

## THE INSURMOUNTABLE WALL OF BIGOTRY

Acts 21:27-22:29

### Acts 21:17-22:29

The Lord had warned Paul, and Agabus the prophet had predicted it would happen: go to Jerusalem and you, Paul, **will be bound** hand and foot. It is NOT going to go well for you.

But Paul wouldn't listen. He was bull headed and determined. He wanted to be in Jerusalem at the time of the annual feast of Pentecost. Just why THAT feast and not another is unclear, but he was determined to make it to Jerusalem by the Day of Pentecost and apparently he did.

So after meeting with James and the Jerusalem elders, and learning that there were a lot of Jewish converts to Jesus who thought Paul was preaching AGAINST Moses (which, as we saw last Sunday, was not quite correct), the church leaders came up with a plan. Maybe, they thought, if Paul would associate himself with some other believing Jewish men who were entering into a vow, complete with cutting off their hair (recall that Paul had done this to himself back in Acts 18:18), then people would understand that Paul was still okay with Moses. And so the plan was followed...

Paul would also enter into a vow, get his hair all cut off, and even pay any expenses that the other four men might incur in making their vows, getting their hair cut, giving an offering to the temple or whatever. By this, they reasoned, anyone and everyone would see that Paul **fit right in** with the rest of the Jews in Jerusalem. And so the plan was carried out.

For days it appeared that **all was going well** until one day some Jews from Asia (it doesn't say it, but maybe from near Ephesus) recognized Paul. Paul had, as you will recall, had more than a few run-ins with various Jews in various towns and cities that he had been visiting over the past number of years. And as Paul had cut off his hair in Cenchrea (in Greece) immediately before he had made his way to Ephesus (in Asia), it is possible that with his head now again shaved he not only caught the attention of others but also became **more recognizable** to those in Asia who had seen him before with a shaved head. But anyway, he was recognized. And once recognized, it didn't matter WHAT he was doing or just HOW CAREFULLY he was observing the

law of Moses. **The jig was up** and these who recognized him were now out to see him killed (verse 31).

Added to all of this is that some of Paul's traveling companions were Gentile Greeks – not Jews – and even though Paul had not taken them into that part of the temple grounds that was for Jews only, it was **assumed** that he must have done so. And so that even further fanned the flames of these people's anger toward Paul.

### **What a mess...**

- A near riot
- People screaming at Paul and then physically beating him
- The Roman tribune being made aware of the unrest that was going on
- Soldiers being called in to stop the turmoil and to arrest Paul

### **What a mess...!**

So they arrested Paul, cuffing him in chains, binding him hand and foot (just as Agabus had predicted). During the arrest Paul spoke to the tribune in Greek and this totally surprised the tribune who had, as he said, supposed Paul was an Egyptian.

As many of you know, Pastor Ed Bailey, of the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Lancaster is a good friend of mine. As he is a 6'10" tall **giant of a black man**, Ed tends to see everything through an **optical lens of race**. It has taken me years to truly understand this about Pastor Bailey but that is because I grew up as a white person in a white dominated society.

But since Ed sees everything through the lens of race, he picks up on things in the Bible that I would not even have really noticed. One of those things is right here in Acts 21:38 when the Roman tribune says to Paul that he thought Paul was an Egyptian. Now, as we all know, Egypt is in north **Africa**. The people living there are **not as dark skinned** as say the people of Sudan or Ethiopia (to Egypt's south), but they are definitely, on the whole, **much darker** than the people of Israel, Lebanon, Jordan or that surrounding area.

Just **WHY** the tribune would have thought Paul to be an Egyptian is not stated, but he certainly would not have

thought that of Paul if Paul was a blue-eyed blonde. Paul corrected the tribune, telling him that he was not from Egypt but from Tarsus, an Asian coastal port city on the Mediterranean Sea. Tarsus would have been firmly within the grasp of the Roman Empire. And unlike Egypt it did not have any history of defiance against the Roman Empire.

So Paul turned the conversation away from what the tribune may have expected would be an adversarial relationship to one of being at peace with each other. And with that Paul asked if he could speak to the crowd.

If the tribune was surprised that Paul could speak **Greek** he was likely even more surprised when, with his permission – and undoubtedly with Roman soldiers standing near him – Paul began to address the crowd in **Hebrew**.

And with that Paul gave a summary of **his life, his work** in seeing people who were part of "THE WAY" (an early term used for followers of Jesus) arrested, and then of **his conversion** on the road to Damascus.

As I read through this – and like many of you I have read this narrative numerous times – it is interesting to me that **his mentioning of Jesus apparently caused no stir...no problem at all.**

Twenty or so years earlier, back when Peter gave his now famous sermon on the day of Pentecost (as recorded in Acts chapter 2), it was Peter's reference to Jesus, whom they had crucified but God had raised from the dead, that caused **a huge stir** and, in the end, **a MASS TURNING in faith to Jesus**. And when Peter and John appeared before the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, the one thing they asked of Peter and John is that they not mention the name of Jesus again.

But now, these 20 or so years later, the mentioning of Jesus by name didn't apparently cause any stir at all. My **guess** is that that is because by now, the presence of Christian Jews in Jerusalem had become a **fairly common phenomenon**. There were likely more than a few Jewish families that, by this time, had at least one family member who had become a follower of Jesus. This was likely the kind of thing that people now sat around and talked about. And given what we read of the early Christian community in Jerusalem (which we can read of in the

early chapters of Acts), and how these Christians cared for one another, even if people had not yet become followers of Jesus, they had been seeing the good that was evident in those who had become Christians.

So Paul tells his story. In his story he drops names – Gamaliel, Ananias, Stephen – these were names that some of those listening would have known. Paul's story was a verifiable story. Undoubtedly at least some in the crowd had known Paul since he was much younger. One almost gets the impression that Paul could have finished out a really **effective sermon** on not only why **he** had come to believe and serve Jesus but on why **they** should do the same. Yes, it could have potentially been highly effective EXCEPT that Paul then committed **the unpardonable sin** before his Jewish audience.

Yes, they were Jews

Yes, they had persecuted and killed Jesus, a Jew

Yes, they had likewise persecuted and then stoned to death Stephen, yet another Jew.

And then Ananias, still another Jew, he figures into the story as well, and undoubtedly some from Damascus in Lebanon would have been acquainted with him.

All that and even more they could listen to and now even handle. But then **Paul committed the unpardonable sin** of mentioning...oh how could he have done it? He mentioned...**the GENTILES**...and not in a bad light!

AHHHH!

**THE WRETCHED GENTILES!!!!**

The Roman tribune and likely all those Roman soldiers who were standing there were, of course, Gentiles. So maybe they should have been a bit more careful. But to have a Jew standing before them, speaking to them in their own language, and then mentioning GENTILES without spitting, or swearing, or someone calling upon God to DAMN THEM ALL right then and there, it was just **too much**.

And so with that one word they called out "Away with him!" The text doesn't say it, but if we could somehow have been there, I bet we might have even heard a few cry out "Crucify him! Crucify him!"

Now, the apostle Paul's role in the formation and development of the Christian church **cannot be overly emphasized**. Paul has had a **profound impact** on even us today – nearly 2,000 years later.

- Just think of how we look to Paul's writings in our organizing of our churches.
- Or think of how we appeal to Paul's instructions when we are looking for church leaders.
- His various letters written to the churches of Asia, Macedonia, Greece and Italy are preached on, taught on and even memorized. Church youth Bible Quizzing Teams will often spend months learning what might be considered the smallest of minutia from these letters.
- Paul has helped us understand the meaning of justification before God
- Paul has helped us grasp the idea of God's election of some and non-election of others
- Paul has aided us in understanding how we each are to fit within a local church and how each of us has a role to play

But another teaching that is so "Pauline" (as theologians would say) and is addressed more clearly by Paul than by any other author of the Bible, is the whole idea of **the MYSTERY of Jews and Gentiles becoming ONE in Christ**.

### Ephesians 3:1-6

Long before American society fell back into **the trap of racial bigotry**, wherein whites worshipped God in one building and blacks in another, the true church had become an **homogenous melting pot** of black, white, Asian, African, European, rich, poor, slave, free, young and old, male and female...the church had become on earth what we are all going to be in heaven.

So if you have even an inkling of a racist bone in you, I'm here to tell you today that given how God operates, I am quite certain that if you have it in for Asians here, in glory, God's going to place your mansion, in heaven, for all eternity, on Beijing Boulevard. Or if you think you are somehow superior to those who are black, you'll be spending eternity on Ethiopia Avenue. And if you think that poor people are poor only because they are slothful, wasteful or ignorant, if

there is a Slum Street in heaven, that's where you will be for all eternity.

For with God there is no discrimination. Romans 2:11 says our God is not a discriminator or "respector" of persons. Now he has his elect – and some might consider that a form of discrimination. But he has his black elect, his white elect, his rich elect and his poor elect. Some are young and some come to him only when they are old. More than a few are women, and in our day and age, there are likely even some who are women, but think they are men, and will likely continue to think they are men until that day that God wakes them up and shows them what everyone else has known from the time they were born and the nurse marked them down as being a female on their birth certificate.

But God is not a discriminator or respector of persons. In light of that, one of the SADDEST parts of the history of the church is how the church of Jesus Christ **allowed itself** to let racial bigotry define it. We can't undo the past, but we can certainly ask for forgiveness for our mistakes. And the church made a HUGE mistake when it allowed itself to start looking white, or black, or Asian, or Hispanic when in truth it is a melting pot. The apostle Paul saw that...he understood that...and he was preaching that and teaching that before even most of the early church leaders had fully begun to grasp it. In Galatians chapter 2, Paul tells his readers of an occasion when he had to confront Peter, the kingpin of the entire church, for his hypocrisy in acting like he accepted Gentiles as being truly part of God's family, but only when there weren't other Jews around watching him.

Paul got it. The church is Jew and Gentile together. It took Christ's coming into the world for that mystery to begin to be understood, but there is no denying it now.

So Jew and Gentile, white and black, rich and poor, male and female – the walls of bigotry have been torn down! No one is better than another and no one is inferior to another.

But could these Jews in Jerusalem handle this?

No! Their bigotry ran SO DEEPLY through their veins that **they simply could not grasp it**. Their bigotry had blinded their eyes to seeing and understanding the truth.

How sad...how very, very sad.

At a recent elders' meeting I heard an elder pray that Burning Hearts Church might become more racially diverse. Amen! Amen!

Before our modern world, if the church showed itself to be a unified body of all sorts of colors, backgrounds and classes, there are few things that would speak to our modern world as loudly and clearly about the truth of Christ than simply that.

We're convinced that if people will just LISTEN to us that they can be persuaded about the truth of Christ. **But it is our current lack of racial diversity that is in great part keeping people from taking the time to listen.**

Up until this point in the book of Acts, Paul has faced a slew of opposition. He's been beaten up, arrested, whipped and imprisoned. All these things are mentioned. But with this arrest, Paul is about to face his greatest challenge and his greatest opportunity to speak before kings about the grace of God in Jesus Christ. But what is so interesting about it all is that THIS TIME, his arrest was not for preaching Christ...Christ's death for sinners...or even Christ's resurrection from the dead. This time his arrest was the result of him mentioning that God had a concern even for the Gentiles (22:21).

And that God did! For where would we – we Gentiles – be today if God had not had mercy also on us. For while Jesus may have come into this world to save sinners, and while he may have had the children of Israel as his primary focus, praise God that the blood shed on that cross 2,000 years ago was sufficient not only for Israel's sins but even for the sins of ALL who would turn to him.

*"Man of Sorrows!" what a name  
For the Son of God, who came  
Ruined sinners to reclaim,  
Hallelujah! What a Savior!*

*Bearing shame and scoffing rude,  
In my place condemned He stood;  
Sealed my pardon with His blood,  
Hallelujah! What a Savior!*

*Guilty, vile and helpless we,  
Spotless Lamb of God was He;  
Full atonement – can it be?  
Hallelujah! What a Savior!*  
(by Philip P. Bliss)