

All things for the Gospel
Acts 21.

1 Corinthians 8
Romans 14
Psalm 124

This morning we are back in the book of Acts, in chapter 21. As we read this chapter this morning we will see Paul on his final journey back to Jerusalem before he is imprisoned by the Roman authorities there in Jerusalem. In a bit of a refresher since it has been a few weeks since we have been here, in chapter 20 we see Paul's warning to the churches that after he is gone there will be wolves who will enter and will lead people astray. And these wolves will come both from the outside, and from the inside. And we talked a bit on ways in which the church can guard herself from these wolves. The biggest deterrent, and the best defense that the church has from false teachers, and those who would seek to do her harm is to live within the truth of the word.

By that I mean, make no compromises, stand for the truth despite the struggle, be faithful to the reading of scripture, be in prayer and in a close walk with God together. As Paul instructs over and over, to put on brotherly love, seeking the needs, of one another over self. This is the opposite of those who would come in and cause disruption...for as Paul warns, the wolves will come in, speaking perverse things to draw away disciples to themselves. A selfish, arrogant, prideful seeking of power and control. Being grounded in the word of God, standing steadfast in love toward one another is the most effective defense that we have against these wolves which Paul warns about.

But those wolves will not go quietly, they will attack, they will seek to devour all that they can. As Jim was talking last week about our defense against the attacks of Satan, and that Satan is like a roaring lion going about seeking whom he may devour, these wolves who come in and seek to destroy the things of God, to cause division, derision, who twist scripture, who seek to divide and erode any unity that is found in Christ so that they may themselves be followed. Satan's tools are lies and deception, to take something that is true and twist it, pervert it so as to make such truths ineffective. As Christians Satan is powerless against us, that is those of us who are God's can not, and will not fall away. Our soul has been bought and paid for, we are not mere slaves to Christ as we were once slaves to sin and the devil, but we have been made free, and have become heirs along with Christ. And that is not something that Satan can take away, for it is a work of the almighty, omniscient Sovereign Lord of all of creation.

But he can hinder, and that is his ploy, though Satan knows that he can not have you, he can work to make you ineffective, or rather less effective in your ministry. Which I think is something that Jim will be talking about over the coming months, the fiery darts of Satan's attack against us in an attempt to make us ineffective for the cause of God's kingdom. There is a military strategy to maim and inflict pain upon the opponent, for the psychological damage, and the care for the wounded will weigh heavy upon the soldiers. This is a type of gorilla warfare, employed by a force who has little to no chance of winning the war, but instead look to demoralize its enemy, strike fear and make them ineffective so that maybe some battles maybe won. This is the tactics of Satan, he knows he can't win the war in the end but will be happy to just win a few battles here and there knowing that if he can render God's people ineffective then he hopes he can keep his grip on those who are his, if he can hinder the spread of the gospel, the ministry of God's word then he can keep others in the bondage of sin for it is the word which carries with it the power of God to save souls.

There is a warfare that is being waged, and it is for the souls of mankind. And that is why we are here, that is why we gather together, that is why we worship together, that is why we pray together, so that we may be equipped and encouraged to wage this war. The main function of Christians gathering to worship together is not a recruitment tool for the army of the Lord, but it is triage, this here is where the wounded come to be ministered to. The purpose of gathering together is to rest and find some comfort in the presence of our Lord, and to prepare for the next battle. To encourage, to exhort, to rally the troupes in preparation to go into the world to reach the lost.

Which is why we must remain faithful to the word of God, to stand firm and trust in him. If we begin to make concessions, compromises, and not believe the word as it is written we lose our strength, and power. We can not pick and chose parts or sections that we like and dislike, this word is the word of God that was given to us, it has withstood time itself, it has remained through the falling of kingdoms and the persecution of Christians throughout generations. It is the eternal, inspired word given so that we may believe, so that we may remain strong and faithful to the one who has purchased us by his blood. And this is the debate that we will see in our passage today, as we read this passage this morning in acts, which tells of Paul arriving back at Jerusalem, we will see it was not a smooth, joyous occasion but rather is the peak of what has been building for a while as Paul has been journeying preaching Christ and his fulfillment of the requirements of the law. In each city Paul had journeyed, it wasn't long before there were Jews who would seek to persecute him, and it is of course no different in Jerusalem.

So, let us go ahead and read acts chapter 21, the entire chapter this morning. (read acts 21) This chapter is the beginnings of a series of Paul's trials, and imprisonment, from which he wrote many of his letters. As we go through these last chapters in this book, accounting Paul's persecution The Theologian William Cunningham makes the observation that there are four particular contributions made in these final chapters to this theme of persecution that Luke writes. First, as we saw this morning in chapter 21, persecution continues to arise from Jewish unbelief. Verse 27 we see it says, that Jews from Asia had come and stirred up the people against Paul. These are likely the same ones he had issues with before, who have seemed to take it upon themselves to follow him and stir up the people against him. The second point, is that Paul is persecuted because of his belief in the resurrection of Christ, the very one that they put to death. 3rd, persecution occurs within the context of divine providence. Notice in our reading this morning, there was several warnings of the coming persecution, this was not a surprise when it happened, it was expected...the holy spirit warned it was coming, but Paul was determined that he must go despite such a future awaiting him. Verse 13, he says, "I am ready, not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.

IT would seem that Paul also realized that his time of travel and missionary outreach, establishing churches, is coming to an end and that God has something else planned for him. And in this case, it is this captivity in which he wrote much of what we have in the new testament. There is a parallel between Paul, and Christ in their final journey to Jerusalem..both knowing persecution awaited them, but both continuing on unwavering. In Paul's case it was a matter of faith, being determined to go, not out of some twisted desire for persecution and death, but because he felt that is where God was leading, and in faith he went forth, as he said in verse 13, "for the name of the Lord Jesus." In other words, to put it simply, persecution is not outside the realm of God's providence, it is not outside the realm of God's will for his children, but instead is used by God for his glory, which is why Paul can stand steadfast before the knowledge of the coming persecution, determined, and yet hopeful for there is nothing outside of purpose and will of God.

And the 4th aspect that we will see as we go through these last chapters and the account of Paul here, the witnesses to Jesus are persecuted in continuity with Jesus. Jesus said, in John 15, the world hated me, understand that it will hate you also. Some sort of persecution is inevitable for the believer, having that understanding helps us to prepare for when it does arise, to stand on the faith that we have been given, and to trust in the one who has given it. Persecution can come in many different forms, from lesser to greater, from mockings, to hardships, oppression and imprisonment because of beliefs, or even death. No matter what we may face, what matters is that we stand true to the word of God. For it is by doing so that through such times glory is given to God. Faith through persecution also has a ministerial effect. Those outside watching and looking will see your faith in action, will witness what it is like to truly believe in this God, to be like Paul, willing to die for the cause of Christ, willing to suffer for the truth of the word. We don't know how God will use even persecution and suffering to further the gospel. Much of Acts can be summarized in the gospel spreading through persecution.

As we have seen over and over again, Paul comes to a new city, proclaims the gospel, gets beaten, imprisoned or driven out of the city, goes to the next city and the same happens again. As we have talked about before earlier in this book, God used persecution to drive the gospel into the world. Persecution of Christians in Jerusalem drove them to flee into other nations, bringing the gospel with them, so that when Paul and others traveled they would meet small pockets of these believers throughout their journeys. And now in our passage this morning we see that Paul has returned to Jerusalem and is welcomed by the believers there, verse 17 says that the brethren received them gladly, but some of the ones who had caused him problems in Asia have seemed to have followed him to stir up the people against him again.

I also find it interesting in reading this passage, that though Paul has taught not only the Gentiles, but the Jewish believers as well that the law had been fulfilled in Christ, and many of those traditions and things were shadows, and examples to point to Christ, still when he arrives at Jerusalem on the advice and request of the brethren there he observes the ritual days of purification. I think that this should be understood that not that Paul believes that such things are truly necessary but is doing so for the sake of the gospel itself, to be able to make peace with, and minister to the Jews there in Jerusalem. As he wrote in Romans 12, "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men." or as he wrote in 1 Corinthians, I think is exactly what he is doing here in the observance of the purification ritual, 1 Corinthians 9, "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under law that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ) that I might win those who are without the law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel sake, that I may be a partaker of it with you."

It is not as though Paul here is compromising his belief, in fact there is no real evidence throughout the book of Acts that Paul was explicitly encouraging Jewish converts to abandon their law and customs. In verse 21, James says, that these Jewish Christians who are still zealous for the law, have been informed about Paul, implying that there has been some false accusations. And he goes on to confirm that there is no change in stance or understanding when it comes to the Gentile believers who were never under the law, but that this is a different issue and subject, For a Jew to deny the law and ritual practices would be to go against their entire culture, so that even those who have believed upon Christ for salvation still observed the Jewish traditions because it was who they were.

Now it would seem that there is rumor about Paul, and James in advising Paul to observe the days of purification is trying to show that those rumors are false. Paul complies for this is not something that takes away from the gospel message, this is not a ritual done to seek favor before God, or to earn righteousness, so it becomes more about the gospel's reach and his ability to minister to these people than the purification ritual itself. And I think that there is a rather important lesson for us as Christians to learn here taken from Paul's principle of becoming all things to all men so that he may win some. There are areas of compromise, where we can maybe set aside things that may culturally makes us uncomfortable in an attempt to understand and to reach others for the sake of the gospel. I am sure that there was quite a few things that was a cultural adjustment for Josh, and his family as they sought to minister to those in the fishing village in Mexico.

But the important distinction to be made here, that such compromises, or concessions, do not compromise the gospel, nor contradict the word of God. This very principle can be used as an excuse, and indeed has been used, to justify even sinful behavior under the guise of "being all things to all people." Though in many ways we are free in Christ, we are not free to sin, and indulging in sin has and never will be a good witness, the witness that we have is that Christ has freed us from such bondage, and that we no longer are a slave to it but have instead become victorious over it through Christ..and it is that victory, through him, that we have hope in this life, and the life to come. Paul recognizing mankind's penchant for finding excuses addresses this in the passage we just read in 1 Corinthians, when he says, I became like those without the law though myself not being without a law toward Christ. That is, to paraphrase Paul, though I set aside my cultural upbringing, laid aside those distinctions that made me a Jew, so that I may sit, and eat, fellowship and witness to the gentiles, I did not use it as an excuse to sin against God, for I am still subject to God who works conviction through the holy spirit.

The important defining factor here is the ministry of the gospel, the seeking those who are lost, and to seek to break down any walls of separation that there maybe for the sake of the gospel itself. To some I suppose it may seem disingenuous, that is, putting aside your freedoms, for the sake of the gospel. Again this is something that Paul addressed in the book of Romans chapter 14, "One person esteems one day above another, another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in their own mind. He who observes the day observes it to the Lord, and who who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. he who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks, and he who does not eat, to the lord he does not heat and gives God thanks. For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself, for if we live, we live to the Lord and if we die, we die tot he Lord, therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lords." The idea here, is that we who are in Christ have freedoms, but Paul goes on and says, let us resolve not to put a stumbling block or cause to fall in your brothers way. Again this plays into the being all things for all people so that we may win some, and to as much as within your power live peaceably with all men.

And we do so, for the sake of the gospel message, for the sake of the ministry. It is not that we are being hypocritical by putting aside some freedoms, or cultural differences, it is that we are seeking to be at peace, and not put forth any stumbling blocks for our brethren. The easiest example I can think of, is alcohol consumption, there is no prohibition against it in scripture, in fact we see the opposite, but there is warnings about drunkenness, and being overtaken by it. Again, not letting your freedom become a vehicle for sin. But how does this apply in the context of what Paul does here in the purity ritual, or in his writings in Corinthians, and Romans? Though we may have the freedom, if we know that it will hinder our ministry, or become a stumbling block for our brothers and sisters it is best to set aside that freedom them to cause another to sin.

During the time when we were looking for a pastor, going through different candidates, interviewing people this topic came up, for one candidate talked of having bible studies at the local bar. I asked him how is this not putting a stumbling block before our brothers or sisters who may struggle with alcoholism? His response was one of callousness, and that we should not have to put aside our freedoms in Christ for the weaker believer but rather build them up. Why that may sound great and all, Scripture literally tells us, that putting aside our freedoms for those who may struggle with such things is exactly what we are to do. This is not being hypocritical as some may say, it is being respectful and honoring of the individual. If our conduct is to be one of love toward one another, and preferring one another over ourselves, then is not setting aside our preferences, or our freedoms a part of that? so that we may minister, and meet people where they are?

The end goal, and the purpose for all of this, should be the gospel, and the glory of Christ. Paul did not go through the 7 day's purification necessarily because he believed it necessary, he had gentiles traveling with him, he lived among them daily, it was not as though he was going to now shun those gentiles who came to Jerusalem with him. To Paul what mattered was the ministry, and he did not want to be cut off from ministering to those who were in Jerusalem, so he did what he believed was necessary so that he may reach them. But in the end it didn't matter, for false accusations, and rumor ruled the day, and they sought to kill him for it. Sometimes no matter how much we try to live at peace, with all men, there comes a time where it is not possible, and when that time comes we must be sure that we are ready to stand, uncompromising upon the truth of the gospel. But we must do so, in love resting upon Christ through it. It is an interesting line to walk for us Christians, to on one hand be bold, and strong for the gospel, and on the other to be meek, and mild for the gospel. But thankfully, we don't do this alone, we have the holy spirit who walks us through, who helps us to know when to stand strong, and when to be meek.

And this is why gathering together, praying together, worshiping and fellowshiping together is important. It all serves too equip, encourage and prepare ourselves for these things. Supporting one another, in love so that the gospel may be preached, and that God may get the glory.