

## THE EXPLOSIVE CHURCH

### (12) Destination Rome.

Acts 21:17-26. We take up the story with Paul reporting to the mother church his exploits for God in the mostly Gentile territory of Asia and Greece, with the warm response from the Jewish leaders at home. However, it was 10 years since the church in Jerusalem had made its great conciliatory gesture towards the Gentile believers (chapter 15) and much had changed. The Gentile church had grown large and powerful, a target for the very human fault of jealousy by the Jewish church with its vastly different background to its faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So we can understand James's anxiety to maintain peace and unity between the 2 groups, as he set out the problem before Paul in verses 20-25, that "*many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you teach the Jews to turn away from Moses*" (an incorrect assumption) and gave him the suggestion that he sponsor and join in the long-held purification rites of 4 believers who had made vows, so that all could see "that you yourself are living in obedience to the law."

Paul, perhaps sick to death of the strife he had encountered throughout his recent journey, was quick to comply with the leaders' suggestion, but was it a compromise on his part? After all, not long ago in Corinth he had written the epistle to the Romans, with his stunning declaration of "justification by faith to Jew and Gentile alike." In the face of it, the result was disastrous. Next day Paul went to the Temple with the 4, and some Asian Jews who saw him were quick to wrongly accuse him of heretical teaching. Verse 27 says they "stirred up the whole crowd and seized him;" already the prophecies of trouble in Jerusalem were being fulfilled. Paul was yet to see what an irreconcilable menace Judaism was to be to the Church.

***As always, Luke records with honesty the bad as well as the good. Should we judge Paul's actions to be a compromise or a valiant gracious attempt to keep peace and unity? What are our guidelines in such a situation?***

Verses 27-36. So, simply through a misunderstanding, Paul is falsely accused and almost murdered - suffering gross injustice at the hands of the religious people until rescued by the pagan Romans! In the following chapters Luke contrasts the reaction to the Gospel of the 2 communities - the Jews who were more and more hostile to it, and the Romans who were consistently friendly to it! Luke records in detail the 5 subsequent trials of Paul to show their importance to the work of the Gospel; through them all Paul proved that belief in Jesus as the Christ was in no way in conflict with the Jewish Scripture and that in no way had he violated any civil law. This innocence of wrongdoing was vital as a credential of the early Church.

Acts 21:37-22:29. What God-given strength and grace Paul had - bound in Roman chains - to speak to the crowd so warmly, calling them "brothers and fathers" just after they had almost lynched him! Though he spoke Greek to the Roman commander - thereby earning his respect - Paul used the native Aramaic as he spoke to the Jews, seeking to identify himself with them as he recounted honestly the story of his conversion to Christianity. We see here Paul's fine education and superb powers of mind - and his remarkable feat of intellectual balance and self-control after the violence he had just suffered. The crowd listened patiently for a while, until in 22:21 Paul used the hated word "Gentiles." That was the last straw. The riot began again and the Roman commander had to come a second time to Paul's rescue, this time taking him right into the barracks - wryly enough, the Fortress of Antonia which was connected by 2 flights of steps to the northern end of the Temple area! For the vigilant Romans, the tower overlooked the Temple grounds.

Not that the commander showed Paul much sympathy, ordering him to be flogged and questioned! Paul's Roman citizenship had already been violated by the chains that bound him before he could be tried, and now Paul used that legitimate trump card to escape further punishment and to strengthen the commander's respect for him which would come in handy later. Paul's unique blend of cultures, which had taken years of his young life to develop, was used by God at this time for his safety. God's timing is perfect!

***We trust in God to care for us, but that doesn't give us the right to be foolhardy. It is not lack of trust to use the brains He gave us to devise means for our own safety. How can we best keep a balance between common sense and undaunted faith?***

Acts 22:30-23:11. Paul had grown up in the wings of the Sanhedrin but they had no time for him now. Once again he used the affectionate "my brothers" but that only served to bring down punishment on his head as Ananias the high priest ordered him to be struck on the mouth. Paul, who had just been through 2 days of fearful mental, spiritual and physical stress, lost his composure for once (chapter 23:3) with "God will strike you, you whitewashed wall!" Verse 5 shows that he did not realise it was the high priest - one of the indications that his sight was not good - and he was quick to apologise. However, in his rebuke he had actually made an unwitting prophecy. Ananias was noted for cruelty and violence, and was a notorious thief of Temple funds: his rage at Paul's "blasphemy" was therefore hardly justified! A few years later, when the Jewish revolt against Rome broke out, Ananias was assassinated by his own people. So much for the respect supposed to be given to the high priest!

We see the humanity of Paul as he cunningly set the Pharisees against the Sadducees (who had no belief in angels or the resurrection) and notice here that, as a Christian, he still claimed allegiance to the high Pharisaic code of belief. The epitome of his message was, as he set out in Romans 1:4, that "Jesus was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead." That of course put the cat among the pigeons, with the Pharisees willing to release him, but the uproar among these great respected religious leaders became so violent that for a third time the commander had to rescue the long-suffering Paul! Yet this grim passage ends in verse 11 with a loving, justifying touch from God Himself. "Take courage! As you have testified about Me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

***What extreme bitterness comes with being falsely accused! Take courage - God knows the truth. In His good time vindication comes.***

Acts 23:12-35. It is ironic that only a short time before this Paul had written to the believers in Rome, (Romans 15:31) "Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea" and we see in this passage how God used half a regiment of Roman soldiers to answer that prayer! In this exciting cloak-and-dagger tale we can realise the social status of Paul's family: his sister must have been in very good standing to have learnt of the assassination plot, and her son to have had such easy access to the Roman barracks. Escaping to Caesarea (the headquarters of Roman rule for Judea and Samaria) and coming under the jurisdiction of the Roman governor Felix, Paul ended up under guard in Herod's palace - which in God's good providence was better than a gaol in Jerusalem! I wonder what happened to the 40 men who had "taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have killed Paul"! Did they really starve to death? Or did "the chief priests and elders" let them break their solemn oath? Tut tut!

***How long before the Roman believers learnt of God's answer to their prayers for Paul? About 3 years! Sometimes we have to wait far longer than that! But as Jesus urges us in Matthew 7:7-11, don't give up. It is our privilege to strengthen our fellow-workers through faithful prayer.***

### **Trial by Jewry!**

Acts 24:1-26:32. Jerusalem and Rome were the centres of 2 very strong power blocs. The faith of Jerusalem went back 2,000 years to Abraham. The rule of Rome extended almost 5,000,000 square kilometres around the Mediterranean Sea. Jerusalem's strength lay in history and tradition, Rome's in conquest and organisation. Yet Paul, no traitor to either church or state, faced his interrogators

calmly and courteously; his opening words to Felix are in strong contrast to the hypocritical flattery of Tertullus (24:2,3 and 10.)

Despite the corruption of Felix's regime, he "was well acquainted with the Way" (his wife was a Jewess) and did have a spark of sincerity and concern. Verse 23 shows his trust in the integrity of Paul and the kindness he showed to him in allowing him some freedom and visitors. Unfortunately Felix was recalled to Rome in AD 59/60 to answer for disturbances and irregularities in his rule, and in order not to annoy the Jews further, he left Paul - who had already been imprisoned for 2 years - still bound. We can't help wondering how much more church-planting Paul could have done in those 2 years! But it could have been during those 2 years that Luke, Paul's constant companion and doctor, was able to do his research for the writing of his gospel.

***We wonder how Luke felt, a qualified doctor with a good career, as his life became dominated by the needs of his friend Paul. We know little of his own personal life or his prowess in the social world, but we do know that millions of people have been led to God through the 2 books he found time to write!***

Festus, Felix's successor, (Chapter 25) appears to have had wisdom and honesty beyond that of Felix. On his visit to Jerusalem from Caesarea the Jews there, still baying for Paul's blood after 2 years, requested Festus to have Paul transferred to Jerusalem, their plan of course to carry out the aborted ambush and assassination. Festus wisely told them to come to Caesarea instead and when they arrived, they once again bombarded Paul with "many serious charges against him, which they could not prove." Festus, anxious to do the Jews a favour, suggested to Paul that he stand trial before him in the Jewish court in Jerusalem.

But Paul had had enough. "I am now standing in Caesar's court, where I ought to be tried," he countered. "I have not done any wrong to the Jews .... No one has the right to hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!" By law a citizen had the right to make this highest appeal and there was little Festus could do about it. After consulting with his council he bowed to the inevitable, in verse 12. "You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!"

Meanwhile, a few days later (verse 13) the Jewish King Agrippa II and Bernice (actually his sister) arrived in Caesarea to pay the customary respects to the incoming Roman ruler. Festus, puzzled at the strife Paul had caused among the Jews, felt it prudent to ask Agrippa for advice; Agrippa conveniently responded that he would like to hear this man himself and the following day a hearing was arranged. And so Paul joined a noble line - Herod the Great had tried to destroy the infant Jesus, his son Antipas beheaded John the Baptist (Jesus had labelled him "that fox"), his grandson Agrippa I slew James the apostle with the sword, and now Paul faced his great-grandson, Agrippa II.

In Chapter 26 Agrippa gave Paul permission to speak and Paul, in spite of all he had endured, was quick to take advantage of this great opportunity to proclaim the gospel. Skilfully he brought out what he and Agrippa had in common - their Jewish heritage - using it as a launching pad to bring Agrippa face-to-face with the truth of Jesus who could transform the life of the most sinful man. At this point Festus interrupted, charging Paul with insanity, but Paul persisted in probing Agrippa's conscience until the king blurted out uncomfortably, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" Paul's answer in verse 29 shows the heart of a man who truly yearns for the souls of men - "I pray that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."

The challenge was ignored, but Jew and Roman were both obliged to acknowledge Paul's innocence, Agrippa's conscience prompting him to say to Festus, "This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar." And so Paul was set on his way to fulfil God's planning.

***We stand in awe at the stature of this man Paul, who endured so much without ever wavering in his faith. We have to be thankful that he still had the psychological and mental energy to write his letters to the churches which we still use as our guide and comfort. Under threat of death, facing continuous false accusations, assaulted unjustly and publicly scorned, Paul steadfastly believed God's word, even saying with confidence to King Agrippa, "I have had God's help to this very day." Can this power be ours today? Why not? God does not change!***