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CHRIST'S AMBASSADOR A PRISONER

– ACTS 21:27-39. – OCTOBER 3. –

Golden Text: – "Thou, therefore, endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ." – 2 Tim. 2:3.

ST. PAUL, accompanied by Luke and Trophimus of Ephesus, Aristarchus of Thessalonica, Sopater of Berea, Secundus of Thessalonica, Gaius of Derbe, Timotheus of Lystra and Tychicus of Ephesus, arrived at Jerusalem Friday, May 27, A.D. 57. He was returning from his third missionary tour amongst the Gentiles. He had been absent seven years. As we have seen, the Lord had permitted forewarnings to reach him that he might expect trouble – bonds and imprisonment – in the Holy City. However, this noble ambassador for Christ, undeterred, had now arrived. He and his associates, it will be remembered, brought with them money collections from the Churches in Asia Minor for the Church at Jerusalem, which, apparently, was in a measure of financial distress.

Their reception on their first day was apparently of a private and personal character, but on the next day, which was probably the Day of Pentecost (Acts 20:16), the Apostles and leading brethren came together to receive St. Paul and his company in a more formal manner. St. James, brother (or cousin) to our Lord, was apparently the recognized leader in the Jerusalem Church. No mention is made of the other Apostles. Probably some of them were absent, engaged in the work at other points. St. Paul recounted his missionary tour amongst the Gentiles and the Lord's blessing upon his ministries of the Truth, notwithstanding the tribulations permitted. We may presume also that at the same time the collections were turned over.

THE FEAR OF MAN – A SNARE

The brief record indicates that the brethren at Jerusalem were considerably perturbed by St. Paul's presence with them. Not merely did they fear for his personal safety, but also lest his coming might stir up persecution against them all. His activity and persistency made him well known to the Jews in the influential part of the world in which he had been laboring. The Jewish custom that the zealously religious come frequently to Jerusalem to celebrate religious festivals kept the Jerusalem Jews in touch with the religious interests of the whole world. St. James and his associates realized that in all probability Jews from Ephesus, Athens, Thessalonica, Berea, etc., might be present celebrating the Pentecostal feast. They knew that St. Paul's activities had already been reported, and that some, even of the Christian believers, were troubled at his reported teaching – that the Law was dead and that no one needed to pay any further attention to it. They urged St. Paul to contradict these partial misconceptions by going into the Temple and associating with some brethren who had taken the Nazarite Vow. They did not suggest that St. Paul take this Vow, but that he be present with these brethren, as a recognition of the propriety of what they did, and that he bear their expenses, which included not only the shaving of their heads and burning of the hair, but also the cost of sacrificing for them four animals each.

St. James and the leaders of the Church evidently understood St. Paul's position properly enough. He taught the Gentiles that it was not necessary for them to become Jews nor to obey the Jewish ritual, but that, instead of looking for God's favor through the types and shadows, they should look to Christ and his antitypical fulfilments of the requirements of the Law. He taught that the Law could not save either Jew or Gentile, but that only faith in Christ could bring the soul into relationship to God. He taught that while certain blessings of God yet remained for the Jew (Rom. 11:37), God during this Gospel Age is selecting a Spiritual Seed of

Abraham from both Jews and Gentiles. He taught also that if any one, Jew or Gentile, attempted to keep the Law, with a view to thus meriting eternal life, such would surely lose it; because "by the deeds of the Law shall no flesh be justified in God's sight." Nothing in all this, however, really interfered with St. Paul's doing just what St. James and the others urged him to do for the four men under the Nazarite Vow. The shaving of their heads and the offering of sacrifices in demand of the Law governing their Vow, in no sense of the word interfered with or attempted to add to the merit of Christ's sacrifice. Nevertheless in our judgment a more courageous course might have been pursued. Apparently the very method taken to ward off public opposition merely served to arouse it. Let us not forget, however, that the Lord could have ordered the matter otherwise; could have overruled the matter differently had he chosen. Let us remember that the Lord foreknew that tribulations would assail the Apostle Paul, and had foretold them. Those who are in close relationship to the Lord have his assurance that all their steps are ordered of him and that all things shall work together for good to those who love God and who have been called according to his purpose. What a comfort! What a consolation this is to all of the Lord's people! No wonder such may have quiet, rest, peace, even in times of storm and trouble! **[R4485 : page 295]**

CONCESSION TO PREJUDICE UNSUCCESSFUL

The scheme to have St. Paul appear as partially endorsing the Law seemed successful for several days, but when the seven days were nearly expired he was recognized by Jews who had come from Asia. They had seen the Apostle with the Greek, Trophimus, and jumped to the conclusion that the latter was one of the four men whose heads were shaved. This would have been a grievous offence from the Jewish standpoint. Only Jews were allowed within the sacred precincts of the Temple, outside of which was a Woman's Court and also a Court of the Gentiles. A stone fence

separated these two apartments and constituted what the Apostle elsewhere alluded to as the "middle wall of partition." (Eph. 2:14.) This wall was four and one-half feet high, and on it was a tablet which has recently been found by the Palestine Exploration Society which reads, "No man of alien race is to enter within the balustrade and fence that goes around the Temple. If any one is taken in the act, let him know that he has himself to blame for the penalty of death that follows." St. Paul was charged with this offence and not the Greek who was supposed to have been misled by the Apostle. It was on this score that St. Paul's life was in danger from the mob which speedily gathered at the cry of the Asiatic Jew that the Temple was being profaned.

While the mob was beating the Apostle, seeking to kill him, a chief Captain or Colonel of the Roman soldiers in the Castle Antonio close by the Temple became aware of the tumult and hurried to the scene with a troop of soldiers. The beating ceased. The people, who had not learned to respect the majesty of the Roman Law, had become amenable to its military forces.

The Apostle was chained by each arm to a soldier. The commandant, endeavoring to ascertain the cause of the tumult and unable to understand the conflicting testimonies, remanded the prisoner to the castle. But the mob, disappointed that they had lost the opportunity of taking his life, made a mad rush to get him from the soldiers or to kill him while under their charge. What a spirit of murder can be aroused, and suddenly, too, in the hearts of not only Jews, but Gentiles! And how often we find in the pages of history that such violence and unreason have been manifested in the name of and in defense of various religions! How utterly foreign to all of this is what St. Paul designates "the spirit of a sound mind" – the spirit of reason, justice – not to mention the spirit of generosity, loving kindness and tender mercy! As the seeing of the foolishness and the brutishness of a drunken person should act as a great temperance lesson in every right-minded man

and woman, so such a scene as this, whether recognized by our natural eyes or mentally seen through the printed page, should be a lasting lesson against anything so brutish and unreasonable. Let every instance of religious bigotry and fanatical violence speak to our hearts a lesson in the opposite direction, and fix in us resolutions that, [R4485 : page 296] by the grace of God, we will never be thus foolish, thus wicked; but contrariwise will become the more gentle and kind and Christ-like, as the days go by.

The oncoming of the mob led the soldiers to press one against the other so as not to lose their prisoner, and thus the Apostle was lifted off his feet and carried by the soldiers up the stairway.

The courage of this ambassador of Christ and his readiness to take advantage of every opportunity to tell the message of his Master was here wonderfully exemplified. We might have supposed that from the beating received from the mob and the more or less rough treatment in getting to the castle door any ordinary man would have been cowed with fear and excitement. But it was here that St. Paul, cool and collected, requested of the commander the privilege of speaking to the people, intimating, no doubt, that they had misunderstood what he was doing and that in a few words he might be able to pacify them. The officer was astonished, for the Apostle spoke Greek fluently. He thought likely that he was "that Egyptian" mentioned by Josephus, who, a short time before this, had gathered a large body of discontented Jews, to whom he represented himself as Messiah, and who, as his followers, gave the Roman authorities considerable trouble. St. Paul answered that he was a Jew of an honorable city and requested again the privilege of speaking to the people, which was granted. Promptly the Apostle preached Christ. No doubt he considered his thrilling experiences well repaid by the privileges of that moment – the privilege of telling a considerable concourse of people about Jesus; that he was the Messiah promised in the Law and the prophecies; that his sacrificial death constituted the

redemption sacrifice for father Adam's forfeited life, and, incidentally, the redemption price for all of his children, who died under his sentence. Surely also he noted that now Messiah is calling a spiritual class of "first fruits" to be his associates in the Millennial Kingdom and that shortly Israel and all the nations will experience the privileges and blessings of that Kingdom. Surely he pointed out, also, that *now* is the acceptable time; that now is the time to make our calling and election sure to the chiefest, the spiritual part of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Paul proceeded to tell them of his missionary tours and how many of the Gentiles were receiving the message gladly and giving their hearts to the Lord in full consecration. But so strong was the Jewish prejudice that the mere mention of the going of this great blessing upon equal terms to the Gentiles re-enkindled the flame of hatred and violence, and their shouts and jeers rent the air. The Roman Colonel, perplexed at the situation, concluded that where there was so much opposition there must be some grounds for it. "Where there is much smoke, there must be some fire." And so he commanded that the Apostle must be whipped until he confessed what he had done wrong that created such a tumult and promised reformation. At once the command began to be fulfilled. They began to bind St. Paul to a bent whipping post. But the latter brought the proceedings to a quick termination by inquiring, "Do you think it lawful to punish a Roman citizen before he has had a trial?" The Colonel ordered him released at once, for already he had exceeded the law in the matter. He took the Apostle's word for it that he was a Roman citizen; for to claim this and to have it found to be an untruthful claim would have meant sure death. The Apostle was held a prisoner for trial.

There are several further lessons for us here. While not condemning the Jews harshly for their selfish, bitter feeling of opposition to the Gentiles, let us notice how much injury this bitterness and selfishness worked to the Jews themselves. Had it

not been for this wrong spirit doubtless many others of that time might have been quite ready to hear the Gospel. The lesson to us, therefore, should be to put away meanness, selfishness, enmities, bitterness, out of our hearts, out of our minds, out of our conduct and words; and instead to put on the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ – a spirit of meekness, gentleness, patience, long-suffering, brotherly kindness, love.

Another lesson for us is that when undergoing trials and difficulties, however unjustly and however much we realize that they could not come to us without the Lord's permission, nevertheless we are at liberty to use any legitimate means for our own assistance and deliverance – even as St. Paul took advantage of his Roman citizenship. God had provided him in advance with that measure of protection and it would have been culpable negligence on his part not to have used it and to have expected the Lord to deliver him in some miraculous manner.

REST IN GOD'S WILL

How *sweet* to feel God's will is best,
And in this precious thought to rest;
To *know*, whatever may betide,
'Tis *best*, for *He* is by our side!

Oh, how it helps us bear the pain,
Oh, how it makes us strong again!
The cold and gloom of darkest night
It fills with warmth and heavenly light!

To those who take His will as best
He grants His perfect peace and rest,
And ever gives them day by day
His grace sufficient on the way.

Then why should hearts grow weak or faint?
Why should we ever make complaint?
Let us press on with upturned face,
And *follow* where we cannot *trace!*

– G. W. SEIBERT.

