

The Christian's Damascus Road Acts 22

James 2

James 3

Responsive Psalm 103:1-10

Last week we read chapter 21, which ended rather abruptly after the arrest of Paul, so this week we will be taking on the second half of that account in chapter 22 this morning. Paul had arrived back in Jerusalem, knowing at this point that he would be facing persecution for the revelation of the holy spirit by many in his last days before arriving foretold that he would be bound and taken. In chapter 21 we see that there are many who were happy to see him arrive, and greeted him and received him and his traveling companions happily. After Paul had given an account to the elders there in the church at Jerusalem, they too also reported to him how the Lord had been working in Jerusalem, at verse 19-20 "When they had greeted them, Paul told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law."

It would seem that they were reporting a large group who had now joined in belief of Jesus Christ as the Messiah, but they were yet connected to, and very zealous toward the law. As I had mentioned last week, the Law, traditions, and rituals that they followed was an ingrained part of their culture, it had become their identity as a nation, and as a people. This was not something that they could merely separate themselves out of, for it was intrinsically part of who they were as a nation, and a people. Paul and the leaders of the church there in Jerusalem did not seem to make a big deal out of it, for as we looked at chapter 21 last week, Paul went along with the purification ritual in an attempt to disarm the accusations against him. Some may look at this passage, and find within it justification for law keeping as believers, pointing to the Church in Jerusalem as an example of a people who believed upon Jesus Christ, but not only followed the law, but were zealous for it.

There are a few reasons why this logic doesn't really connect, first off, is the fact that in the time of Paul, in Jerusalem there is a close relationship and connection between the religious faith of the Jews, and the political system and national identity. Here, in the United States, we at our core have been founded upon the idea of the freedom of religion, our government does not dictate what, or how its citizens should worship, for there is a separation between church and state. That is not the case here in Jerusalem, the Jewish synagogue, and the nation of Israel were inseparable. I think that this is an important distinction to make, for the reality is for most of us here today, the Jewish law never had any bearing on us, that is...it was given to the Jews and by in large we are all gentiles. Given that, there is already a separation between the 2 that was not present in Jerusalem. So to attempt to bring the law back into the gentile church, is unnecessary as we even see reiterated again in chapter 21, as the Elders of the Church in Jerusalem again confirm in verse 25, "But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.

So to make an argument that we today, as Christians are to look to the law is a misunderstanding of the gospel on multiple levels. Then to extend it even further, it is also unnecessary for the any, whether Jew or Greek to observe the law, if the observance is to gain righteousness or holiness, for the reality is that we are found righteous and holy not because we keep the law, but because God has fulfilled it on our behalf through Jesus Christ.

Again this is how Paul can say, to the Jew I became like a Jew so that I may reach some, and to those without the law, I became as one without the law so that I may reach some. Paul was not being ingenuous, or hypocritical, but rather he recognized that the law itself, and the keeping of it was inconsequential to the christian for it had already been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. So, for the sake of the gospel, Paul would concede, and set aside his freedoms so that he may be an effective minister of the gospel. Knowing that these who were a part of the Jerusalem Church were zealous for the law, therefore he observed their ordinances to disarm their accusations against him. But, then as we see these men from Asia came and stirred up trouble, bringing false accusations, speculations, and here say to turn the people against Paul, making it out to be a hypocrite, a liar, and a deceiver.

So it says in verse 30, And all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple. Verse 31 says that the sought to kill him. They became an unruly mob, seeking to take punishment into their own hands which was against the Roman rule, for though Rome allowed for the practice of different religions, the leaders in Jerusalem were not given the power to enact the death penalty, which is why they had to appeal to Rome in the crucifixion on Jesus. But here, it is an unruly mob, set upon killing Paul which was illegal under the Roman rule, but their anger and hatred toward Paul as this supposed impostor and deceiver drove them to a state of frenzy, which is why the Roman Commander sent his soldiers. IT was an unlawful gathering, resulting in an unruly mob, which was, left unchecked going to lead to the death of one of Rome's subjects, and as the commander will find out in chapter 22, not only was Paul a Jew under Roman rule as were the others, he himself was a natural born Roman citizen which gave him certain rights and protections under the Roman law.

This morning we are going to be looking at Paul's defense against this unruly mob who sought to kill him. Starting in verse 1, of chapter 22, let us go ahead and read that this morning, reading the entire chapter. Paul in his address here to the people shows proper respect the gathering of people, for he addresses those who would be his seniors, as well as his equals and those who were younger when he addresses them by Men and Brethren as he is seeking to persuade them that his mission is rooted in Judaism, and is without a doubt the will of God. In his account of the Lord's appearance to him on the road to Damascus it is told in a way that would have appealed to the people of Israel for they were used to hearing of such encounters with God in their own scriptures, and history. Even Paul's practice of his ministry of going first to the Jews in the synagogues of each city he entered before the gentiles shows his loyalty to Israel, and his deep desire for them to join with him in the faith of the fathers who came before, believing and trusting upon the one and only Messiah.

In his recounting of his Jewish heritage and history in verse 3 he equates himself to this crowd, "I was taught according to the strictness of our fathers law, and was zealous toward God as you are all today." Paul himself was once like them, and I think that is one of his points in sharing his experience with them, in a hopes to show how God has worked through him, one who was like them, zealous for the law, a persecutor of those who believed that Jesus was the Messiah, just as they are seeking to do to him now. And to show that his claims were true, he invokes the high priest himself as a witness, knowing full well that Paul had approached the council to receive written permission to go forth and seek Christians from Damascus to Jerusalem for punishment. Paul shares these details about himself in an attempt to highlight the transformation of faith, and a deeper understanding of the purpose of these very Laws and Traditions that he himself, just like this gathering of people were zealous for.

In this address to the people, he is clearly seeking to persuade the audience there in his defense. They were accusing him of being an apostate, by making false accusations that he had brought gentiles into the temple, and was teaching against their law. By giving this account of himself, he is showing his heritage in an attempt to prove these accusations to be false. Paul's theological roots took place right there in Jerusalem, taught by Gamaliel who was a Pharisaic teacher of the law and the member of the Sanhedrin and was greatly respected by all people. It has been argued that Gamaliel was arguably the most significant and influential Pharisaic educator in the early 1st century. Paul's education under Gamaliel likely took place around the age of 13, at which point he was as he says in verse 3, "taught according to the strictness of our fathers law." A Pharisee of Pharisees, given an education in the study and practice of Pharisaic teaching from the highest order and most respected teacher. His zeal for God and the purity of Judaism was unmatched.

We see this in the following verses as he lays out this account of how he hunted down, and persecuted to the death, all those who followed Christ, with no partiality, both men and women. And this was something that the high priest, and whole council could testify to. It was a well known, and documented fact. There was probably even records of the letters that Paul had obtained giving him authorization to imprison all those who followed Jesus. But Paul goes on and shares his encounter with God on the road to Damascus, in an attempt to explain to this crowd the radical change, going from one who would persecute and imprison the men and woman who followed the teachings of Jesus and his disciples, to now being one himself. It is a challenge that he is setting before them, inviting them to reevaluate what they know about him, and Jesus, and possibly change themselves. Even here, after being beaten with the intention of death, he still has not given up to persuade those who were seeking his death to accept God's calling in his own mission, and in the gospel of glorifying the Messiah of which he preached.

This account of Paul's conversion is the second time it is recorded in Acts, first appearing in chapter 9 but here being told by Paul himself from his perspective rather than by Luke. In Paul's recalling of this account he notes that it was about noon, the brightest time of day and yet a light shown even brighter. The interesting note here, is that his traveling companions saw the light. They all fell to the ground but they did not hear the voice of Jesus, other than a sound like thunder, nor were they blinded by the light as Paul was. This was a message directly given to Paul, and for Paul, the others were not chosen to see or hear Christ personally as Paul did. I remember listening to Vic preaching about this account, and he would conclude that to be saved, one must have their own Damascus road experience. Having been raised in the church myself, and saved at a fairly young age, this was something that I struggled with, and pushed back on with him a bit not having been one who had a seemingly stark change in my testimony. But, I do think that he was right. The bible describes faith, and belief in Christ as the new birth, and that we are made new creatures in him, whatever that entails for each individual one can not argue that it isn't a stark Damascus road change.

When one sees and hears God, and is confronted with their sin, the response can be none other than like Paul's...fall to the ground, and cry out, What should I do? The answer, repent, believe, turn from your sin and follow him. One can not be confronted by God and not change. The realization of sin, is a crushing, destroying reality with Christ being the only hope of escape. Like Paul, when we are confronted by God we are knocked down, torn apart, and we seek to hide ourselves from his light, but when God comes for you, there is no hiding for his light exposes every bit of darkness in you, but then he reaches out his hand and says, take my hand, follow me and your sins, will be forgiven.

This is the irresistible grace of God, how could you not cling to one who shows you such mercy. When he allows you to see yourself for who you really are, we were just as he described the Pharisee's in the book of Matthew, he said they are white washed tombs, painted clean on the outside, but inside are full of rot, decay, and death. So to are we before the new birth, we may try to reform, we may try to live a good life but the reality is that inside our heart is full of deceitful wickedness, self serving pride and arrogance, and a hatred toward God for he is the light that shines revealing the rot and decay inside of us. But along with the irresistible grace of God, comes his elective calling, It is personal, it is meant for you. Much like the account of Paul here, is the calling of God in salvation as well, the call to believe goes out, all can see the light, and hear the rumble, but unless God chooses to reveal it to you directly you will not truly see, nor hear. The calling of God's people, is a personal, individual calling. You can not be saved by proxy, by that I mean just because you were raised in a Christian home, does not make you a Christian, without that personal Damascus Road experience, without being approached by God revealing your sinfulness, and the conviction that it brings, without repentance, there is no true faith.

One can not merely claim belief, but rather their life must then show it. The life of the believer is marked with repentance, we seek to flee from sin, not toward it. But there are times we are caught up in it, for we still live in this body..but the difference is, those who are God's will not wallow in that darkness for long, for once revealed again it is like the Damascus Road, we fall to our face and repent for again we have failed the one who has given us everything. Do you see how this truly is a new life in him? We go from seeking our own desires, to seeking the desires of God in our lives, we go from pursuing our own fulfillment, to seeking to fulfill God's desire for our own lives. We go from reveling in he darkness, seeking sin, after sin to fill an uncontrollable hunger and emptiness in our lives, to sitting and resting at the feet of the savior, full and satisfied by his grace.

The new birth is a stark change, we truly do become a new creation in Christ Jesus. Paul in his letter to the Galatians highlights this difference, chapter 5, verse 16, "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh." Those who are God's are spiritually minded, no longer bound to the desires and whims of the flesh, but have the Spirit to convict and to guide., verse 17, "For the flesh lusts against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish." Again the spirit's conviction working in you against the sinful desires of the flesh, and he goes on to list the desires and works of the sinful flesh. "These works are evident, which are adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like, of which I tell you beforehand just as I told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God."

This is a descriptor of the old man, each and everyone one of us could be defined by this list one way or another before Christ, before the new birth, before we were given the spirit to believe, But now,those who are Christs, the Spirit dwells in us and produces, Love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." It is a stark change, a life defined by sin and rebellion changed to a life defined by the grace and mercy of Christ. It should be a noticeable, tangible change within the life of an individual who comes to believe upon Christ. This was one of the points that James wrote about, He wrote, "What does it profit, m brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? And also, But someone will say, You have faith, and I have works Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works."

There is an outward, notable difference in the life of the believer, a Damascus Road experience if you will. A transition from once being lost and undone, to being found and fulfilled in Christ. It is more than just a mere belief, it is a change of who you are at the core. Those who have been called into this new birth, have become a new creature who will produce good works through faith because they love the Lord. The spirit ministers to you in assurance and belief, working through you to do the will of the father, convicting of sin, driving us to repentance. There is a type of faith without the spirit, but it is a false faith, a faith which strives to seek to gain merit before God, a faith that says I am good enough, or a deceitful faith which claims belief but is not more than words, a faith defined by James when he said, "IF a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and you say, depart in peace be warmed and filled but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Likewise faith by itself, if it has not works is dead."

Paul had a type of faith, a belief to find favor with God he must adhere to the Mosaic law, and he saw all those who followed Christ as blasphemers against this holy god, for they were putting their faith in something else, they were justified by something else. Paul's faith before he was confronted by Christ, was a false faith, a faith that led him to beating, imprisoning and killing God's people. We must be wary that our faith is genuine, that we are not deceiving ourselves, seeking to gain favor through our good deeds, but rather resting in Christ, and having our good deeds flow out of a love for him, not as a way to gain favor but merely as a result of a changed heart. MY challenge for you this morning is the question. Have you had a Damascus road like experience? As I had said before, this was something I struggled with, Vic made the statement that unless you have had this experience then you do not truly have faith. I have come to agree with him on this, for the life of the Christian is a stark difference, and if you can not recognize within yourself that change then I contend as Vic did, you just very well may yet need to repent and submit to Christ. No one can be confronted by the holiness of Christ, having their own sin and darkness revealed and not walk away a changed person. Have you had this change?