

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Paul's Address To Jerusalem

March 10th, 2024

Acts 21:37-22:29

Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning, Redeemer! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 21.

In our passage last Sunday, Paul was in the Jerusalem temple paying for the vows of his friends when a group of Jews from the region of Asia spotted him. These men hated Paul, and they shouted out the false accusation that Paul had brought unclean Gentiles into the temple. There was no truth to what they said, but they shouted it loud enough and passionately enough that an angry mob formed. Paul was dragged from the temple, and they attempted to beat him to death.

The Roman tribune responsible for keeping the peace rushed to the scene and pulled Paul from the crowd. He had endured so much violence that the guards literally had to carry him up the steps to the barracks.

But as they reach the top of the steps in our passage for this morning, Paul will make a strange request. He wants to speak to the crowd. Even in this broken state, Paul sees an opportunity to share the hope that he has with these people who are trying to kill him. That's where we pick up in the text this morning. We will be reading from Acts 21:37 to 22:29. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active Word to us today:

As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, "May I say something to you?" And he said, "Do you know Greek? ³⁸ Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?" ³⁹ Paul replied, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure

city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people.”⁴⁰ And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying:

22 “Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.”

² And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said:

³ “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. ⁴ I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, ⁵ as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

⁶ “As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly 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 And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’ ⁹ Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. ¹⁰ And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.’ ¹¹ And 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.

¹² “And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, ¹³ came to me, and standing by me said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. ¹⁴ And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; ¹⁵ for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’

¹⁷ “When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance ¹⁸ and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’ ¹⁹ And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. ²⁰ And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.’ ²¹ And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

²² Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.” ²³ And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, ²⁴ the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this. ²⁵ But when they had stretched him out

for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, “Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?”²⁶ When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, “What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen.”²⁷ So the tribune came and said to him, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?” And he said, “Yes.”²⁸ The tribune answered, “I bought this citizenship for a large sum.” Paul said, “But I am a citizen by birth.”²⁹ So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him. (Acts 21:37-22:29 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This is a large passage, but the central detail of the story is Paul’s speech to the crowd. This morning, I want to ask the simple question:

What Can We Learn From Paul’s Address To Jerusalem?

The first thing we learn from his example is that:

1. He identified with the people in front of him

Living as we do in a world that is steeped in an “us and them” mentality, this is an important detail. As Paul looks out at this crowd and sees the hatred in their eyes, he addresses them as “brothers and fathers”! Then, rather than shaking his head at them in disbelief, he explains that he understands why they treated him this way. In fact, he confesses that the old Paul would have been the loudest voice in the crowd! We see this in verses 3-4:

I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. ⁴I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women (Acts 22:3-4 ESV)

"I get it," Paul says. "You're zealous for God... So was I. You think that killing me would be a service to Him. I thought that way too."

Now, Paul isn't *excusing* their sin. But he IS *identifying with* these sinners. Because, in order to reach people, you need to be willing to meet them where they're at. And, in order to meet people where they're at, you need to be humble enough to admit that you were once in the same place.

There is not a sinless person in this room. We have ALL sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Now, if you have repented of your sin and placed your trust in Jesus then – PRAISE GOD – that sin has been removed from you and has been paid for at the cross! Amen? Amen. But that doesn't mean that we need to spend the rest of our lives pretending that our sin never happened.

That's what Paul is modelling for us here. Notice, he's not *bragging* about his former life. He's not trying to *impress* the crowd with the stories of how he used to terrorize Christians. I suspect that the memory of Stephen's death returned to Paul often and filled him with remorse. Memories of sin should be *painful* memories!

But these painful memories enabled Paul to identify with the people he was ministering to.

And so too will yours.

Are you ashamed of your past? Are you ashamed of that jail time? That abortion? That addiction? That experimentation? That affair? That history that you would give anything to change?

Paul was too. He referred to himself as the "chief of sinners." But rather than denying or hiding his past, he *used* it as a means of relating with the lost people that God had called him to reach. God redeems our broken stories. What man intended for evil, God intended for good.

Having identified with the people in front of him, Paul then turns his focus onto the transforming power of Jesus.

2. He focused on the transforming power of Jesus

If his goal was simply to win the affection of the crowd, he would have stopped at verse 5. But he wasn't trying to win the crowd to *himself* – he was trying to win them *to Jesus*! So, we pick up in verse 6 where Paul explains:

As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly 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 And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘**I am Jesus of Nazareth**, whom you are persecuting.’ (Acts 22:6-8 ESV)

It’s not enough to identify with the crowd and to say, “I get it. I’ve been there.” We need to go a step further and to explain how it is that we were moved from THERE to HERE. Paul *used* to be a persecutor, but now he is a NEW MAN and there is only one reason why: Paul encountered Jesus and EVERYTHING CHANGED!

There is something so *simple* and yet so *powerful* in this lesson.

By way of illustration, we are constantly bombarded with weight loss advertisements. And almost all of us scroll past those advertisements or drive past that billboard without giving a second thought. But, if you notice that your friend has lost 100 pounds, you lean in a little closer and listen with a greater sense of expectation, don’t you? Well the same principle is true in our evangelism! G. Campbell Morgan explains here:

more powerful than all argument is the experience of one man, arrested by Christ, and changed by that experience.¹

Now, that’s not to say that there is no place for argument. When Paul preached in the synagogues, he opened the Scriptures, and he made an argument as to why Jesus was the Messiah. We SHOULD study to show ourselves approved and we SHOULD be prepared to give an answer for the hope that we have. That is a powerful tool.

But many of us fail to recognize this *other* tool that God has entrusted to us!

It reminds me of a story I once read of a great missionary to India – E. Stanley Jones. He recounted his first sermon – a sermon he preached long before his days as a missionary. He stepped behind the pulpit and aimed to impress the congregation with his powerful logic – like a

¹ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 493-494.

lawyer before a jury. At one point in the sermon, he used a word that he clearly didn't understand and a young woman in the congregation smiled and buried her head in her hands. He was so rattled by the embarrassment that he lost his train of thought. He apologized, abruptly ended his sermon, and slumped his way back to his seat. But, as he sat down, he felt the Lord saying to Him, "Haven't I done anything for you? Couldn't you tell them that?" He stood back up in front of the pulpit and shared the story of how God had changed his life. That morning, he had the privilege of leading a young boy to Christ. He writes of that experience:

As God's lawyer I was a dead failure; as God's witness I was a success. That night marked a change in my conception of the work of the Christian minister – he is to be, not God's lawyer to argue well for God; but he is to be God's witness, to tell what Grace has done for an unworthy life.²

Too many of us assume that – because we are not “lawyers” of the faith – we have nothing to say to the world. But if you would simply say, “*That* is who I was; *this* is who I am; Jesus did it ALL!” you would be shocked at the ways that God would use you! As Paul addressed this crowd, he focused on the transforming power of Jesus. And then:

3. He explained how to respond to the gospel

Whenever a person comes into membership at Redeemer, one of the first questions we ask in the interview is: “How would you share the gospel with an unbeliever?” We have heard some great explanations but it's interesting to me how often the *response* is missing. As we announce the grace of God in Christ, we need to spell out very clearly how it is that a person *receives* that grace! When Paul and Silas shared the gospel with the Philippian jailer, the man asked:

“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30b ESV)

Do you know the answer to that question, Christian? It's important that you do! To fail to answer that question is like leading someone to their brand-new mansion but neglecting to give them the key to get inside! And so, as Paul shares the story of how Jesus transformed his life, he includes

² E. Stanley Jones as quoted by Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 283.

the story of how a man named Ananias led him to Christ, and he specifically focuses in on the instructions that Ananias gave to him. Look at verse 16:

And now why do you wait? Rise and **be baptized** and **wash away your sins, calling on his name.**' (Acts 22:16 ESV)

That's the response.

If you are lost, and you are looking for the answer – if you are dead in your sin, and you feel God stirring your heart – if you want salvation then you can have it!

Repent of your sin. That is the only way that it can be washed away. Repentance begins with saying sorry for the wrong that you have done, but it goes so much further. Real repentance leads to change. Real repentance means – not simply *confessing* your sin – but *turning away from it*.

And as you lay down that sin, CALL OUT to Jesus! HE is the answer that you need! HE is the way, the truth and the life! BELIEVE that! Believe that he lived the perfect life that you could not live! Believe that he died the death that you deserve to die! Believe that he rose and conquered sin and grave! Turn away from your old life and submit yourself to Jesus – the King who died so that you could live.

Rise and be baptized!

Look at the way that Paul ties these two things together. Baptism is the place where this expression of repentance and surrender is most clearly and vividly expressed! Through baptism, we declare to the world that we have died to who we used to be, and that we are now a new creation – united with Christ. It is a public declaration of allegiance to King Jesus!

If you are here today and you have not yet responded to the gospel – if you have not yet *laid hold* of this gift of grace – then don't waste another moment. Repent. Believe. And be baptized. Receive his grace today and live forever with him.

I am tempted to end on this note, but as we consider the story in front of us there is another important lesson that we need to consider. As Paul addressed the crowd in Jerusalem:

4. He held nothing back that needed to be said

Everyone listened intently as Paul shared his testimony, but that all changed in verse 21. Look there again with me:

And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

²²Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.” (Acts 22:21-22 ESV)

As I mentioned last Sunday, we have a hard time wrapping our minds around the hatred and the animosity that existed between Jews and non-Jews or Gentiles – but we catch a glimpse of it here.

The Mosaic Law taught that God’s people were to intentionally separate themselves from the Gentiles. They were to eat differently, and dress differently, and behave differently such that they would be a distinct and compelling example of what it looks like to live God’s way. This distinctiveness was meant to serve as a WITNESS to the nations, such that Israel would be a BLESSING. That was the promise that God made to Abraham back in Genesis 22:

and through your offspring **all nations on earth will be blessed** (Genesis 22:18a NIV)

However, after generations of conflict and war and oppression, the idea of being DISTINCT was kept but the purpose of being a BLESSING TO THE NATIONS was lost. Like an older brother that isn’t ready to share mom and dad’s attention with a new baby sister, the Jews had grown sour at the idea that God had a plan to include Gentiles in the family.

Paul knew that this was a sensitive subject. But he also knew that he needed to address it. If we are going to call ourselves God’s people, then we need to surrender to Him in every area. By harboring hatred for the Gentiles and by refusing their admission into the family of God Paul’s Jewish brothers and sisters were living in sin.

So, he told them that – while he was worshiping in the temple – God had commissioned him to go and preach to the Gentiles. And, as soon as he said those words, the crowd had heard enough. He had poked the soft spot, and their anger and hatred came back to the surface. Whatever progress Paul had made up to this point was quickly undone as soon as he identified the sin that his listeners had made peace with.

This story might have ended differently if Paul had simply avoided this sensitive topic. But faithful ministry holds nothing back that needs to be said. Brothers and sisters, we need to be willing to tell the truth.

If you are here this morning and you feel stirred to respond to the gospel, you need to understand that following Jesus is EVERYTHING that you need! But it does come at a cost. You will need to let go of your sin. This doesn't mean that you're going to change overnight – it doesn't mean that you're going to walk in perfect obedience from here on out – but it DOES mean that you need to choose to turn AWAY from where you were going and to turn TOWARD where Jesus is leading.

It means turning away from that pornography.

It means turning away from that quick temper.

It means turning away from that love of money.

It means turning away from that unforgiveness.

Slowly but surely, from one degree to the next, following Jesus means changing the entire direction of your life.

And church, as we speak clearly about sin, we had better expect some push back. Martin Luther once told his friend:

Preach so that if the people don't hate their sin, they will hate you.³

³ Martin Luther to Philipp Melanchthon as quoted by Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 359.

That's a fair description of how this passage ends.

A beaten and bloodied Paul looked out over the crowd who tried to kill him and – with the strength he had left – he put the gospel before them one last time. He identified with them. He pointed them to Jesus. He told them how to respond. He held nothing back.

And they hated him for it.

As readers, we are not surprised by this response. These same people had – just moments ago – lied about Paul, attempted to beat him to death, and shouted with glee at his arrest. But this bloodied, broken brother looked out over the crowd that had just tried to kill him and determined that he would attempt one last time to share with them the hope that he had received. This leads us to one final lesson from Paul's example:

5. He loved the people in front of him

I want to take a moment to point you to something that Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans. If you remember, Paul wrote to the Romans while he was on his way to Jerusalem. We catch a glimpse here into the heart behind this visit. And in Romans 9:1-5 Paul writes:

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit—² that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ **For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers**, my kinsmen according to the flesh.⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. ⁵ To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. (Romans 9:1-5 ESV)

Paul knew that he would be placed in chains upon his return to Jerusalem. He knew that – but he was not deterred. In fact, Paul says here that he would even be willing to be ACCURSED and CUT OFF FROM CHRIST if it meant the salvation of his people! Think about that: If the price to be paid for the salvation of the Jewish people was for Paul to go to hell, then HE WOULD PAY THAT PRICE! That language is so strong that it makes us feel uncomfortable, but THAT is the heart – that is the LOVE – that enabled this beleaguered, beaten, bleeding man to look back with

mercy and compassion at the crowd that tried to kill him and to address them as “brothers and fathers.” A famous old preacher once said:

Brethren, there is need of the same urgency now. Hell is as deep and burning as ever. Unconverted souls are as surely rushing into it. Christ is as free and pardon is as sweet as ever! Ah! how we shall be amazed at our coldness when we do get to heaven!⁴

Today, we are amazed at Paul’s heat. But in eternity, we will be amazed at our coldness.

Today, we are amazed at the great lengths to which Paul would go to see his people come to Christ. But in eternity, we will be amazed at how little we were willing to sacrifice.

Today, we are amazed at Paul’s love. But in eternity, we will be amazed at our apathy – and we might even recognize it as hatred.

The missionary Jim Elliot once wrote in his journal:

May we who know Christ hear the cry of the damned as they hurtle headlong into the Christless night without ever a chance... May we shed tears of repentance for those who we have failed to bring out of darkness.⁵

Paul wasn’t driven by guilt or shame, and neither should we be. He was driven by love. I pray that this same love would grip our hearts this morning. As we conclude, I want to send you out with one simple question: Who is God calling you to speak to?

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? (Romans 10:14 ESV)

To that end, let’s pray together.

⁴ Robert Murray McCheyne as quoted in Warren Wiersbe, *Treasury of the World's Great Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1979), 383.

⁵ Jim Elliot as quoted by Ruth Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 290.