

Paul's Defense Before The Mob in the Temple Courts

Acts 22

Acts 22:1-21: *"Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now."² And when they heard that he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, they kept all the more silent. Then he said:³ "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today.⁴ I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women,⁵ as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished.*

⁶ "Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me.⁷ And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'⁸ So I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.'⁹ "And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me.¹⁰ So I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do.'¹¹ And since I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of those who were with me, I came into Damascus.

¹² "Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there,¹³ came to me; and he stood and said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that same hour I looked up at him.¹⁴ Then he said, 'The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth.'¹⁵ For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.¹⁶ And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.'¹⁷ "Now it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance¹⁸ and saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.'¹⁹ So I said, 'Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You.'²⁰ And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.'²¹ Then He said to me, 'Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.'"

Background Notes

The second half of Acts 21 gave the record of Paul's arrest in the Temple precincts in Jerusalem. Paul was falsely accused of bringing a Gentile beyond the Court of the Gentiles, into the inner courts of the Temple area, and thus defiling the Temple, so the Jewish mob dragged Paul out of the inner courts and was beating him up. In fact, they would have killed him if the Roman military forces hadn't rescued him (Acts 21:31).

Where did these soldiers come from, and how did they come so quickly to Paul's rescue? Some Bibles have diagrams of the 1st century Temple complex. Attached to the northwest corner of the Temple complex was a building called the Antonia Fortress. This was the "barracks" where the Roman soldiers and commanders were quartered (Acts 21:34 & 37). Pilate likely stayed in this building when he was in Jerusalem at the time of our Lord's arrest and trial. In fact, the "stone pavement" where the Lord was tried before Pilate was possibly the ground floor of the Fortress of Antonia (John 19:13). This pavement can be seen today in the excavations of that area of the Temple complex.

A staircase led to the Temple courts from the Antonia Fortress, and that is how the soldiers rescued Paul so quickly. It was on these stairs that Paul asked the Roman military commander if he could speak to the Jewish mob that had just assaulted him.

Until this point, the Roman commander thought that Paul was an Egyptian revolutionary who had returned from his compound in the wilderness. But Paul indicated that he knew Greek and was from Tarsus in Cilicia, a free Roman city that was a center for culture, education, and commerce. So the commander then saw Paul in a different light- and with a different status.

At this point Paul had not shared the fact that he was a Roman citizen, but the military commander gave Paul permission to speak to the mob. So Paul motioned to the people to be quiet as he spoke to them, using the staircase to the Fortress as his elevated platform.

Doctrinal Points

1. Believers are expected to witness faithfully.

When Paul spoke to the Jewish mob that had just beaten him, he used Hebrew - or Aramaic, which is very similar to Hebrew. This was the language of the Jewish people in Israel, and it would definitely have had a favorable effect on the Jews from around the Roman Empire who spoke Greek and a number of languages. Hebrew was the "mother tongue." Using Aramaic would certainly have resulted in a listening audience.

Paul's intention was to use this opportunity, not just to defend himself, but more importantly to witness faithfully for the Lord. Paul took advantage of every opportunity to witness for the Lord - and so should we! We should use tact and logic as much as possible, as Paul did, but it's more important to be a faithful witness.

Notice that Paul started with his own personal testimony. That's always a good technique in witnessing. No one can argue with your own personal experience. In his speech, Paul mentioned a few things about his conversion that are not recorded in Acts 9, such as the fact that he saw the Lord in a trance while he was praying in the Temple, and the Lord communicated to him that he would be sent to the Gentiles (v17-21).

Verse 16 has caused some confusion as to the purpose of baptism. After Paul's conversion, Ananias said to him, *"And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord"* (v16). It seems at first that the Bible is teaching here that Christian baptism will take your sins away, but from the rest of the New Testament we know that this is not so. There are a couple of Greek participles in this verse, and thus a literal translation would be as follows: *"Having arisen [get up], be baptized, and have your sins washed off by calling on the name of the Lord."* In other words, calling on the name of the Lord is how your sins are removed. Baptism is a symbol of your identification with Christ who has washed your sins away.

In his testimony to these unsaved Jewish people, notice that the apostle Paul clearly included the gospel. He left no doubt that even though he was well educated in Judaism, and had been doing what he thought was right, his thinking was wrong. He was not saved until he acknowledged Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and Lord.

We should follow Paul's example of witnessing. Believers are expected to witness faithfully.

2. Believers are not expected to suffer needlessly.

Acts 22:22-30: *"And they listened to him until this word, and then they raised their voices and said, 'Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!'"²³ Then, as they cried out and tore off their clothes and threw dust into the air,²⁴ the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him.*

²⁵ And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, 'Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and un-condemned?'"²⁶ When the centurion heard that, he went and told the commander, saying, 'Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman.'"²⁷ Then the commander came and said to him, 'Tell me, are you a Roman?' He said, 'Yes.'"²⁸ The commander answered, 'With a large sum I obtained this citizenship.'" And Paul said, 'But I was born a citizen.'"²⁹ Then those who were about to examine him immediately withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him.

³⁰ The next day, because he wanted to know for certain why he was accused by the Jews, he released him from his bonds, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down and set him before them."

Up to Paul's mention of the Gentiles (v21), the Jewish mob listened quietly to his testimony - but when he mentioned the Gentiles, they cried out for his death. This reaction reminds us of the mob that cried out for our Lord's crucifixion. At this point, the commander decided that he would cross-question Paul by the torture of a scourging, so he could discover the reason why this man was causing such an uproar. Remember that our Lord suffered a scourging. A Roman scourging was so brutal that it could incapacitate a man for life, or even lead to his death.

As they were binding Paul and stretching him out to be scourged, Paul let it be known that he was a Roman citizen. It was unlawful to scourge - or even to bind - a Roman citizen before he was proved guilty. Scourging Paul would have put this commander in danger of losing his rank, and maybe even his life.

In that day it was a great privilege to be a Roman citizen. Citizenship could be purchased, but that was costly. *“The commander answered, ‘With a large sum I obtained this citizenship’ (v28).* A person could be declared a Roman citizen after performing a valuable service to the Empire. Or a person could be **born** a Roman citizen, and the apostle Paul was a Roman citizen by birth. So Paul was delivered from the scourging because he claimed his rights as a Roman citizen.

Do you see how the doctrinal point applies? Just as Paul used his rights to avoid a scourging, believers should not suffer needlessly. Some Christians have found fault with Paul here. They say that he should have allowed the scourging because Christians are to be persecuted. That’s ridiculous! Yes, 2 Timothy 3:12 says *“all who will live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution”* - so Christians **will** be persecuted. But the Bible never tells us to pray for persecution, or that we should try to be persecuted, or that we should needlessly suffer persecution.

Acts 22 indicates that if the Lord gives you an opportunity to avoid physical persecution without compromising your testimony, you should take that opportunity. Follow the example of the apostle Paul. Believers are not expected to suffer needlessly.

Practical Application

Don’t run ahead of the Lord!

After his conversion, Paul asked the Lord what he should do. *“So I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do’” (v10).* However, the Lord didn’t give Paul a blueprint for his entire life. He just gave Paul the next step in his walk of faith: *“Go into Damascus.”*

Notice that Paul didn’t say, “Wait, Lord - I want to know everything I’ll do further down the road in life!” Paul did not run ahead of the Lord. When he got to Damascus, the Lord revealed to him through Ananias that he would be the Lord’s *“witness to all men, of what you have seen and heard.”* But no further details of his future were given. Further details would come later, in the Lord’s timing.

We, too, have to learn to let the Lord guide us step by step. Don’t run ahead of the Lord!