

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

by

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

PAUL'S DEFENCE AT JERUSALEM

(Acts 22:1-29)

OUTLINE

Key verse - 15

Addressing a mob - surprised captain by speaking Greek - surprised people by speaking Hebrew - reviewed his life - told his mission to Gentiles - claimed Roman rights.

1. Personal experience is convincing.
2. The call of God comes first in our lives.
3. God gives calmness and self-possession in the midst of danger.
4. Rebuke for neglect arouses antagonism.
5. Paul teaches us to have a supreme desire to win men to Christ.

It was an exceedingly tense moment when Paul was rescued from threatened death at the hands of a mob and when the soldiers, who had rescued him, forced the mob to stand back that he might have an opportunity to address the people. Most men would be so terrified that they would be speechless, but not so with Paul. He had been threatened by mobs and had faced death so often that it was not an unknown condition for him. He had surprised the captain of the Roman guard by speaking unto him in Greek when he had thought that he was an Egyptian. When permitted to speak to the people he surprised them by speaking so accurately in Hebrew. Only a genuine Jew of the Rabbinic school could speak correct Hebrew. The common language of the people at that time, was not Hebrew but Aramaic or Greek. Many of the people had thought that he was a Greek, or a citizen of some other nation and not acquainted with the Hebrew language, their customs or their law. Paul soon showed them that he had an unusually accurate knowledge of these and was in fullest sympathy with them.

REVIEW OF LIFE

Paul told the people that he was a Jew of the purest and strictest type; that he had been a student under Gamaliel and had received with full sympathy all that that great teacher had taught. He told them that he was so zealous toward God and the keeping of the law that he persecuted to the death all who followed the Christian faith; that he even went out to distant points beyond Jerusalem as far as Damascus in order that he might arrest, bind and punish all the Christians.

Then he told the wonderful story of his conversion, of how in place of arresting men at Damascus, he was arrested on his way there by the Lord and told that he should be His witness to all of the knowledge of Christ which he had seen and heard.

ANGERED BY MENTION OF GENTILES

They listened quietly until he mentioned the fact that he had been sent of the Lord from Jerusalem far away to the Gentiles. Then they cried out, and said: “**Away with such a fellow from the earth: for it is not fit that he should live**” (Acts 22:22). As the crowd became frenzied the captain commanded that Paul should be brought into the castle and examined by scourging that he might know wherefore they cried so against him. It was supposed that scourging would compel a man to make a confession and tell the truth. However, it was a poor way then, as it is now, to extract truth from a man.

ROMAN RIGHTS

The command of the captain was not carried out for, as they were binding Paul in preparation for scourging, he said to the centurion who stood by, “**Is it lawful for you to scourge a man that is a Roman, and uncondemned?**” (Acts 22:25). The centurion told the captain that Paul was a Roman and warned him that he should be careful how he treated him. The captain then came to Paul and asked him if he were a Roman. This was a legal question and Paul gave a legal answer. To thus claim Roman citizenship if one were not a Roman involved the death penalty. The captain boasted that he had obtained this freedom by paying a great sum, possibly intimating that Paul could never have had enough money to buy Roman citizenship. Paul replied that he was free born. Then the captain was afraid and those who were preparing to torture him departed from him. They had risked their official position by even binding a Roman.

CONVERSION TOLD THREE TIMES

The account of Paul’s conversion is narrated three times in the Acts, first as a matter of history and twice in addresses by Paul. Each time some special facts were told as the occasion demanded. Paul probably told the story often as he went from place to place bearing the message of the Gospel and endeavoring to convince men of its truth. An experience like that would always be so clear in his memory that he could, without time for preparation, tell any part of it which seemed to be needed to enforce the truth which he was presenting.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE CONVINCING

The personal experience of a devout, humble Christian who has been at one time an opponent of the Gospel, but has been converted and convinced of its truth and power, is usually the most convincing evidence which one can offer to worldly men of the reality of the regenerating power of Christ on heart and life. This was the kind of evidence which Paul gave to the Jews. His past record was known to the officials and others at Jerusalem.

Why should a man so zealous for the law change from a persecutor to a follower of Christ when he knew he would suffer persecution? Surely nothing but honest conviction could bring about such a change. He had gained nothing in honor, ease or money. There was no visible reward awaiting him in the future. He was manifestly not a frenzied fanatic. He could speak and act with the utmost calmness and intelligence. Even that day there may have been those there who were convinced by his testimony. The most of them, however, were hardened and would not hear him through. When a man's mind is agitated with hate it is very seldom that he will yield to the pleading of the Gospel messenger.

Paul's experience was used by him to convince many, under other circumstances, and it has been used to convince many in all the centuries that Jesus is the Christ. Our own experiences, whether in conversion or in the providences of God, may be used with great effectiveness to convince and strengthen men today.

The story of the life of Augustine, of how he was saved from a life of indifference, excess and shame, has been read by thousands and has done much to win and encourage men who were in sin or in doubt. The life of John Bunyan, of his conversion and of the grace of God which saved and sustained him, has been read and reread the world around. It has been used to awaken many and to help many who were already awakened. The name of God has been greatly honored by it.

I have heard a well-known evangelist and Bible teacher tell the following as his own experience: "I knew a man who used to go to dances at least four nights a week and in summer time spend his days on the race-course. He would spend a large share of his afternoons at the card table and the remaining nights on a big drunk or something of that kind. I have known that man so touched by the finger of God that you could not get him to a ball unless you dragged him by an ox-team, unless he went to preach the Gospel. I have known him to do that. In the olden days he loved the theatre, but today he would be perfectly unhappy in a theatre unless he went there to preach the Gospel. I have known him to do that. In the olden days he played cards six days out of seven but today you could not hire him to touch cards. In the olden days the prayer meeting would have been crucifixion to him, but there is scarcely anything he enjoys today as he enjoys the prayer meeting. In the olden days the Bible was the stupidest book to him, though he read it every day. He loved everything in the way of literature better than the Bible and religious books. Today he loves the Bible and sometimes he thinks he will not read anything else. I know that man well. I know him better than I know any other man, and knowing the transformation that has taken place in his life I know that the new birth is a reality, if I don't know anything else." The speaker was Dr. R. A. Torrey. Such an experience stirs men deeply and has a remarkable convincing power.

Dr. Haven tells of a lawyer who entered a room where Christians had gathered to relate their experiences. He took notes of what was said. At the close he was so impressed that he arose and said: "My friends I hold in my hand the testimony of no less than sixty persons who have spoken here this morning, who all testify with one consent that there is a divine reality in religion; they have experienced its power in their own hearts. Many of these persons I know. Their word would be received in any court of justice. Lie they would not, I know; and mistaken they cannot all be. I have hitherto been skeptical in relation to these matters. I now tell you that I am fully convinced of the truth and that I intend to lead a new life. Will you pray for me?"

Thomas Bilney was an ardent young convert and longed to do something for his Master. Hugh Latimer was a zealous Roman Catholic priest, who preached against the reformation. Mr. Bilney went to him and told him he wished to confess. In the privacy of the confessional he told him the whole burning story of his conviction, conversion and newly-found happiness. The Spirit directed, and Latimer's heart was searched, convinced and changed. From that hour Latimer gave his life to the cause he had before opposed and sealed his testimony with his blood.

With such facts as these in mind is it not apparent that it is worthwhile to tell what the Lord has done for your soul? Is it not worthwhile to tell of the great transformation which the Lord has wrought in your heart?

THE CALL OF GOD FIRST

With Paul the call of God took precedence over personal desires. At first, Paul did not have a personal desire to go to the Gentiles. He had a hatred of them before his conversion. He had a desire to stay with the Jews in Jerusalem after his conversion. While he was in the temple the call of God came to him to make haste and get out of Jerusalem. Even then he protested; he replied to God that he had persecuted the Christians and consented to the death of Stephen, and was evidently about to request the Lord that he might remain and testify at Jerusalem that he might counteract what he had done against the Christians. But the Lord told him: **“Depart: for I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles”** (Acts 22:21).

God does not direct us by means of a vision or trance as He did Paul. He witnesses to us by His Spirit and providences and thus points out the way which He would have us go. When He points the way we should allow His call to take precedence of everything else and be willing to go. We should be ready to leave house and lands and brothers and sisters and father and mother, if need be, to respond to God's call. Many are ready to go if there is no cross to bear, but that is not surrender. Jesus calls His disciples to take up their crosses from the first moment that they accept Him and to follow wherever He leads. Our Lord gave us a most striking example in His own life of what following Him means. He pointed out the fact that even the foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man had not where to lay His head. He left carpenter shop and home; His disciples left fishing nets and business; and in like manner should we be willing to forsake all that we may be His disciples and ready to do His bidding.

Moses had wealth, honor, and possibly even a throne in Egypt awaiting him; but he left these voluntarily, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin. Elisha must have engaged in farming on a large scale when he had employed eleven men with ox teams; but he left them all when the call of God came, burned his yoke of oxen and the plow, giving them in sacrifice to God, and indicating that he was leaving his earthly possessions for the service of the Lord.

In modern times we have a noted example in Sadhu Sundar Singh of one who had great opportunities before him in his own land and among his own people. His father had influence and wealth.

When his relatives saw that he seemed determined to follow Christ, his uncle offered him immense stores of wealth if he would give up his desire to be a Christian and turn back to his old religion and to his father's home. Nothing, however, could turn him away from what he felt to be the call of God. Leaving everything behind he took his staff and started out to preach Christ to the poor and neglected in the most remote and forsaken parts of India. He has professed that the life of a lone Christian missionary gives him more happiness than anything else, and he has resolved to give himself to a life and work of sacrifice in response to the call of God.

“The Lord Christ wanted a tongue one day
To speak a message of cheer
To a heart that was weary and worn and sad,
And weighted with many a fear.
He asked me for mine, but ‘twas busy quite
With my own affairs from morn till night.

And the dear Lord Christ - was His work undone
For lack of a willing heart?
Only through men does He speak to men?
Dumb must He be apart?
I do not know, but I wish today
I had let the Lord Christ have His way.”

CALMNESS IN DANGER

The Holy Spirit gave Paul calmness and self-possession in the midst of danger. As one thinks of Paul having been dragged out of the temple toward the gate of the city, and of the insults and knocks that he must have received before the soldiers came down from the castle to quell the riot, he wonders that the apostle was either physically or mentally able to talk, much less to make a public address. When he went to Jerusalem he knew that God was directing him, as He had done for twenty years past, amidst varied trials and temptations and narrow escapes while he had journeyed through many lands. He was prepared for the worst. He knew that God would not cause him to endure more than He would give him grace to bear. He knew that in weakness he was made strong. He responded, not merely to the natural inclination to defend himself, but to the opportunity to witness for Christ. The Lord had told the disciples that they should not be unduly concerned in the hour of trial, for it would be given them in that hour what they should speak. Paul was resting upon that promise. He could say in a far truer sense than Socrates at his trial, that his whole life had been a preparation for that hour.

One of Frederick the Great's leading generals was Hans Joachim von Zieten. He was a Christian and not ashamed of his faith. Once he declined an invitation to his royal master's table, because on that day he wished to present himself at the table of his Lord and Master Jesus Christ. It was the day on which the ordinance was to be observed. The next time he appeared at the palace the king, whose infidel tendencies were well known, made use of some profane expressions about the holy communion of the Lord's Supper; and the other guests laughed at his remarks.

General Zieten shook his gray head solemnly, stood up, saluted the king, and then said with a firm voice: “Your Majesty knows well, that, in war, I have never feared any danger, and everywhere have boldly risked my life for you and my country. But there is one above us who is greater than you and me - greater than all men; He is Saviour and REDEEMER, who has died also for your Majesty, and has dearly bought us all with His own blood. This Holy One I can never allow to be mocked or insulted; for on Him repose my faith, my comfort, and my hope in death. In the power of this faith, your brave army has courageously fought and conquered. If your Majesty undermines this faith, you undermine, at the same time, the welfare of the State. I salute your Majesty.”

This brave confession of faith by General Zieten made a powerful impression upon the king. He felt he had been wrong in his attack on the faith of his general, and he was not ashamed to acknowledge it. He gave his right hand to General Zieten and placing his left upon the old man’s shoulder, said with emotion, “O happy Zieten! how I wish I could also believe it! I have the greatest respect for you. This shall never happen again.” The king then rose from the table and dismissed the other guests and invited General Zieten into his cabinet and they had a long heart to heart talk. What happened there was not divulged, but the testimony of the brave General encourages us to continue to believe the fact that God can sustain those who confess His name under difficult circumstances, and He is able to direct them in what they shall do and say.

Even little children can be calm in danger, and be given self-possession and courage to give their testimony for Christ. During the period of the persecution of the Covenanters, a group of children were ordered to be shot.

“A little girl of eight looked up into the face of one of the soldiers and said: “Sodger man, will ye let me take me wee brither by the hand and die that way?” ‘Bonny Whigs ye are,’ cried Westerha, ‘to die without a prayer.’ ‘If it please ye sir,’ said the little girl, ‘me and Alec canna pray, but we can sing, The Lord’s my Shepherd. My mother learned it us afore she gaed away.’ Then all the bairns stood up and from their lips rose the quavering strains, ‘The Lord’s my Shepherd: I’ll not want.’ As they sang, trooper after trooper turned away. Man after man fell out, and the tears rained down their cheeks. At last even Westerha turned and rode away, for the victory was to the bairns through the singing of the twenty-third Psalm.” They were sustained under trial and gave their testimony as best they knew, and it was more powerful than if they had been able to speak with tongues of silver. **“Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness”** (Isaiah 41:10).

REBUKE FOR NEGLECT AROUSES ANTAGONISM

When Paul ceased to relate history and told the people that, because they would not hear, God had sent him to the Gentiles, they became furious and cried: **“Away with such a fellow from the earth: for it is not fit that he should live”** (Acts 22:22). There was a stinging rebuke in the declaration that the Gentiles were more ready to hear the Gospel than the Jews; that God had withdrawn the messenger from the Hebrews and sent him to the Gentiles. The Jews held that they were first in the sight of God and always would be, and anyone who ventured to say that the gospel was to be given to the Gentiles in place of them was not fit to live.

It depends upon the condition of men's hearts, to whom a rebuke comes, whether they will receive it and profit by it or not. At Pentecost, Peter rebuked the people in Jerusalem more strongly than Paul did at this time. He told them plainly that they were the crucifiers and murderers of Christ; that God had honored Christ by raising Him from the dead and setting Him at the right hand of God. Many of those who heard Peter said: "**Men and brethren, what shall we do?**" (Acts 2:37). Those who heard Paul said: "**Away with such a fellow from the earth: for it is not fit that he should live!**" If a man or a group of men have set themselves to resist a righteous man, they will not listen to rebuke but become the more hardened. If they are listening with open mind, seeking the guidance of the Spirit, He will lead them to see their wickedness and repent. Alas! even today when men are rebuked for their sins, they more frequently become hardened and resentful, rather than humble and penitent.

Ahab set himself to go on in his own sinful way regardless of what God said; and when the true prophet Micaiah rebuked him, told him his plan would prove disastrous and his life would be taken, he commanded that the prophet should be punished, but he would not yield.

Dr. W. L. Watkinson says that the Spaniards have a popular legend concerning the Petrified Man. The story relates that once he was in the flesh but that he appealed to the blessed saints to turn him to a stone image if he had committed a certain fraud, of which he was really guilty. In a moment a curious change began to come over him. Gradually his legs turned to white stone. The stone continued to creep farther along his body until he was altogether stone, his eyes staring into vacancy. Is it not frequently true of those whose sin is pointed out and who are rebuked for it, that their heart is hardened and their will becomes unyielding, until it seems like changing stone to effect any reform or to lead them to repentance?

There can be but one end for the man who will not heed the warning which has been given of God. He is like the traveler who was making his way along the Scottish coast and who was induced to take the road by the sands as the most agreeable. He was warned that he should not be attracted so as to delay as he watched the beauty and grandeur of the waves and rocks. A man who noticed his delay warned him: "If you pass this spot you lose your last chance to escape. The tides are rising. There is an ascent near you, and by it alone you can escape." Still the traveler thought the warning was either foolish or else there was no need of obeying it soon. But as soon as he began to look back he found that tide had cut off a retreat and that he could not climb the cliffs which were before him. He saw a projecting rock which he thought was his last refuge. But upon even this the relentless water rose; they came to his feet, then to his neck; he uttered a despairing shriek for help, but no help was near. He had neglected the last opportunity of escape and the sea closed over him in death.

The call of God comes to every man who reads His Word or hears His Gospel: "**How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?**" (Hebrews 2:3). "**Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon**" (Isaiah 55:7). Jesus, when speaking of some who had been killed, though not worse than the others, said: "**except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish**" (Luke 13:5).

SUPREME DESIRE TO WIN MEN

The supreme desire of Paul was to persuade his brethren to repent and believe in Christ. That was the prime reason why he asked to speak to the mob on the occasion recorded in this chapter; self-defense was secondary. Paul had, not long before this, written to the Romans: **“That I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh”** (Romans 9:2-3). Though he had suffered at the hands of the Jews in almost every city in which he had preached, yet he continued to go to the Jews first. When, at various places, they drove him out of the synagogue he would turn to the Gentiles. He spared not himself but warned men night and day with tears. He longed to lead them to Christ because he knew that apart from faith in Christ there was no hope of salvation.

Some one has given the following brief account of the origin of the Salvation Army. “Years ago a plain Methodist preacher fell in love with the world’s most unlovely. He came to where he actually hungered for the lost. He pushed out into the midst of such people in the East End of London. For days he stood on those streets seething with men and women. He drank it all in and loved it because of the souls he saw. One night he went home and said to his wife: ‘Darling I have given myself, I have you and the children, to the service of those sick souls.’ She smiled and took his hand and together they knelt and prayed. That was the beginning of the work of William Booth as the originator of the Salvation Army.” It arose out of a supreme desire in the heart of one man to win men for Christ.

Paul seemed alone as the representative of Christ that day in Jerusalem. There were others there, but so far as we know none of them gave their testimony for Christ. The splendid thing about Paul was that he did not hesitate to give his testimony though he was alone. It sets a lesson before every one of us. A young woman with her husband moved into a pioneer community. “Poor, poor Adeline,” wrote the other sister to her mother at home: “She was always so active in Christian work, and I venture to say she has gone where there isn’t another Christian in the place. She will not know what to do with herself.” Soon there came a letter from Adeline herself, saying: “Mother, can you believe it? We are the only Christians in this place, Will and I. Think of our opportunity!”

Can any of us claim that supreme desire to win men to Christ which the converted leper in India manifested? He said, so Mr. Innes relates: “I thank God that he laid leprosy on me because of the lepers I have been able to lead to Christ.”

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friend. Oh, for a love like that of Paul which makes us ready to lay down our lives that we might win those of our generation to Christ! Out over the world, and even in our own community, there are men who, either do not know Christ’s love for them, or, if they know it, have no appreciation of what it means to them. Since Christ means so much to us how can we allow day after day to pass, how can we allow man after man to pass by, without beseeching those who are lost that they should come to Christ without delay? **“Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved”** (Acts 4:12). In Christ we may find life - life that shall bring joy here and now, and life that shall last for evermore.

QUESTIONS
(Acts 23:1-29)

1. Why did Paul make the defense here recorded?
2. How did he show he was in full sympathy with the law?
3. Why did speaking in Hebrew gain the attention of the mob?
4. What statement was it that caused the people to cry out against Paul?
5. Of what important event in his life did Paul tell in his defense?
6. What was the object in telling of his conversion?
7. How many times is this story told in the Acts?
8. Was Paul able to convince men under other circumstances by telling the story of his conversion?
9. Is personal Christian experience a strong argument today? Why?
10. Did Paul have a desire to go to the Gentiles at first?
11. Why then did he go?
12. How does God direct us to know His will today?
13. Would more people be ready to respond if there were no cross to bear?
14. What gave Paul calmness amidst danger? Is this true of us?
15. Why did they not examine Paul by scourging?
16. Was Paul's desire to condemn or win his brethren?
17. How is the promise, "Lo I am with you alway," fulfilled here?
18. How is the promise, "It shall be given you in that hour what ye shall speak," fulfilled here?
19. Contrast the reaction of the rebuke which Peter gave at Pentecost with that which Paul gave to the people here?
20. Why was the result so different? Why is it often different today?

~ end of chapter 38 ~

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