



Central Peninsula Church

...to make and mature more followers of Christ

Trouble Along the Way

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

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Acts 21:15-22:29

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I've always been the kind of person who easily finds trouble at every corner. I know that's probably surprising news for some of you. Even as a kid I fell on the mischievous side of things, thinking it hilarious to watch my older brother's face as he slipped in between sheets at night only to find a generous lathering of dad's shaving cream there. And despite his many pleadings and stern warnings I continued to do it again and again. I was also a courageous kid, at least in my own mind. When my friends would dare me to jump off a construction sight onto a gravel pit two stories below my response was, "Watch me!" And there I went, flying like Superman and tickled pink to have an opportunity to prove them wrong. Then there were times that I could be pretty stubborn and compulsive, although my wife would say I'm still like that today. Growing up in San Francisco, mom and dad would direct my brother and I away from certain areas of the city. "Don't go to Chinatown," they would say, "too much gang activity there." "Stay away from Downtown where the bums and homeless hang their hats." But the one prohibition that rankled me most was, "Keep away from the Palace of Fine Arts." That was incredible to me! You see, in that day the Palace was yet to be reconstructed into what we have today. It was still condemned, surrounded by tall fences with signs that read in bold letters, "No Trespassing!" Plaster could and would fall from the roofs of the decaying structures at any time. The entire place was overgrown with weeds; infested with garden snakes, snails and duck poop. We always imagined evil groundskeepers lurking within the Palace waiting to chase us kids away from our own private fort. And yet, despite all these concerns and warnings, where do you think I ended up? You see, trouble found me around every corner. Or, perhaps more accurately, I found it!

When we come to Acts chapters 21 and 22 we find the Apostle Paul in similar circumstances. He's in trouble. As much as I appreciate Paul's discernment, his prayer life, his passion for God's word and the Spirit's direction, Paul was *also* a bit compulsive. He was hardheaded at times. This is not to say he was headstrong in the same way I was. But it would be an understatement to say he was merely a man of great conviction. Paul was "driven." And when he set his sights towards Jerusalem, nothing was going to deter him from arriving at that destination, regardless of the many

warnings he had received along the way. Because he had a passion in his heart to reach Israel, because he recognized an opportunity in the gathering of the Jews on the day of Pentecost Paul resolved to go there, prepared not only to be bound but to die for the cause of Christ if that be God's will for him.

Once in Jerusalem Paul received much approval from James and the elders of the church there. They were pleased to accept the generous offering he had brought with him from the Gentile churches. But there were also concerns. A rumor had spread among the Jewish Christians that Paul was teaching against the Law of Moses. Of course, this was false. Paul never taught the Jews to abandon Moses, or to not circumcise their children. What he taught was that Gentiles should not be subject to these Jewish provisions. So when Paul became aware of all this prattle, he could have responded by defending his position. That's probably how I would have reacted. He had been misunderstood! The accusations were so unfair! These people didn't know what they were talking about! But instead, Paul demonstrated his great character by simply listening to and submitting underneath a plan to allay these suspicions. Paul took it upon himself to go into the temple with four young men that had taken a vow to God and underwrite their expenses until they completed the purification rites as prescribed by law.

Now, some would say that Paul was wrong in putting himself back under Jewish law while others say he was just following his own established practices. Personally, I respect the fact that Paul was secure enough in Christ that when he was with the Jews he became as a Jew. Likewise, when he ministered to Gentiles, he became as a Gentile. When he was with the weak he limited himself in order to reach others through their own culture *and* not be a stumbling block to the gospel message. I apply the same principle when teaching at Higher Power. Because that culture is primarily unchurched, I tone down the "Christianeze." I wear jeans and tee shirts, use slang like "Dude" and "Bro." When Pat Portman takes her group of women to Romania they strip off their makeup and jewelry to not offend the cultural sensitivities there. This is not a salvation issue; just smart evangelism. For the same reasons Paul here is participating in these customs, so that whatever rumors to the contrary might be silenced

through his conciliatory actions. And it was during this process, Luke tells us, that the proverbial duck poop hit the fan.

The trouble began when some Jews, in recognizing Paul in the temple, incited a riot against him. This is like a scene out of the "Wild Wild West." These were not the Christian Jews from the Jerusalem church but a group of non-Christian Jews from Asia. They had been seeing their own following dwindle in size as thousands turned to Christ through Paul's ministry. As a result they longed for the opportunity to get rid of him. And now that chance had come, for Paul was on their turf. So they inflamed the worshipping crowd with two trumped up charges. The first was that Paul was anti-Semitic. He was accused of teaching "against our people and our law and this place." The second was that Paul had "brought Greeks into the temple" which, by law, would defile it. Evidently they had earlier seen Trophimus, whom they knew to be a Gentile, with Paul in the city and jumped to the conclusion that Paul had brought him into the temple's inner courts, which were forbidden to Gentiles. Gentiles were allowed into the outer court. But the inner courts were permissible only to Jews. Some years ago an archeologist actually found a copper plaque that had been fixed to the wall dividing the two courts. It warned, "No Gentile shall enter within the partition and barrier surrounding the temple and whoever is caught shall be responsible to himself for his subsequent death." Paul was surely aware of this prohibition and would never have endangered his friend in that way. Besides, he was already showing his respect for the ceremonial laws by participating in the purification rituals. So it makes no sense that he would violate the temple precincts by bringing in a Gentile.

False or not these accusations soon spread like fire. A lynch mob seized Paul. They drug him out of the inner court of the temple by the scruff of his neck and began to beat him to death. No doubt they would have succeeded if God hadn't intervened through the Roman guards who were stationed along the outer wall. Seeing the ruckus these soldiers sent word to their commander, Claudius Lysias, who immediately gathered his centurions and charged down into the crowd to rescue Paul. Once he had Paul in his possession the commander attempted to find out from the crowd who Paul was and what he had done. But the crowds were all shouting one thing and then another. So he concluded that the best thing was to take Paul inside the barracks and interrogate him personally. And as he started to take Paul away the mob followed, shouting, "Away with him! Away with him!"

How difficult, how heart breaking it must have been to face the sting of rejection that sprang from those words. Paul had been accused, abused and now abandoned by the very people he had come to serve. In the first part of Romans 9 we get a sense of what this must

have meant for him. Paul writes, **"I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen, according to the flesh, who are Israelites"** (vv. 2-4a). Paul as a Jew loved his people. He loved their common heritage. He loved the rituals that ultimately pointed towards the One who would fulfill every word of what those ceremonies stood for. And he longed to reach them. Yet his heart was broken when he saw the bitterness and opposition to the cause for which he now stood. Do you think it brought Paul consolation that these very words were also hurled at Jesus at the time of the crucifixion, that in some surreal way he was indeed following in Christ's stead? They didn't mean, "Take him away from the temple area." They meant, "Remove him from the earth." Paul was never closer to death than at this point. His own people's hatred was so fierce that the soldiers had to hoist Paul upon their shoulders as they moved him away from the temple court and into protective custody. Can you imagine? Let's pick up Paul's great response in Acts 21 starting in v. 37.

But "as Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the commander, 'May I say something to you?' And he said, 'Do you know Greek? Then you were not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?' But Paul said, 'I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city; and I beg you, allow me to speak to the people.' And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the stairs, motioned to the people with his hand; and when there was a great hush, he spoke to them in the Hebrew dialect saying, 'Brethren and fathers, hear my defense which I now offer to you.' And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew dialect, they became even more quiet" (21:37-22:2).

What we have here is a case of mistaken identity. The commander thought that Paul was someone else—an Egyptian who, a few years earlier, had led a band of desperadoes to the Mount of Olives, and promised that, when the walls of Jerusalem came tumbling down at his command, they would be able to break into the city and overpower the Romans. Of course he was unable to deliver and the Romans made short work of them. But the Egyptian himself had escaped. When the commander heard the cultured accents of Greece flowing out of Paul's lips he knew that Paul was no assassin. So the Jews believed Paul to be a blasphemous teacher. The Romans thought he was an Egyptian terrorist. How confusing it must have been! But despite the ridiculous allegations Paul responded calmly and asked the commander if he could speak to the crowd that was still calling for his death. When he received permission Paul addressed the crowd in their own language. By using Aramaic and calling them "brethren

and fathers,” he was identifying with the people. This is so important! For here is the first door that has to be opened in ministering to those who are in opposition. We have to ask ourselves—how can I speak their language? I’ve already mentioned that when I talk to ex-cons and recovering addicts my style of language is different from how I am speaking today. The message is the same but the way in which it can best be heard is the guiding principle. By using their native language the crowds became a little more receptive to what Paul had to say.

As he continued in his efforts to win a hearing among them, Paul then gave his BC, or Before Conversion, credentials. **“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia,”** he told them, **“but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God, just as you all are today. And I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished”** (22:3-5).

Paul is stressing his Jewish heritage and his training under the highly respected Gamaliel, one of five Jewish rabbis regarded as the greatest of all time. He wanted to gain credibility by telling them of his common zeal for the law and shared animosity of Christians. Paul is basically saying, “Hey, I’m one of you! We share the same history.” And this is the second door that must be opened. We should never forget where we came from. And Paul, here, is in one sense, wearing his shame as a badge of honor for the benefit of his hearers. Now I’m not saying that his training and passion for God was without value. Every spiritual advantage before the coming of Christ was with the Jews and Paul acknowledged that openly. But later in his epistle to the Philippians, where Paul is once again citing his credentials, he says that he considers all of them as “rubbish” (literally food scraps or dung) so that he might gain Christ. No amount of self-effort mattered any longer for the surpassing value of knowing Christ had put it to shame. I can relate to what he’s saying and certainly appreciate what he’s doing. And though my own history is different from Paul’s, who best can identify with a particular culture than someone who has “been there, done that” *and* is not ashamed to admit it. God uses our BC credentials to effectively connect with those who are still in bondage. This, I believe, is Paul’s point, one that paves the way for sharing his salvation experience.

“And it came about that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ And I answered, ‘Who art Thou, Lord?’ And He said to me, ‘I

am Jesus the Nazarene, who you are persecuting.’ And those who were with me beheld the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me. And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Arise and go on into Damascus; and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.’ But since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus. And a certain, Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very time I looked up at him. And he said, ‘The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will, and to see the Righteous One, and to hear an utterance from His mouth. For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you delay? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name’” (22:6-16).

Notice that Paul is making no attempt to preach but rather falls back on the most powerful form of witness, telling the story of what happened to him when God’s light descended in the form of Jesus. And this is the third door that must be unlocked if we are to reach hearts that may be lost or hardened to grace. Whenever we tell our stories—how an encounter with the living God provided us with new perspectives, a new beginning; how He washed us clean and gave us a new desire to follow Him—we are the world’s greatest authority on that subject. Do you know that? It’s true. We don’t have time to go through all the details of Paul’s conversion but what a wonderful effect this must have had upon this crowd who had never before heard it from his own lips. And though it had occurred some 30 years before, every detail was still etched into the memory of the Apostle Paul. This was the moment he had received new sight. Paul’s own calling as a witness had flowed out of this day. Ananias, whom Paul deliberately characterizes as a “devout observer of the law” and “highly respected by all Jews,” told him that “the God of our fathers” had chosen Him to know His will, to hear His voice and be His witness. And by relating these circumstances Paul is turning the tables on his adversaries. He had acted and was acting in submission to divine initiative and not to any agenda of his own. Therefore charging him, albeit falsely, would be the same as indicting God Himself. His testimony reinforced that point. It’s as if he’s implying, “Hey, if you have a problem with Jesus take that up with God, not me.” This is so important for us to remember when dealing with oppositional people. We can connect with their language and histories. We can give our account of how God miraculously intervened. But ultimately the outcome *and* accountability rests between them and God. We are but messengers. We can only put our experience on display, to be rejected or accepted.

Then Paul does a strange thing. He recounts a vision he received from the Lord some 27 years earlier when, three years after his conversion, he came back to Jerusalem. **“And it came about when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance, and I saw Him saying to me, ‘Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.’ And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in Thee. And when the blood of Thy witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the cloaks of those who were slaying him.’ And He said to me, ‘Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles’”** (22:17-21).

Paul came back to Jerusalem as the self-appointed apostle to the nation of Israel. He believed that once the Jews saw the radical transformation in his own life it would convince them of the truth of the gospel. Makes sense to me! But not only were his assumptions false but even the Christians had difficulty receiving him. The apostles would have little to do with him. Brokenhearted, Paul went into the temple to pray when the Lord spoke to him. And in spite of his objections, Paul was told to leave Jerusalem immediately. ‘Go,’ the Lord said, ‘for I am calling you to be an apostle to the Gentiles.’ And this is the final door that must be opened. We must clearly communicate God’s present calling in order to contrast the difference Christ has made in our lives. Paul once terrorized Christians; now he’s their advocate. Only Christ can rewire our desires in such a radical way.

But when Paul mentions his specific calling all hell breaks loose again. **“And they listened to him up to this statement, and then they raised their voices and said, ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!’ And as they were crying out and throwing off their cloaks and tossing dust into the air the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, stating that he should be examined by scourging so that he might find out the reason why they were shouting against him that way. And when they stretched him out with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, ‘Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?’ And when the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and told him, saying, ‘What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman.’ And the commander came and said to him, ‘Tell me, are you a Roman?’ And he said, ‘Yes.’ And the commander answered, ‘I acquired this citizenship with a large sum of money.’ And Paul said, ‘But I was actually born a citizen.’ Therefore those who were about to examine him immediately let go of him; and the commander also was afraid when he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had put him in chains”** (22:22-29).

Now Paul was probably not finished bringing

these Jews up to speed with his story. But in their minds he was “too through,” as we say. They were offended by the suggestion that God could relate directly to the Gentiles through Christ. To their way of thinking, everyone else, except themselves, were unworthy of God’s salvation. Theirs was the ultimate prejudice! The commander (not understanding what had reignited the flame) ordered Paul to be brought into the barracks to be examined through scourging. This was a process of beating a man on the back with leather thongs imbedded with pieces of metal and bone. If one failed to die under the scourge they would most likely be crippled for life. But here we see Paul thinking on his feet again. Knowing that it was illegal for a Roman citizen to be bound and beaten Paul invokes his citizenship. The law of Rome explicitly stated that no Roman was to be bound without due process of law. And though Christ had called Paul to suffer for His name this didn’t include needless suffering. So here we have God using the Roman justice system to protect Paul once again.

You see, God wasn’t finished with him, not by a long shot. And though Paul would never again minister as a free man, still there were those in chains elsewhere in need of what he had to offer. Paul’s letters to the Ephesians, the church in Philippi, Colossians and Philemon were yet to be written. Rome was still on the horizon of God’s plans for him. Though Paul will remain a prisoner of Caesar nonetheless he will carry out what remains of his ministry with power and blessing and renewed influence throughout the Roman empire. What a wild story! What a great testimony! What an outstanding heart for ministry!

As we stand back and review this account I can’t help but think of the phrase Paul uses in 2 Corinthians, “struck down, but not destroyed.” Paul was assaulted from virtually every angle and yet, as we close this passage, he’s still standing. Do you know that God will call us into situations where we’ll be struck down, at times, by the very hands we are trying to serve? I can easily imagine going into an unprotected prison environment to minister God’s grace only to receive catcalls and much disgrace. I know first hand how hardened that culture can be. You too may encounter opposition within the academic world, the work place or mission field; even within your own family system. Jesus Himself promised that, at some point along the way, we’ll all find ourselves at our own “Jerusalem’s.” Our response to these situations, however, is critical if we are to be effective witnesses to God’s life-changing power.

Through Paul’s example in Jerusalem we learn, first of all, that it’s important to accept the situation as God ordains it. Facing opposition never caused Paul to be unfaithful to God’s plan. He had known he would face hostility upon arriving at Jerusalem. But he calmly accepted that as God’s will and refused to run away. How easy it would have been for him to rationalize not going

at all. "My friends need me. I can preach the gospel better as a free man. I think I'll stay away from all that trouble." Had he done that, no one would have criticized him. Instead they would have patted him on the back and whispered, "Good choice. We certainly understand." But at a deeper level, discouragement and regret would have wreaked havoc in the apostle's soul. Like a thief in the night, compromise would have set in and subtly eaten away his passion for ministry. That's what usually happens when we choose to neglect our true calling. Paul couldn't allow that to happen. He had to meet his Jerusalem. And in whatever form that may take for us, so must we.

Secondly, it's important to use each troubling circumstance as an opportunity. The crowd had not gathered to hear Paul preach but to annihilate his integrity. Paul used that occasion, however, to proclaim how God's saving power had transformed his life. So let your light shine. Keep it real. Speak to them in their language. Those who are living in conflict may find a way out as a result of God working in them through you.

Finally, and most importantly, it's critical that we maintain the proper attitude – one of selfless love. It was Paul's love for other's that brought him into that place. And yet he didn't retaliate, but took positive steps to clear up any misunderstandings. Above all he wanted to help others resolve their hostility and trust Christ as he had done. We, on the other hand, might be tempted to put on a martyr's sackcloth, indulge in a little self-pity or pull out our battle fatigues. But the right response is to face our accusers with a loving heart, an option that is only possible if we have cast ourselves into the nail-scarred hands of Christ. Are you facing opposition this morning? Are you in the thick of your own Jerusalem, encountering hostility from those you love the most? If so, my prayer is that you allow Paul's example to guide your responses to the glory of God.

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