceful, but that is about to change. Many sermons concentrate on faith – either what to believe or how to believe – or ethics – our duty to God and man. But some sermons, such as this one, reflecting the text under consideration, describe a biblical worldview, the Christian understanding of the world, of history, and the history of the kingdom of God.

Text Comment

v.29 The Jews from Asia, probably from Ephesus itself, would, of course, have known about Paul's ministry from his three eventful years there. That they were from Ephesus is further suggested by the fact that they recognized Trophimus who was from Ephesus. The accusation of these Jews was that Paul was undermining, if not positively attacking the primary components of Jewish national identity: 1) the privileged position of the Jews as the people of God, 2) the Law of Moses, and 3) the temple. The first of those presumably refers to the Christian understanding, shared by Jews and Gentiles alike, that Gentiles did not have to become Jews to belong to the people of God. In other words, Paul was undermining the favored place of the Jews as God's chosen people. If Gentiles could likewise be God's people and there were many more Gentiles in the world than Jews, well, the handwriting was on the wall. The latter two charges had also been made against Jesus and Stephen, but both resulted from a serious misunderstanding of what those men had taught. It is at least possible that these Jews had followed Paul from Ephesus on purpose with a view to counteracting his influence. If so, that is further evidence of how influential Paul had been among the Jews in Ephesus. [Peterson, 589]

The charge that Paul was violating the sanctity of the temple was ironic because at that very moment, when the Jews from Asia noticed Paul in the temple, he was undergoing a week-long ritual of purification precisely so that he would *not* defile the temple!
 [Marshall, 347]

The temple area was at that time divided into several concentric rectangular courts. The Gentiles were allowed in the outermost court, which was even called The Court of the Gentiles. They were not allowed in the next court, the Court of the Women, protected by a low barrier that fronted the stairs leading up to the inner precincts of the temple. On that wall were inscriptions that threatened death to violators of the court's sanctity, two of which inscriptions have been uncovered by archaeologists. The Court of Israel, immediately in front of the altar that stood before the doors of the sanctuary itself, could be entered only by male Jews. The Romans were, at this time, prepared to allow Jews to

execute violators of the sanctity of these respective courts since not to do so would only further provoke the Jews and they were anxious to promote tranquility in what was the most turbulent province in the empire.

The idea that Trophimus would have wandered into the forbidden precincts of the temple was absurd. It derives from the willingness of these men to believe the worst about those they regarded as their spiritual enemies. As one commentator put it, that would have been as likely as some tourist “wandering” into the private spaces of the Kremlin. Luke charitably acknowledges that the charge was not a deliberate lie, but a misunderstanding. [Marshall, 348]

- v.30 That is they dragged Paul out into the Court of the Gentiles, the other courts were too close to the sanctuary to be a place for a beating. That the gates were shut behind them is another eyewitness touch, since Luke does not explain why this was done.
- v.32 Josephus tells us that the Roman garrison in Jerusalem was stationed at the northwest corner of the temple area in the Antonia Fortress and was connected by two flights of stairs to the Court of the Gentiles. In other words, they hadn't far to come. The garrison in Jerusalem was a cohort, normally consisting of 760 infantry and 240 cavalry soldiers, a thousand men commanded by a *tribunus militum* (the equivalent of a Major or Colonel). This man, wisely it turns out, acted promptly and forcefully, bringing down a force of soldiers under their junior officers, forcing the crowd to retreat and saving Paul from death. We happen to know the commander's name: Claudius Lysias (23:26).
- v.33 Paul's arrest by the Romans and his being handcuffed fulfilled the prophecy of Agabus which we read in 21:11.
- v.36 “Away with him,” mimics the cry of the mob that clamored for the death of Jesus nearly thirty years before (Luke 23:18). We noted in a previous sermon that Luke seemed to be drawing our attention to the parallel between Jesus and Paul in that both made a long, fateful, and final trip to Jerusalem even though they knew that arrest and danger awaited them there. Well here too is a clear parallel: both were assailed by a mob of Jews crying for their death, indeed, using the same words in each case.

It is perhaps part of Luke's purpose here to contrast Jewish hostility with Roman justice. The Jewish mob wanted to kill Paul and left alone would have done so; the Romans took him into protective custody until a hearing could be conducted. Remember Luke is writing to a Roman world and anything Luke could do to commend the Roman state served the interests of the Christian faith in that world. The Christians, far from enemies of the state, were grateful for it.

To appreciate the significance of what we just read, let me remind you that, so far as the book of Acts is concerned, at the point of his arrest by the Roman commander, Paul's freedom to travel and continue his ministry was brought to an end. He was in custody somewhere – Jerusalem, Caesarea, or Rome – until the end of the book. As the book ends in chapter 28, Paul is under house arrest in Rome, still a prisoner in other words. So, with this paragraph we just read we

enter the final section of the book of Acts. And before we take up that section paragraph by paragraph, it seemed to me important that we consider it as a whole; prepare ourselves, in other words, for what we will read in the succeeding Lord's Day mornings.

It is very interesting and certainly important that the book of Acts ends as it does. The final seven and a half chapters of the book, fully a quarter of its material, is devoted to the time Paul was a prisoner, from the time he was arrested in Jerusalem to the time he landed in Rome still a prisoner of the Roman state. Certainly we might have expected a different ending. The gospel has been advancing triumphantly wherever it has gone. In some respects then the book ends with a sigh. Or, at least, we might have expected that the more than two years covered by the last seven chapters would have been given a more summary narrative. After all, Paul's upwards of two years in Corinth receive some 17 verses and Paul's three years of tremendously successful ministry in Ephesus took Luke just 41 verses to describe. These last seven and a half chapters, covering some two years, amount to 240 verses.

Of course, Luke is reporting what happened and, to some degree, events determined his narrative. However the amount of space devoted to this two year period of Paul's life indicates that Luke thought it very important to tell the story in some detail. During the course of the next five chapters Luke will describe five episodes in which Paul defended himself before tribunals, first before Jews and then before the Roman state. He will make a defense before the crowd in the temple area in chapter 22, before the Sanhedrin in chapter 23, before the Roman governors Felix and Festus in Caesarea in chapters 24 and 25 and before King Herod Agrippa II in chapter 26. Luke gives us not only an account of these hearings or trials, but gives us an extensive report of what Paul *said* on each occasion. Indeed, it is Paul's voice that we hear primarily in the next large section of the book.

So the question is forced upon an inquiring mind. What made this material so important to Luke? Why did he devote such a substantial portion of his book to this two year period of Paul's life and work? [Stott, 335] If we are fully to appreciate Luke's message, we need to be alert to his interests as a historian and a theologian.

There are perhaps many reasons that might be mentioned to account for Luke's having slowed his narrative down to a crawl to pay so much attention to the two years of Paul's imprisonment, but two of them stand out as more obvious than others. And together they form an important part of a Christian philosophy of history. You and I need to understand the world in which we live and why things happen as they do. Luke will give us that understanding.

I. First, Luke is clearly interested in the place of both Jews and Gentiles in the kingdom of God. And he seems to regard this history as a turning point, a crisis, a climax. In particular what we have here is the final rejection of the gospel by the Jewish people as a whole. In a very important sense, the ancient people of God here cease to be the people of God.

We live so long after the first century that it is hard to appreciate how consequential the Gentile mission was in the history of salvation. Up to this point in world history, virtually all of the people of God had been Jews. The relationship between salvation (eternal life) and the Jewish people was coterminous. Not every Jew was saved, but virtually everyone who was saved was a

Jew. Since that had been true for two-thousand years, it is not at all hard to understand why the Gentile mission was hard for Jews to swallow. They were happy enough for Gentiles to become Jews, but for Gentiles to become the people of God *without becoming Jews* was the same thing as Jews being pushed to the back of the salvation bus. After so long being in that privileged position they were not about to give it up without a fight. And, in fact, the Jew-Gentile problem in first century Christianity leaves its mark everywhere in the New Testament, as indeed it has on world history ever since.

The fact is that by the end of the first century, some forty years after these events in Jerusalem, the Christian church was overwhelmingly a Gentile community. There continued to be Christian Jews, of course, but their relative numbers continued to decline steeply as evangelism won increasing numbers of Gentiles to the Christian faith. The first surviving body of Christian literature written subsequent to the New Testament, is a motley collection of books typically known as the *Apostolic Fathers* – books such as the Didache, the Letter of Clement to the Church in Rome, the Letters of Ignatius, the Martyrdom of Polycarp, and so on – and every one is written by a Gentile. There is no surviving significant piece of Christian literature in early Christianity written by a Jew, though all the books of the New Testament, save Luke's two volumes, were written by Jews. How quickly things changed! The specter of its Jewish past still in some ways both inspired and haunted the church, she knew that her origins lay in Israel, but she moved on into history largely without the Jews.

The handwriting was already on the wall in Paul's ministry. He always began in the synagogue, and won converts there in virtually every place, but soon the Jewish opposition would surface, grow more violent, the flow of Jewish converts would dry up, and Paul would leave the synagogue and concentrate on the Gentiles in the town or city and win from them many more converts. Luke has given us several accounts of just such a pattern in Paul's ministry. And it didn't take long for any observer to realize that the number of Gentile Christians was fast outstripping the number of Jews. As the years of the first century passed and as the Gentile mission began to build up a head of steam – remember, the apostles leading that Gentile mission were all Jews! – Jewish hostility increased both to the Christian message and to Christians themselves. Remember, any Jew would know that the Christians – Jews and Gentiles alike – were claiming the Jews' Bible as *their* Bible, Yahweh as *their* God, Abraham as *their* spiritual father, and *their* faith as the true faith of Israel! *That had to sting!* And all the more as the movement grew by leaps and bounds in the very places where there were Jews to observe its growth. They who had played first violin so long were now reduced to playing second fiddle. This had everything to do with Jewish attitudes toward Christianity. The New Testament makes no bones that the Jewish response to the gospel had so much to do with jealousy.

The Jews had rejected Jesus whom the Christians proclaimed not only as the Messiah, but as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob himself. And now they rejected Jesus' followers. They had two opportunities to make their peace with the work and the message of Jesus Christ and they squandered them both. *And this seems to be a prominent theme of these last chapters of Acts.* In fact, the Book of Acts ends on this note in its final verses. What we get here is the New Testament's last gasp of the Jewish identity of the church of God. And what we see is an apostate people willingly and with determination turning their back on God. If you are a Christian that is what you must see in this history, for Jesus was the living God – the God of

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and his apostles were the servants of God, as the prophets of Israel had been. The Jews had placed themselves on the wrong side of salvation history!

Jesus, of course, had prophesied this very outcome when he predicted, just a few days before his crucifixion, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple as divine judgment for Jewish unbelief, an event that was only some ten years in the future when Paul was arrested in Jerusalem. It may be, as Paul prophesies in Romans 11, that the Jewish branches of the tree of salvation will be grafted back in at the end of the age, but first they had to be cut off the tree, and Luke is making a point of the fact that it was the Jews themselves who did the cutting. This is the significance of Luke's quoting their words, "Away with him!" in v. 36. *They were doing to Paul what they had done to Jesus.* They had years to watch the fledgling group enjoy explosive growth. They knew what miracles the apostles had performed, like Jesus before them. They knew what the Christians were preaching. They saw the Gentiles coming to the faith, in so many ways *their faith*, in large numbers. But all of this only increased their animosity and their bitterness. *No evidence, no matter how impressive, was going to change their minds.*

Such is the hardness of the human heart in sin. Such is the fate of people who have so long rejected the summons of the Lord that they have passed the point of no return. They were incensed by the rumor that the sanctity of the temple had been violated, a rumor that was untrue and which they didn't bother to confirm. But they were impervious to the warnings that had been given them of their sinful pride and unbelief, warnings the ancient prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus, and his apostles had repeated times without number, and in that pride they were oblivious to the fact that in a few years' time the hand of God's judgment would fall upon them and there would no longer be a temple or any need to protect its sanctity. It is no accident that Acts begins in Jerusalem but ends in Rome. [Stott, 336] *The gospel has moved on, leaving one people behind as it embraced another!*

The first two of Paul's defenses would be made to Jewish groups and they would seal Judaism's fate. A final offer of salvation would be made, a final appeal, and it would be rejected, not once, but twice. This is, of course, an immensely important moment in the history of salvation, but it is also the revelation of a paradigm. What happened to the Jews has happened to generations of the church ever since. This view of the Jews is not anti-Semitism; *it is everywhere and always the way of the kingdom of God in the world.* How is it possible that Christianity in Europe – once the spiritual home, the Jerusalem of world Christianity – should now have almost entirely disappeared? Well, Christians turned their back on the Lord and his messengers, like the Jews before them, generations refused to heed the warnings of God's Word, and God, in turn, turned his back on them. *That is the story of the kingdom of God in this world* and it continues to be the story in our day. Is the same thing happening in the United States? It appears to be. What do you suppose will later be seen to have marked the effective end of American Christianity as Paul's arrest in Jerusalem marked the effective end of Jewish Christianity, no matter that there were still a sizeable number of Christians among the Jews in Jerusalem? Don't suppose this has little or nothing to do with you. *Whether your children or grandchildren will get to heaven is what we are talking about.* The more determined the church becomes to rid itself of the gospel of Jesus Christ the fewer Christians and the fewer Christian influences in the culture there will be.

So it was with the Jews. A superficial relationship with God, a relationship based on checking the box and filling the square in hopes of reward, an indifference to divine judgment, had replaced the deep personal relationship described in the Word of God, a relationship founded upon a guilty sinner's utter dependence upon the grace of God in Jesus Christ, a relationship expressed in humble and grateful service to God, especially in the love of others, loving others as we have been loved in defiance of our sin and ill desert, such a love for God and for others that becomes the controlling purpose of one's life. The Jews had once had such an understanding of their faith but had long since lost it, as generations of the church after them would lose it, never to get it back.

Perhaps you had to live in the first century and see this happen before your very eyes to understand how appallingly easy it is for the church utterly to lose its way, completely to forget who and what God is, to grow comfortable with its sin and pride, and to forget why it was necessary for the Son of God to come into the world and die on a cross. Here is the church rejecting its Lord and doing so without a twinge of conscience. But, then, we can see the same thing happening before our eyes today almost everywhere we look. One thing you can be sure of: there are only some American *Christians*, comparatively few, who actually think God would be so offended by the spiritual rebellion of his people that he would destroy Jerusalem and her temple and leave the dead and dying scattered among the rubble. But that is what God said he would do and that is what he did just ten years later. There was no fear of God in Israel in A.D. 60 as there is precious little such fear among American Christians today.

The Jews of the first century are the Bible's great example of the church having utterly lost its faith, so completely that it detests the message it once embraced and bitterly resents those who remind them of it. "Away with him!" Can you imagine ever saying those words yourself of someone preaching what Paul preached! I hope not. But then a great many so-called Christians who never thought they would say such words either said them or raised children who said them. Here is a summons to take your faith seriously, to cultivate it, to preserve it, and to take great care to pass it on to your children, and all the more in a day like ours, so like the first century in this most fundamental respect, the day of a church losing its way for want of living faith in Christ.

II. The second of Luke's great interests in his account of Paul's two years of imprisonment is the defense of the faith.

A great deal of what follows in the final seven chapters of Acts is a report of Paul's defense of the faith before both Jewish and Roman tribunals. In fact, some of the most important material for Christian apologetics, that is for the defense of the Christian faith, is found in the arguments that Paul offers in his own defense, which defense he turned into an argument for the Christian faith itself.

He will on several occasions give an account of his own conversion on the road to Damascus – in other words, bear witness to his own encounter with Christ. But he will talk about the events of the gospel history as well, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus especially, to which events there were many eyewitnesses, a point Paul will make more than once. "These things were not done in a corner," he will tell King Herod Agrippa (26:26).

We are going to hear a highly intelligent man – one of the most intelligent men who ever lived, a towering intellect, a man who perhaps as much as any other human being has shaped the thinking of the human race – who was once himself an enemy of this new movement, even an avid persecutor of the Christians, explain why he became a follower of Jesus Christ and a powerful advocate of Christ’s message. It is an electrifying story and Paul tells it again and again, and so instructing us in the way of Christian witness and evangelism. “Come and let me tell you what the Lord has done for me.”

But we are also going to listen in as he *argues* for that faith as historical, theological, and spiritual *truth*. Paul’s arguments then are very much our arguments still today. We have no need, we have never had any need to apologize for our faith. We may have had need far too often to apologize for Christians, but never for the Christian faith. Still today, the reason why it continues to command attention, why it continues to gain adherents in every land, indeed why it is surging forward in Africa, Asia, and South America – no matter the sometimes vicious opposition to it in those lands – is because it so powerfully commends itself to people *as true*. The arguments for it – arguments of every kind: personal, historical, theological, philosophical, ethical – are persuasive, intellectually satisfying, and of immense practical power, sufficient Paul will say to leave men without excuse if they will not believe.

Arguments for other philosophies of life have their day; they sound convincing for a time until they are exposed and lose their power to persuade. Arguments for the Christian faith today are what they have always been and are convincing new generations of believers as they always have.

Many will refuse to become Christians because they do not want to be Christians, they do not want to surrender their lives to God, they do not want to live a Christian life, they do not want to admit their need of Christ and his redemption, they do not want to humble themselves before God and others. They don’t want to admit that they were so completely wrong about so much. Such were the reasons the Jews would not believe. But no one ever refused to become a Christian because the evidence for the Christian faith was inadequate. That is both the teaching of the Bible and the experience of the Christian faith in the world.

So we have in these final chapters of Acts a people turning its back on a message being embraced by untold thousands of others, a message supported by an argument that one of the most brilliant men of that time or any time made with absolute confidence. And that, my friends, is the story of our world. The truth supported by convincing proofs being rejected by people who ought to believe it but will not believe, the evidence be damned, while, at the same time, it is embraced by joyful multitudes who, humanly speaking, should never have believed it but embraced it in ever increasing numbers. So it was, so it is, and so it will be until Christ comes again and puts an end to the profound nonsense of human unbelief, an unbelief that resides not first in the intellect but in man’s proud, selfish, and rebellious heart. *The story of our world!*