

53—Acts 21.37-22.29—Tumult vs. Testimony

I. Introduction

- a. When we ended last week, the people are furious and vicious and I want to understand why.
 - i. “I think the Jews feel some pressure to remain distinctive from the Gentiles because their self-identity was wrapped up in eating kosher food, Sabbath observance, circumcision, a certain worldview, language, and their own customs. But Paul seems to be able to take down those barriers and that threatens their self-identity.”
 1. “For devout, conservative, Jews from Jerusalem, what was at issue was the Law, the temple, and belief that they were the people of God. From their perspective, Paul was destroying what God himself had set up. He was entangling the people of God with pagans. Not only was he jeopardizing their identity, he was blaspheming the Almighty, whose people they were and whose revelation they were appointed to obey and preserve.”
 2. “At the same time, it is hard to miss the element of ownership: these people were acting as though God was the exclusive property of ancestral Jews. From Paul’s perspective, this entailed a profoundly mistaken and even perverse reading of the OT, and a sadly tribal vision of a domesticated God.”
 3. D.A. Carson (Jan. 22, For the Love of God, vol. 2)
- b. And hence the sign this week: Christ is no tribal deity. We need to understand this because we can also be like this with far less justification than these Jews.

II. Main Point

- a. Why do the people turn nasty and violent? (I make this point because Luke and the story cause me to ask this when at verse 22 they had not raised their voices about Jesus but rather that God sent Paul to the Gentiles.)
- b. God is no tribal deity. Christ died for all peoples of all nations and the way salvation comes to the people is by hearing the gospel and believing; not a nationalist riot.

III. Outline

- a. 37-40—Paul seeks permission to speak to a malicious mob
- b. 1-5—Paul makes his defense that he was the good hometown boy
- c. 6-16—Paul testifies that a good Jew receives the salvation through Jesus
- d. 17-21—Paul reveals God’s mission to the Gentiles
- e. 22-29—Paul uses his dual citizenship strategically

IV. Exposition

- a. We left off last week with Paul being carried up the steps to the barracks barely escaping a malicious mob. James and the elders’ plan didn’t work but Paul’s did because he gets an opportunity to speak this chaotic crowd. What I think we are seeking to understand is why are the people so violent and angry? They want a riot but Paul seeks a word.
 - i. I think we all feel the temptation to respond the way the Jews did. We had rather blow up the building than do the slow patient work of witnessing to the grace of Christ in the gospel.
 1. For example, I am whole-heartedly opposed to abortion and many other things we do in this country to destroy life. But blowing up abortion clinics is not the way. The people still want to have and perform abortions and they will find a way.
 - a. But many pregnancy centers are doing slow work of teaching and loving each woman that walks through their doors.
 2. With the alternative, we feel like we have accomplished something. We are fighting for a cause. Marched in a rally. Put a sign in our yard. Voted a particular way.
 - a. I read Wednesday morning in Psalm 108 that vain is the salvation of man. But with God on our side, we shall triumph.

- b. We are here to glorify God and make disciples of all peoples. History tells us that nationalism has never worked—Israel being the primary example of a nation unable to walk with God as a nation under his covenant and instruction.
 - i. That’s not to say there’s anything wrong with God’s law or God himself but rather there’s something terribly wrong with us.
 - c. So, if you have a tendency towards this new fade of Christian Nationalism, I’d urge to consider our text today.
- ii. As we begin here in verse 37, recall that the people have gone absolutely mad. They are ready to kill but Paul seeks permission to share a word with the people.

(Acts 21:37-40) ³⁷ As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the commander, "May I say something to you?" And he said, "Do you know Greek? ³⁸ Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?" ³⁹ Paul replied, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people." ⁴⁰ And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language...

- iii. Imagine, 5 minutes ago the mob was beating you to a pulp and now you are in chains being carried by Roman soldiers up a flight of steps into the barracks. And the thing that crosses your mind is NOT self-preservation but you would like to say something to the people.
 - 1. And strangely enough, we will see it’s not a word of vengeance. He’s not seeking an opportunity to incite the crowd but rather bear witness about the saving gospel of Jesus Christ.
 - 2. Just notice the differences in the Jerusalem tribe and Paul. He asks the commander for permission to speak a word to him.
 - a. He doesn’t demand but the people are saying, “Away with him,” while Paul displays respect for authority.
 - b. The commander is caught off guard that Paul speaks Greek so fluently because he thought he was the Egyptian who had recently stirred up a revolt.
 - i. This Egyptian guy had formed a group called the Assassins to overthrow Rome’s reign over Israel. They were described as Judean Nationalists.
 - c. Paul makes sure to clarify his identity.
 - i. I am not the Egyptian. I am a Jew, from Tarsus.
 - ii. But he doesn’t identify himself as a Roman citizen, yet.
 - 1. If you recall back in Acts 16 in Philippi, Paul made known to them he was a Roman citizen AFTER they had beaten him with rods and imprisoned him.
 - 2. And as we progress in this story, we know Paul makes this known later.
 - 3. But why does he not tell them now?
 - a. My guess is that he doesn’t see the need just yet and he doesn’t want to risk not being able to speak a word to the people.
 - b. Whatever the reason, we know he chooses to forgo his right as a citizen at this point.
 - c. This is another lesson for us. Respect authority and be willing to forgo your rights as a citizen of the state for the sake of the gospel.

3. I think it's absolutely astounding that Paul is granted permission to speak. If I were that commander, I would be at least hesitant to grant that not knowing what he is going to say nor how the people will respond.
 - a. But permission is granted and Paul gets the stage he was looking for. How fitting it was that he spoke to them while in chains. He is displaying Jesus' sufferings through his own body.
 - b. The result of Paul's seeking to speak a word calms the mob into silence.
 - i. See the difference! The crowd incited each other for war but Paul brings peace.
4. How does your tribe handle things?
 - a. Many think a law or duty is enough. Law and duty never go far enough. Love does.
 - i. (1 Cor. 13:1-3) If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.
 - ii. (1 Cor. 13:4-7) ⁴ Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
 - b. Kimberly was reading the book by Jinger Duggar one of the "19 Kids and Counting" and is now married. She describes her life under the teaching of Bill Gothard.
 - i. Obviously, many of these tribes become very cultic but when her then future husband pointed out how Gothard told a girl she was too far gone for Jesus, she finally saw how her tribe had no grace, hope and love to offer the broken and then she knew she had been deceived.
 - c. Is your tribe able to love and show grace?
- b. As we move on to Paul's defense, we need to take note of Paul's willingness to share the unedited version of his life. He's not just a hometown boy, but he was a hero though he thinks he was the chief of all sinners in what he shares.

(Acts 22:1-5) "Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you." ² And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said: ³ "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. ⁴ I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, ⁵ as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

- i. Why do they become so quiet? BECAUSE HE'S SPEAKING THEIR LANGUAGE! He's one of us, right? Paul does everything right to accomplish what he's there for.
 1. (Rom. 9:3-4) ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. ⁴ They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.

- ii. I can tell you; Paul thinks that salvation in Jesus Christ is what every Jew should have been longing for.
 - 1. This Jesus stuff isn't some new religion but rather the fulfillment of all the promises of God that he had made to Israel.
 - 2. That's why he connects his defense in to his kindred according to the flesh by saying, "Brothers and fathers!" In other words, the faith of our fathers longed for this Messiah to come.
- iii. So, he graciously speaks the language of his kindred. He also makes clear that he was educated in this city at the feet of the best of the best, Gamaliel.
 - 1. He too was—was—zealous for the law as they are right now.
 - 2. He even went so far as to persecute the Way to the death.
 - 3. Indeed, he was no outsider. He wasn't even one of those less-than-ideal Jews from the Diaspora who grew up among the heathen nations. He is a hometown, homegrown hero!
 - 4. There are many Jews in Jerusalem at this very moment who know exactly who Paul was, even among the high priests and whole council of elders. He's not making this up. There are verifiable witnesses among them.
 - 5. And in his zeal for the law, he tells them of his journey to Damascus to blow up the Way in that city.
- c. That gets us to our next point. On his way to Damascus to punish those Jews who believed in Jesus, he was met by Jesus himself. In this next section, Paul testifies to the good news.
 - i. I'm not going to read this section. We have already heard the story. And we will hear it again soon.
 - ii. But what I'd like to focus on is this:
 - 1. Paul speaks of Jesus of Nazareth, the one these high priests and council had crucified.
 - 2. He speaks of Ananias, a devout man according to the law and well-spoken of by all the Jews who believed in Christ and urges Paul to do the same.
 - 3. He talks about seeing the Righteous One who is obviously Jesus.
 - a. This Jesus tells him that he will be a witness not a mob boss to men...to everyone of what he has seen and heard.
 - b. And to purify your sins, Paul in Jesus by being baptized, calling on his name.
 - iii. I just want to point out the people are still silent. This doesn't set them off.
 - 1. Their hometown hero thinks the way of salvation is in the one who they nailed to a cross and buried but has risen!
 - 2. He believes Jesus was the promised Messiah. But this Righteous One wasn't coming to save the Jews and slaughter the nations.
 - a. This Righteous One came not to condemn the world but save the world.
 - b. And to save the world, there was this major issue with every human being that did not allow God to be merciful without sufficient payment of the sin of humanity.
 - i. That's why this Righteous One is also the Suffering Servant.
 - ii. (Isa. 53:11) ¹¹ Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.
 - 1. That making many to be accounted righteous included more than just ethnic Israel.
- d. That's gets us to the next point where Paul reveals God's mission to heathen nations—that's people like us.

- i. Paul gives us a story we didn't know about. If you recall his visit to Jerusalem back in chapter 9:26-30 there is no mention of him going to the temple to pray.
 - 1. But during that visit, he fell into a trance and saw Jesus saying in (Acts 22:18-21) 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' ¹⁹ And I said, 'Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. ²⁰ And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.' ²¹ And he said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"
 - a. Silence so far. Until those last words—I will send you far away to the Gentiles. Notice there in (Acts 22:22) ²² Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live."
 - i. Jesus didn't come to riot; he came to save.
 - ii. Jesus doesn't send out his disciples to create cliques and clubs and cults and tribes and nations like this.
 - 1. He sends his disciples to make more disciples through the witness of the gospel.
 - 2. Someday Jesus will come and judge the nations and destroy all evil and save his people out of this mess.
 - 3. Then God's Kingdom will reign forever as we all desire but not until then.
 - 4. Christian Nationalism is not the way nor do I think a religious freedom for Christians only will work. The government will eventually tell the church what to do as well.
- e. I think many of us would find ourselves in a very difficult spot if our government takes over running the church. We would be saying things like this crowd in Jerusalem are saying, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live." Paul is a redeemed child of God through the gospel of Christ but this tribe in Jerusalem wants to kill him. Can you not see the problem?
 - i. When you do not conform to the state religion, they will rally together and cut you down.
 - 1. But if a similar stance as Rome and ours is kept, we see that laws such a religious freedom can help the spread of the gospel.
 - a. But the gospel has always spread even under the most hostile of governments and still does.
 - 2. Notice the commander orders that Paul be brought in the barracks and examined by flogging.
 - a. He wants to know as we do why these people have turned so nasty and violent.
 - b. But Paul then makes known that he is a Roman citizen. Now, Paul is not opposed to suffering of the name or even dying.
 - i. But to risk death for their information just isn't worth it.
 - ii. They suppose there's more to the story that Paul hasn't shared. And he spoke to the people in Hebrew and they have no idea what he just said.
 - ii. We know where this goes from here. Roman citizens have rights.
 - 1. And now Paul uses that right at this moment—not earlier—to continue the witness.
 - 2. The commander is obviously very afraid having found out that he bound an uncondemned Roman citizen.

V. Response

- a. Dear church, I think Jesus wants us to figure out how we can be better at being flexible for the sake of the gospel. I don't want us to be like this mob in Jerusalem. I want us to be like Paul. That doesn't mean we don't speak up about the moral wrongs of the government. But our government seems to depend on a moral voter. And we live in a day where people get their ethics and morality from politics and that's backwards. Politics is meant to come from our ethics and morality. You have a certain moral value and then you create policies to guard those values and punish those who disobey them. But at the end of the day, if the voter has no moral barometer that comes from the Creator of the world, then that voter will look to their own god (and politics is an idol in our country) for what is right and good.
- b. It's easy to become like the mob. I don't want us to be a cult or a tribe. I want us to be kind, patient witnesses for Christ in this fallen world.
- c. I'm all for living simple, quiet lives but we ought not isolate ourselves from the world.
- d. We should desire to be the influencer with the gospel.
- e. I like where we are headed. We are reaching into the community in our men's and women's fellowships. The same is true with our VBS and back to school bash this summer and the Goodlettsville festival in the fall. I want us to continue to be the light in the darkness.
- f. But holding up in our tribes doesn't accomplish the mission of God. The day of Christian softball leagues can't reach the lost.
- g. We must ask ourselves; how can we engage the culture around us with the gospel? I don't think a tumultuous people is the answer but rather faithful, flexible witnesses are.
- h. At the end of the day, I want to be like Jesus who came and identified with us as humans. How flexible was the eternal Son of God to save his people from their sins by taking on human flesh?
- i. Jesus came to save a people from every tribe, tongue, people and nation. We will only enjoy the beauty of that unified nation in God's Kingdom when Jesus returns. And then forever we will be the perfect nation under the perfect reign of our perfect King—King Jesus.
- j. But that reality is only true of who have repented and believed and been baptized in the name of Christ.
 - i. Being baptized is your first experience of identifying with Jesus and his people.
 - ii. And by it you call upon the name of the Lord to be save.
 - iii. Do you identify with Jesus' death and resurrected life?

Benediction: (2 Cor. 13:14) ¹⁴ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.