

11. Arrest in Jerusalem (3Q 2018—The Book of Acts)

Biblical material: Acts 21; Rom. 2:28, 29; Gal. 5:6; Acts 22; Acts 23:1–30; Matt. 22:23–32.

Quotes

- The grandeur of Jerusalem is also... its problem. *Umberto Eco*
- What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? *Tertullian*
- Once, there was a time in Jerusalem of brotherhood and peace: cultures and languages lived side by side and not one at the expense of the other. *Yitzhak Navon*
- Jerusalem is the house of the one God, the capital of two peoples, the temple of three religions and she is the only city to exist twice - in heaven and on earth: the peerless grace of the terrestrial is as nothing to the glories of the celestial. *Simon Sebag Montefiore*
- Religion is a process of turning your skull into a tabernacle, not of going up to Jerusalem once a year. *Austin O'Malley*
- Jerusalem is a festival and a lamentation. Its song is a sigh across the ages, a delicate, robust, mournful psalm at the great junction of spiritual cultures. *David K. Shipler*

Questions

Would Paul have been better off staying away from Jerusalem? How do we deal with those who oppose us? Why did Paul always want to provide a defense? What does this conflict reveal about religious ideas and how they are used? What lessons do we learn from this particular lesson in the life of Paul?

Bible summary

Acts 21:17 and on details the arrival of Paul in Jerusalem. But it's not long before his enemies gather and Paul is arrested (21:33), though this is more of a case of being taken into protective custody! After gaining the commander's permission, Paul speaks to the mob (Acts 22). Paul recounts his background and conversion, but as soon as he mentions his role as apostle to the foreigners, the mob wants to kill him. But just as the Romans are about to flog him, Paul asks if this is legal to do to a Roman citizen. So now the commander is much more amenable, and Paul is released from his shackles and will face the Jewish council. In Acts 23 Paul does face the Sanhedrin, and provokes an argument by mentioning the resurrection. Once again the Roman commander has to intervene, and also has to prevent a plot by some Jews to kill Paul. Paul is sent under guard to Caesarea.

Paul makes it clear that true religion is not a matter of outward show (Rom. 2:28). Whether you are circumcised or not has no value—it's "only trust working through love that matters" (Gal. 5:6 FBV). Matt. 22:23–32 records the Sadducees' debate with Jesus regarding the resurrection.

Comment

Paul's background is in a strong affirmation of religious belief. He himself admits he was a 'Pharisee of the Pharisees,' with all that this implies. So it must have been very difficult for him to accept the message of Jesus that went against his strict legalistic observance. He would have been aware of Jesus' condemnation of the scribes and teachers of the law for their insistence on outward rituals and strict regulations. More than this, as a very rigorous law-keeping Jew, it would have been inconceivable that the message of the gospel was to go to the Gentiles as well...

When Saul—who-became-Paul met Jesus on the Damascus road, he had many decisions to make, many ideas to change, and much to learn. (That's why he spent time in Arabia, far away from Jerusalem). He needed to work through the implications of this 'paradigm shift.' Most of all, this was a radical change in his picture of God. Instead of seeing a God who would delight in his persecution of Christians, he came to know the true God as revealed by Jesus. But as for so many of us, he had to spend a long time thinking this through—and unlearning many ideas about God that he had been taught. Only then could he be a true 'ambassador for Christ.' For while he was previously very 'zealous for God' (Acts 22:3), he was zealous for the 'god' as portrayed by the adversary. This is a cautionary note for all of us—we may be very missionary minded, as was Saul before his conversion, but zeal and enthusiasm does not always correlate with truth!

So much of what Paul writes to his Jewish contemporaries applies to us today. With an emphasis on law, with much reliance on rules and regulations, we can easily become sidetracked. This is not just overt legalism (although that has always plagued the church), but also a preoccupation with our legal standing before God, even as we stress "righteousness by faith"! Making our salvation into some kind of "legal fix" with God does not deal with the heart of the problem—our evil, corrupted minds that Paul describes so well.

Jew or Gentile—while our backgrounds certainly impact our ways of thinking, our social environment, and how we relate to each other—before God we have nothing to claim. That's why everyone needs God's good news, for none of us has anything in ourselves to boast about. As Paul concludes: "What makes you a Jew is on the inside, a "circumcision of the heart," following not the letter of the law but the spirit. Such a person looks for praise from God, not from people." (Romans 2:29 FBV).

Ellen White Comments

Paul had prided himself upon his Pharisaical strictness; but after the revelation of Christ to him on the road to Damascus, the mission of the Saviour, and his own work in the conversion of the Gentiles, were plain to his mind; and he fully comprehended the difference between a living faith and a dead formalism. Paul still claimed to be one of the children of Abraham, and kept the ten commandments in letter and in spirit as faithfully as he had ever done before his conversion to Christianity. But he knew that the typical ceremonies must soon altogether cease... {LP 65}

Jerusalem was the metropolis of the Jews, and it was there that the greatest exclusiveness and bigotry were found. The Jewish Christians living within sight of the temple naturally allowed their minds to revert to the peculiar privileges of the Jews as a nation.... Some were zealous for the ceremonial law, and they regarded Paul with disfavor because they thought that his principles in regard to the obligations of the Jewish law were lax. {AA 197}

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