

2. For a long season, and through various means, the Spirit had been warning Paul that opposition awaited him in Jerusalem. Bonds and affliction were coming, but as a reaction to Christ more than to Paul himself. Confusion, unbelief and fear motivated men to lash out at Paul, and it was his gospel that provoked this irrational and unhinged response. And the fundamental reason Paul's gospel had this effect is that it heralded a radical shift in the world and its relation to God. The message of the gospel is that Jesus Christ has inaugurated the everlasting kingdom of God in which deliverance and reconciliation have come to the entire creation. The Christ event ushered in a whole new reality and nothing will ever be the same again. From the definition of God's covenant people to the relation between Jew and Gentile to the way the covenant community was to perceive and order its existence in the world, everything has been transformed in Christ.

This Christological transformation caught the nation of Israel off guard; the kingdom Paul and others were proclaiming was radically different from the one they were expecting, and the disconnect left many befuddled and many others resistant and deeply agitated. Confusion and disbelief were the natural Jewish response to Paul's gospel of Yahweh's kingdom in His Son, and given how different this kingdom was from what the Jewish people had been taught the Scriptures promised, it was no wonder so many concluded that its promoters were apostates who opposed God Himself – as well as His truth and His people – and so needed to be dealt with severely.

This dynamic lay behind the opposition the Spirit warned of, and Paul would face it not only in Jerusalem, but all the way to Rome and to the end of his life. Time and again Paul was going to be put in the position of having to vindicate himself and his gospel against the charge that he was an enemy of Israel's God, His servant Moses, His Law and His people. His defense would begin in Jerusalem, *and notably with Jewish believers who themselves were confused about his message and its implications for them as Jews.*

This is an important consideration because it shows that the Jewish conviction that Paul was an apostate was, in some cases at least, sincerely held. There were obvious reasons why Jews would conclude this about Paul, just as they had with Jesus before him.

- True, Paul's former pharisaical colleagues and the Jerusalem elite doubtless felt betrayed by him, but in itself that cannot explain their rabid obsession with seeing him destroyed. It's also clear that their motives weren't free of selfish concerns: If Paul and his message prevailed with the sons of Israel, the nation's elite – from the rabbis to the scribes to the Levites to the priestly class itself – would find themselves stripped of their status, power and even their livelihoods (cf. John 11:45-50). Their personal well-being was clearly their final concern, but this doesn't mean they didn't sincerely believe that Paul was promoting a heretical "way" which encouraged the sons of Israel to apostatize from Israel's God and His covenant with them. The rulers of Israel had seen many pseudo-messiahs emerge over through the centuries, each one promoting his own novel ideas and attempting to gather followers; as far as they were concerned, the Nazarene and his sect was just another iteration of this phenomenon, and one to be equally opposed and stamped out (cf. 24:1-5, 5:27-39).

- As for the growing community of Jewish Christians, they weren't motivated by such selfish concerns and yet still struggled to come to grips with the manifold implications of this gospel they'd embraced. They were "learning Christ and being taught in Him" by His indwelling Spirit, and yet could still be influenced by those who were promoting the notion that Paul and his gospel were calling them to forsake their Jewish heritage and practice. Though perhaps still "babes in Christ," the Jewish Christians *were* being taught by His Spirit. Yet this didn't mean they had everything figured out. The reason for their confusion wasn't so much their immaturity – some may have been Christians for many years – as the radical nature of the kingdom of God and its comprehensive transformative effect on everything pertaining to Israel's identity, history and covenant life with God.

Throughout his two-fold account Luke has taken pains to show the all-encompassing, transformative relationship between the Israelite salvation history and the Christ event, and the episode with Paul and the Jerusalem elders contributes to that emphasis. But it also serves as the point of transition in Luke's narrative: It was precisely Paul's efforts to address his Jewish brethren's concerns that led to the subsequent incidents of accusation and defense in Jerusalem. Those, in turn, led him eventually to Rome where Paul would make his defense to Caesar himself. But as to Jerusalem, Luke recorded two such episodes beyond Paul's meeting with the elders: The first was his defense before the city's populace (21:27-22:29), the second before the Jewish Council (22:30-23:11).

- a. Again, it was Paul's defense to his fellow Jewish believers – in the form of his public participation with the four men who'd undertaken a vow – that provided the occasion for his witness to the Jews of Jerusalem. Luke recorded that Paul purified himself in order to come alongside the men and pay the expenses incurred in the completion of their vow. That process involved his entering the temple along with them as the priest offered the required sacrifices on their behalf (21:26, ref. again Numbers 6:13-21).

Given his notorious reputation, Paul's presence in Jerusalem could not go unnoticed. The news that he was in the city would have spread quickly and doubtless many Jews were watching his daily movements. How many times Paul entered the temple during those days of completion isn't clear, but during one of those visits he was spotted by some Asian Jews who happened to be in Jerusalem at the same time. They obviously recognized him from his extended ministry in and around Ephesus and perhaps were members of the Ephesian synagogue which Paul had repudiated and turned away from (19:8-9). That would certainly explain their impassioned response to seeing him in the temple.

It also appears that they recognized Trophimus, one of the Ephesian Gentiles who'd accompanied Paul to Jerusalem (cf. 21:27-29 with 20:4). At the very least, they were able to identify Trophimus as a Gentile and, having seen Paul with him in the city, they concluded that he'd taken him into the temple. Luke's language indicates that these Jews merely presumed this to be the case; they clearly hadn't seen Trophimus with Paul in the temple.

Most likely they knew Trophimus wasn't with Paul, but believed they could prevail in making this charge since the two had been publicly seen together in the streets of Jerusalem. Their calculation proved correct, and these Asian Jews were able to incite a mob bent on seizing Paul and putting him to death. Their charge was that Paul had brought Gentiles into the temple, but this was merely the proof they offered in support of their larger accusation, namely that Paul preached to all men everywhere against the Jewish people, the Law of Moses, and the sanctuary.

Paul's gospel of the kingdom was that the Israelite salvation history – the Israelite kingdom – had found its predestined fulfillment in Christ. But to many Jewish ears, this sounded like a renunciation of that history and its features and a call to depart from them. If even many of the *believing* Jews struggled to understand how Paul's gospel of fulfillment didn't mean abrogation, how much more would that be the case with Jews whose hearts and mind remained darkened to Christ. (The same cry of abrogation (replacement, or *supersession*) continues to this day in the mouths of dispensationalists. Like the first-century Jews Paul and Jesus encountered, they, too, are living in the hope of a coming kingdom that amounts to a glorified resurrection of the Israelite theocracy.)

Riots were nothing new to Paul's ministry, and now it was happening in Jerusalem. He'd experienced them at the hands of Jews and Gentiles alike, and once again the Gentile authority had to intervene to keep things from spinning out of control (21:30-36; cf. 16:16-24, 17:1-15, 18:12-17, 19:23-41). Luke records that the whole of Jerusalem was drawn into the fray, and the intensity and volatility of the situation were such that, when he became aware of it, the Roman commander saw fit to address it himself. He and some handpicked soldiers intervened on Paul's behalf – not because they cared about what was happening to him, but because they were charged by Rome with keeping the peace. Order and control were paramount in Rome's oversight of its provinces; they were all too aware how quickly public uprisings escalated into outright insurrection.

Thus the commander ordered Paul bound and removed to the barracks, but Paul prevailed upon him to allow him to address the crowd. Moments earlier he was being beaten and in danger of being torn limb from limb; now, surrounded by Roman soldiers, Paul stood on the steps of the soldiers' quarters and addressed his countrymen. Battered, bloody and shaken, Paul was unmoved from his constant commitment to testify of Christ and His gospel (21:37-39).

- b. In a scene of profound irony, Paul addressed the Jewish crowd from the safety of his Roman attendants. Those who should have embraced Paul's gospel – those who possessed the salvation-historical privileges which have now been realized in Jesus Christ (Romans 9:3-5) – were determined to destroy it and all who promoted it. The only thing that kept them from fulfilling their design was intervention by Gentiles who lacked that privilege. The Roman commander was the presence of reason, restraint and honest inquiry (21:33, 37-39) in the face of Jewish fury – a dynamic that Paul's ensuing defense would bring into sharp focus.

Appropriately, the centerpiece of Paul's defense to his fellow Jews was his life-changing encounter with Jesus of Nazareth on the Damascus road. He provided the context for that encounter by rehearsing with the crowd his life in Judaism and former disposition toward this new "way" and the sect of the Nazarene (22:3-5). Some of those present may not have known Paul's history, but many of them did. Either way, the things he was claiming about himself were readily verifiable. Paul hadn't set out to be a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth and servant of His gospel; quite the opposite, before that fateful day outside Damascus he'd have stood shoulder-to-shoulder with his Israelite brethren gathered before him.

But Jesus had appeared to him and Paul was transformed by the will of Israel's God revealed through His glorified Messiah. Paul had intended to vanquish the knowledge of Jesus; instead, he himself was conquered and taken captive by that knowledge. And Jesus had conquered Saul, not to destroy him but to employ him as His chosen instrument to propagate and promote the very "way" he'd sought to eradicate. Yahweh hadn't forgotten or abandoned His promise to Abraham to restore the world to Himself through his seed (ref. vv. 12-15): Jesus is that seed – the "Righteous One" (cf. 3:14, 7:52 with Isaiah 53:11), but He is forming a new Israel in Himself through which His Father's will of global blessing is to be realized. The nations' blessing flows through Israel, and Paul, the Hebrew of Hebrews, was a chosen pillar in that Jewish foundation (Ephesians 2:11-22).

Thus Jesus' appearance to Paul wasn't simply to confront and deter him; it was to restore and redirect him. Jesus had come to Paul to open his eyes and give him life out of death; *He'd come to make this Hebrew of Hebrews a Jew indeed – a true son of Abraham* (cf. 22:3 and Philippians 3:1-6 with Romans 2:28-29 and Galatians 3:26-29). And as a son of Abraham, Paul was to fulfill his covenant calling by taking the word of God's restoration and reconciliation in Christ to the world of men (22:10-15; cf. 9:15).

Paul, the zealous and devout Pharisee, a man who could claim blamelessness under the Law, was actually blind and defiled as he made his way to Damascus. The man sought out by his countrymen as a distinguished teacher needed himself to be taught; he who boasted in the Law actually dishonored God because he had refused to listen to the Law; rather than being a "light to lighten the Gentiles" as demanded by his Abrahamic heritage, Paul had given them reason to blaspheme and refuse the God of Abraham (cf. Romans 2:17-24 with Galatians 4:21-27).

Paul, the quintessential Israelite, had actually repudiated and actively opposed his own identity. He was a "sinner" in need of forgiveness and cleansing; he needed to obtain a bona fide place and inheritance in the God's true "Israel" (22:12-16). The significance of Paul's rehearsal of Ananias' words and ministry to him are easily lost on contemporary American readers, but his Jewish audience knew exactly what he was saying and what it meant for them: *If Paul, who had an impeccable Hebrew pedigree and credential, was a defiled and self-deceived pretender to the title "Israelite," how could they escape the same condemnation?*

The proof that contemporary readers so often miss the point is how Paul's reference to baptism in relation to his sin is commonly treated. The typical consideration focuses on the role baptism plays in a person's salvation:

- To many, this passage is a classic and insuperable proof-text for the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. The basis for this conclusion is that Paul seemed to be ascribing cleansing from sin to water baptism.
- Those who reject baptismal regeneration as a denial of "salvation by grace through faith" labor to find another meaning in Paul's statement, typically the notion that water baptism only symbolizes a person's regeneration.

But all such discussion is a fatally flawed distraction precisely because it has no connection with the context; rather, it is imposed upon it because of extraneous doctrinal concerns and presuppositions. Does anyone really believe that Paul's Jewish hearers processed his words in terms of the question of baptismal regeneration? *What they heard was a man using his personal experience to confront them with their own fraudulent status as Yahweh's covenant people.*

The Jews didn't conceive of baptism in terms of "salvation," but in connection with membership within the household of Israel. Baptism was an initiatory rite by which a person was made "clean" so as to be fitted to *enter* God's covenant community. Jews – who were already members of that community – underwent cleansing rituals ("washings") when they became defiled under the Law, but only in order to be restored to full fellowship in the community (ref. the cleanliness laws of Leviticus 11-17 and the centerpiece of the Yom Kippur prescription). Jews were already "clean" by virtue of their Abrahamic election and consecration and so didn't undergo the baptismal initiatory washing. *Gentile proselytes* were baptized, both as a ritual cleansing and to symbolize their entrance into the household of Israel (cf. Romans 6:3; 1 Corinthians 10:1-2, 12:13). Commenting on Gentile baptism, the Dictionary of Biblical Imagery notes:

*"Full immersion, coupled with circumcision (for males) and a sincere heart, meant conversion. Some later Jewish teachers insisted that a Gentile converted in this manner became 'like a newborn child,' completely separated from his or her Gentile past."*

Thus Paul's audience would have been shocked by his revelation that he had been baptized as a "sinner." In effect, he was telling them that, prior to his encounter with the risen Jesus of Nazareth, he had laid fraudulent – albeit self-deceived – claim to the title *Israelite* – that is, *covenant son of Abraham*. For all his Hebrew pedigree and credential under the Law, he was no different from the Gentile dogs; he, too, was a "sinner" outside the true Abrahamic community who needed to be brought into it through the washing of baptism (ref. Galatians 2:11-15). Moreover, Paul was indicating that his cleansing and entrance into the Abrahamic community came through union with Jesus – by being baptized into Him.

Paul's statements were shocking, but the implications were more so: *If these things were true of this eminent Pharisee, how much more were they true of them?* They, too, were "sinners" in need of a washing to enter into the covenant household; they, too, had blindly put their confidence in their Abrahamic heritage; they, too, had deceived themselves that they were God's "righteous" sons. If Paul's experiences were true and Jesus of Nazareth is indeed Israel's Messiah, they were indeed guilty of the same uncleanness and blindness as Paul. John's labors on their behalf – *which focused on a needed Israelite baptism* – and Jesus' own words and work had been lost upon them (cf. Luke 3:1-9; John 8:31-59).

The Jewish crowd wouldn't have missed Paul's point, but he drove it home by recounting Jesus' second appearance to him when he later returned to Jerusalem (22:17-22). His experience in Damascus turned the light onto their own woeful condition, but Jesus' renunciation made the verdict explicit: *"Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me."*

Paul had departed Jerusalem a fierce champion of Old Covenant Judaism (22:4-5) and returned a devoted follower of the man whose name he'd been determined to stamp out in Israel. For that reason he hadn't received a hero's welcome in Jerusalem, but the same furious opposition he had himself directed against Jesus' disciples (9:19-29). Paul's love and burden for his countrymen likely gave him hope they'd embrace their Messiah as he had. They, too, knew the Scriptures and the promise they held out. Beyond that, he was one of them; his credibility as a committed Jew would surely win them over (22:19-20). But it was not to be; the Jews in Jerusalem responded to Paul just as their Syrian counterparts had.

Now a second time the threat of death hung over Paul's head, and it was into that circumstance that Jesus appeared to him. The Lord had called Paul to be His witness to the sons of Israel and the Gentile peoples, and Paul understood that Israel's salvation-historical privilege and role meant that the gospel should first go to them (Romans 1:16). But Israel was determined to renounce their Messiah, yet unto the fulfillment of divine purpose and promise: God's blessing would flow to the nations through Israel – through their unbelief as well as their faithful witness. Thus Jesus took the occasion of Jerusalem's hostility to direct Paul toward the Gentiles. Jewish unbelief was to be the context for his ministry to the nations.

- c. Luke recorded that the crowd – which moments earlier had been in an uproar – listened to Paul up until that point. They were doubtless mulling over his words, trying to process and come to grips with what he was saying and the implications for them. But when they heard him speak of Jesus' command to turn from the sons of Israel to the Gentiles, this was more than they could bear (22:22-23). They had heard the same sorts of things from Jesus during His earthly ministry and this teaching, more than any other, had fueled their hatred and repudiation (ref. Matthew 21:23-45; Luke 4:14-30, 13:22-30; etc); surely a man who proclaimed such outrageous notions could not be Israel's Messiah – the Servant-Deliverer and Son of David promised by Yahweh to establish the kingdom for Abraham's sons.