

Arrest In Jerusalem

Memory Text: “But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.’” (Acts 23:11)

Setting The Stage: Nearly fifty years ago, Bangladesh was facing a health crisis. Contamination of water sources throughout the country were causing an incredibly high rate of child mortality, with more than a quarter-million children dying each year from waterborne infectious diseases. As a solution, international charity organizations launched a massive humanitarian effort to bring cleaner water to the country, installing roughly 10 million hand-pumped wells that brought up water from deep underground.

It wasn't until more than 20 years later that scientists discovered how that well-intentioned plan had backfired. Though the underground water was free from the bacterial contamination of surface sources, it was tainted instead with arsenic, the toxic chemical that can cause skin abrasions, cancer, and other diseases. A survey by the World Health Organization (WHO) found that as many as 77 million people—half the population of Bangladesh—were drinking water with levels of arsenic higher than the recommended safe limit. The WHO characterized the situation as “the largest mass poisoning of a population in history.”

Good intentions with bad results. In this week's lesson we learn that the leaders of the early church in Jerusalem also had good intentions, but the results were devastating to the Christian cause.

Sunday – Meeting The Jerusalem Leaders

Acts 21:15-24; Colossians 3:11; Galatians 5:6

Acts 21:15-17. Paul had desired to arrive in Jerusalem in time for the Passover with the hope of winning his countrymen to the gospel, and to present the gifts sent by the Gentile churches to the struggling church in Judea. It was also his desire to bring a tighter union between the Jewish and Gentile converts to Christianity (more on that in a moment). But learning about a plot on his life he took a different course, delaying his arrival in Jerusalem. With Paul were several representatives from the giving Gentile churches (Acts 20:4), brought as a token of the work the Holy Spirit was doing among the Gentiles.

Acts 21:18-21. When Paul described in detail the things God had done among the Gentiles, the leaders in Jerusalem rejoiced and praised the Lord for His marvelous works. But what they said to Paul after he reported his missionary endeavors is

troubling. Why a sudden change in topic, including a sudden change in disposition toward Paul, especially after it was obvious what God was doing among the Gentiles?

Several years had passed since the Jerusalem Council where representatives from the churches gave careful consideration to questions concerning the work among the Gentiles. At the end of the council it was agreed to recommend a plan that would promote unity in the new church. At the same council everyone was unified in commending to the Christian churches Paul and Barnabas.

But prior prejudices toward the Gentiles and Paul's method of labor among the Gentiles were kindled anew in the hearts of some of the leading men in Jerusalem. And at this time they still cherished those feelings, and felt that Paul was largely responsible for the existing prejudice among some Jewish converts. But the rumors weren't true.

Colossians 3:10, 11: "And have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all."

Galatians 5:6: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love." (cp. Gal. 6:15)

Instead of coming to Paul's defense, they sought to reach a compromise by counseling Paul to take a certain course of action they believed would remove all concerns.

Acts 21:22-24. To show that the rumors circulating about him were wrong, Paul was asked to do something very Jewish: sponsor the Nazarite vow of some Jewish believers. Paul was advised to be politically correct. Because of his desire to be in harmony with his brethren, his sensitivities toward those weak in the faith, his deference toward the apostles who had been with Jesus, and his desire to become all things to all people so far as he could without compromising principle, Paul followed the counsel, but the results were disastrous.

We don't blame Paul. Other before him had made mistakes as well. We think of Abraham, Moses, Elijah, and others. Don't we make mistakes as well? What made Paul's actions especially troubling was that they contradicted his own teaching and practice. In accepting the legalistic motive behind the recommendation he thereby promoted two gospels—one for Gentiles and another for the Jews—faith and works.

"Instead of accomplishing the desired object, his efforts for conciliation precipitated the crises, hastened his predicted sufferings, and resulted in his being separated from the church, depriving the church of one of its strongest pillars, and brining sorrow to

Christian hearts in every land." (Acts of the Apostles, pp. 405, 406) Good intentions with bad results.

In our attempt to be relevant, how can we be careful not to make a similar kind of error? It's always best to not to bend over backwards to please people. It may be in your heart, it may be your disposition, or it may seem easier to take the path of least resistance, but you always need to keep your head on our shoulders, stay steady, send up a prayer, and take time to consider if a proposed course of action would contradict or undermine your faith.

Monday – Riot In The Temple

Acts 21:26-36; Proverbs 16:28; 21:23; 26:20; Exodus 23:1

Acts 21:26-36. Having accepted the church leaders' suggestion, Paul would need to undergo a seven-day ritual purification to assist the completion of the men's vows (Num. 19:11-13). Also, anyone coming from a Gentile land was not to enter the temple.

A riot ensued based on a false allegation and rumor. Because Paul had brought with him Trophimus, a believer from Ephesus, it was assumed by the "Jews from Asia" that Paul has brought him into the temple—a crime punishable with death. They stirred up the natural prejudice of the people, and if it hadn't been for the swift actions of the Roman commander, Claudius Lysias, Paul would have been killed.

Regarding the trial of Jesus, the mob got stirred up into a frenzy. It resulted in His death. Today it is so easy to get caught up in believing false reports and get sucked into jumping on the media hype train. People all too easily take sides without getting the facts. Their position is founded on hearsay and rumor. But God's people need to think critically and not succumb to group think. It's important we verify the facts. And we don't have to have an opinion on every single thing that's going on out there either. If you don't know, you don't know. It's okay. We must be careful not to be a promoter of false reports in the church as well by giving ear to rumors.

Proverbs 16:28: "A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates...friends."

Proverbs 21:23: "Whoever guards his mouth and tongue keeps his soul from troubles."

Exodus 23:1: "'You shall not circulate a false report. Do not put your hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness.'"

Proverbs 26:20: "Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases."

Tuesday – Before the Crowd

Acts 21:37-22:29; Romans 5:6-8

Acts 21:37-40. Even though the crowd clamored for Paul's death, out of genuine love and concern for his fellow Jews he asked the commander for permission to talk to them. After confirming that he was not some Egyptian rebel but instead a Jew from Tarsus, he was given permission to speak.

Acts 22:1-21. Instead of convincing them from a theological standpoint, Paul shared his personal conversion story instead. Why did he choose to do this? He wanted to disarm them, and he did that by letting them know he understood how they felt about "the Way" because he himself once felt the same way, inasmuch that he persecuted them. He wanted them to understand that after such a dramatic encounter on the road to Damascus, what other choice did Paul have but to surrender His life to Christ. What more convincing argument does a Christian have than the ability to share his or her personal experience with Christ?

Acts 22:22-29. The crowd listened up to the point Paul mentioned his calling to share Christ with the Gentiles. That was enough for them to come undone. Prejudice and bigotry ran deep. It still does in some hearts today; and I'm not just referring to racism. The Jews felt the only ones entitled to all the privileges of salvation. It didn't take long for the Jews to erect a barrier preventing the Gentiles from learning about God's plan of salvation. They were viewed as unworthy of receiving this knowledge. They mistakenly believed salvation was of the Jews.

This bigotry—spiritual bigotry—we each need to stay clear of. Thinking we are better because we've been entrusted with the truth leads to barrier building. We determine who becomes worthy of hearing and receiving salvation. But being entrusted with truth should lead us, not to think we are better than others, but to recognize the weight of responsibility that rests on us to share with those who do not know.

If anyone didn't deserve to hear the truth because of the way they behaved, it was the mob. But Paul provides us with an example of how the Jews ought to have treated the Gentiles. Greater than this, he gives us an example of God's grace. Grace is for those who don't deserve it, not for those who think they deserve it. May God help us to exhibit His grace in our lives!

Romans 5:6-8: "For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Wednesday – Before The Sanhedrin

Acts 23:1-10; Matthew 28:18-20; John 16:7; Hebrews 13:5, 6

Acts 23:1-10. The Roman commander didn't see Paul as a threat to society, so he determined to let the Sanhedrin figure it all out.

Paul's statement concerning his "good conscience" was a subtle rebuke to the religious leaders whose consciences had been violated over and over again through the poor choices they had made. For that, Paul was to be struck. However, knowing the law he rebuked the high priest for commanding something contrary to what the law allowed.

The Sanhedrin was made up of both Pharisees and Sadducees who were opposed to each other on a number of issues, doctrine being one of them. A major point of contention existed over the subject of the resurrection. The Sadducees didn't believe in angels, in miracles, and certainly not the resurrection. Paul ingeniously used this subject to disrupt the proceedings. But more than just a tactic, the subject of the resurrected Christ lay at the foundation of his own conversion and the reason he was being judged. Nothing else could explain the change in his life. The resurrection lays at the foundation of our lives also. God is not dead; He is alive!

Later, while reflecting on the trying experiences of the day, Paul was encouraged by the presence of Christ (Acts 23:11). To all those who live for and serve Christ, His abiding presence through the Holy Spirit should be reassurance and comfort as well.

Matthew 28:18-20: "And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' Amen."

John 16:7: "Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you."

Hebrews 13:5, 6: "Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So we may boldly say: 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?'"

Thursday – Transfer To Caesarea

Acts 23:12-30; Isaiah 59:19; 54:17

Acts 23:12-17. Forty men had conspired to kill Paul. They involved the Sanhedrin

in their plan. While the elders and chief priests could have declined the request, they did not see an opportunity to do away with what they considered to be a menace. Providentially, Paul's nephew heard the plot and raced to share it with Paul, who in turn encouraged him to go see Claudius Lysias to relate the band's intentions. Here were religious men thinking they were doing the work of God, but instead were being used of Satan to accomplish his desired end.

Acts 23:23-30. Thinking that Paul's continued presence in Jerusalem might lead to dangerous consequences in the city, even perhaps to his own life, Claudius Lysias decided to transfer Paul from his jurisdiction to that of Felix the procurator. Roman law fully protected its citizens who had the right to a legal trial where they could defend themselves (Act 25:16), and even the right to appeal to the emperor in case of an unfair trial (Acts 25:10, 11). Thus Paul was protected as he was transferred to Felix, lest the band of forty learn of his relocation and seek to do him harm along the way.

Isaiah 59:19: "So shall they fear the name of the Lord from the west, and His glory from the rising of the sun; when the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a standard against him."

Isaiah 54:17: " 'No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment You shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their righteousness is from Me,' says the Lord."