

## BIBLE SERIES: "EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"

by Mario Seiglie

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### **ACTS 21-23 PAUL'S ARREST, SPEECH TO THE CROWD AND BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN**



In the last study, Paul was taken by the Temple guards after being falsely accused of having introduced a Gentile into the Temple precincts.

Luke continues with the account, "Now as they were seeking to kill him, news came to the commander of the garrison that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. He immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them. And when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the commander came near and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and he asked who he was and what he had done. And some among the multitude cried one thing and some another. So when he could not ascertain the truth because of the tumult, he commanded him to be taken into the barracks. When he reached the stairs, he had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob. For the multitude of the people followed after, crying out, 'Away with him!' (Acts 21:31-36).

*Barclay* explains, "It was the time of Pentecost. Jews were present in Jerusalem from all over the world and certain Jews from Asia were there, who no doubt knew how effective Paul's work in Asia had been. They had seen Paul in the city with Trophimus, whom they very likely knew. The business of the vow had taken Paul frequently into the Temple courts and these Asian Jews assumed that Paul had taken Trophimus into the Temple along with him. Trophimus was a Gentile and for a Gentile to enter the Temple was a terrible thing. Gentiles could enter the Court of the Gentiles but between that court and the Court of the Women there was a barrier and above that barrier were inset tablets with this inscription—'No man of alien race is to enter within the balustrade and fence that goes round the Temple, and if anyone is taken in the act, let him know that he has himself to blame for the penalty of death that follows.' Even the Romans took this so seriously that they allowed the Jews to carry out the death penalty for this crime" (notes on Acts 21:31).

It is interesting that two of these inscriptions forbidding entrance to the Temple have been found, one in 1871 and another in 1935.

*Barclay* adds, "The Asian Jews then accused Paul of destroying the Law, insulting the chosen people

and defiling the Temple. They initiated a movement to lynch him. In the north-west corner of the Temple area stood the Castle of Antonia, built by Herod the Great. At the great festivals, when the atmosphere was electric, it was garrisoned by a cohort of one thousand men. Rome insisted on civil order and a riot was an unforgivable sin, both for the populace who staged it and the commander who allowed it. The commander heard what was going on and came down with his troops. For Paul's own sake he was arrested and chained by each arm to two soldiers. In the confusion the commander was able to extract no coherent charge from the excited mob and Paul was actually carried through the seething mob into the barracks. There was never a time when Paul was nearer death than this and it was the impartial justice of Rome which saved his life" (notes on Acts 21:35).

Luke continues, "Then as Paul was about to be led into the barracks, he said to the commander, 'May I speak to you?' He replied, 'Can you speak Greek? Are you not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a rebellion and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness?' But Paul said, 'I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city; and I implore you, permit me to speak to the people'" (Acts 21:37-39).

Paul had spoken to the Roman commander in fluent Greek, which caused him to consider Paul as a cultured man. Then the officer remembered an incident about three years before where an Egyptian false prophet had stirred up an uprising. Josephus, the Jewish historian, mentions him twice and his band of the Sicarii, or 'Assassins.'

Paul denies the charge and says he instead was a Jew born in Tarsus and not Egypt. He then asked and was granted to speak to the crowd in their native tongue, which was a dialect of Hebrew, formally known as Aramaic. Bruce adds, "Aramaic was not only the vernacular of most Palestinian Jews; it was also the common speech of all non-Greek speakers in Western Asia, as far east as (and including) the Parthian Empire" (*New International Commentary on Acts, Revised*, p. 413).

This took great courage and Paul gives his defense by narrating his conversion from Judaism to Christianity. This history is given three times in

the book of Acts, first in chap. 9, now in chap. 22 and lastly in chap. 26. Here, he fills in some details about what Ananias had actually told him.

Luke mentions, "So when he had given him permission, Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, saying, 'Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now.' And when they heard that he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, they kept all the more silent. Then he said: 'I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished. Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' So I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.' "And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me. So I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do. 'And since I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of those who were with me, I came into Damascus. Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there, came to me; and he stood and said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that same hour I looked up at him. Then he said, 'The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.' Now it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the

temple, that I was in a trance and saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.' So I said, 'Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.' Then He said to me, 'Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles'" (Acts 21:40-22:21).

Barclay brings out, "Paul's defense to the mob who are out for his blood is not to argue but to relate a personal experience; and a personal experience is the most unanswerable argument on earth. It stresses two things.

(1) It stresses Paul's identity with the people to whom he is speaking. He was a Jew and that he never forgot. He was a man of Tarsus and Tarsus was no mean city. It was one of the great ports of the Mediterranean, standing at the mouth of the River Cydnus and being the end point of a road which came all across Asia Minor from the far-off Euphrates. It was one of the greatest university cities of the ancient world. He was a rabbi, trained at the feet of Gamaliel who had been 'the glory of the Law,' and who had died only about five years before. He had been a persecutor in his zeal for the ancestral ways. On all these points Paul was entirely at one with the audience.

(2) It stresses the difference between Paul and his audience. The difference was that he saw Christ as the Savior of all men and God as the lover of all men. His audience saw God as the lover only of the Jews. They sought to hug the privileges of God to themselves and regarded the man who would spread them abroad as a blasphemer. The difference was Paul had met Christ face to face" (notes on Acts 22:1).

Luke tells how Paul's mention of Gentiles being called upset the Jewish crowd, "And they listened to him until this word, and then they raised their voices and said, 'Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!' Then, as they cried out and tore off their clothes and threw dust into the air, the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under scourging, so that he might know

why they shouted so against him. And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, 'Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?' When the centurion heard that, he went and told the commander, saying, 'Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman.' Then the commander came and said to him, 'Tell me, are you a Roman?' He said, 'Yes.' The commander answered, 'With a large sum I obtained this citizenship.' And Paul said, 'But I was born a citizen.' Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him. The next day, because he wanted to know for certain why he was accused by the Jews, he released him from his bonds, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down and set him before them" (Acts 22:22-30).

When Paul relates how Gentiles now have an opportunity to be part of Israel and God's people without being circumcised or following the ritual law [for it was not about the Ten Commandments], they went into a frenzy and the Roman officer, not knowing Aramean, ordered Paul scourged to get the answer of why the crowd was so enraged.

Barclay explains, "It was the mention of Gentiles which set the mob ablaze again. It was not that the Jews objected to the preaching to the Gentiles; what they objected to was that the Gentiles were being offered privileges before they first accepted circumcision and the [ritual and oral] Law. If Paul had preached the yoke of Judaism to the Gentiles all would have been well; it was because he preached the grace of Christianity to them that the Jews were enraged. They took the common way of showing their disapproval; they shouted and waved their garments and threw dust in the air, in the fashion of the east. The commander did not understand Aramaic and did not know what Paul had said; but one thing he did understand--he must not allow a riot and must deal at once with any man likely to cause a riot. So he determined to examine Paul under scourging. This was not a punishment; it was simply the most effective way of extracting either the truth or a confession. The scourge was a leather whip studded at intervals with sharp pieces of bone

and lead. Few men survived it in their right senses and many died under it" (notes on Acts 22:24). Remember, Jesus had been scourged before being crucified.

So Paul uses his Roman citizenship to prevent the scourging since it protected him from such torture or from any cruel way to die. It also gave him a right to a trial and even to appeal the verdict.

Luke continues, "Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, 'Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.' And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, 'God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?' And those who stood by said, 'Do you revile God's high priest?' Then Paul said, 'I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people'" (Acts 23:1-5).

Here they were inside the Roman fortress and all of a sudden, one of the priests, enraged that Paul had called the members of the Sanhedrin, "brethren" and had spoken of having a "good conscience," ordered for him to be struck in the mouth. After the fist hit him, Paul replied that God would punish him for doing this, not knowing the order had come from the reigning High Priest.

As Bruce points out, "The rights of defendants were carefully safeguarded by Jewish law, and they were presumed innocent until proven guilty. Paul had not yet been properly charged, let alone tried and convicted. The high priest, who was there to administer the law, had broken the law by ordering Paul to be struck...But the bystanders were shocked; that was no way to speak to the high priest. They do not appear to have been so shocked by Ananias' outburst, although that was no way for the high priest to speak. As soon, however, as they pointed out to Paul that the man to whom he spoke so freely was God's high priest, he apologized to the official...Paul's visits to Jerusalem since his conversion had been infrequent and short, and he probably did not know Ananias by sight" (pp. 425-427).

The next time, we plan to continue with this fascinating account of the courageous life of Paul.