

Acts Part 11: Jerusalem!

Week 6: The Protection of Rome

Sunday, April 3, 2022

- **Over past few years my family started a new tradition- we get together and do a dramatic reading of a Shakespeare play. Don't all families do that? Coming soon is "Much Ado About Nothing"- Shakespeare's classic work about which I know nothing!**
- **What WE know something about is the drama surrounding the apostle Paul, where we are in ACTS.**
- **Today we are wrapping up the events in Jerusalem, which we could easily call...**

✠ **Much ado about Paul... because he is the center of a LOT of attention.**

- **The Jewish zealots of Jerusalem are obsessed with ending's Paul's work- and his life**
- **The Roman leadership in Jerusalem is obsessed with figuring out why everyone want's Paul dead**
- **Today we see mobilization of a large contingent of Roman soldiers and Cavalry, all with purpose of protecting Paul and getting him out of Jerusalem as quickly as possible.**
- **As last week, today's text is narrative of historical events- and yet, by looking closely at the people of this story, and how God is at work throughout the story, we see powerful principals that speak into our lives today.**
- **BUT BEFORE WE GO THERE, TODAY IS SUNDAY, APRIL 3rd! 2022... PE, TO, Thanks....**
- **OKAY! Ready! We're going to cover this story in two large sections, and then look closely at what we can learn. The first part of the story is where we discover there is a**

✠ **The plot to kill Paul**

Acts 23:12-22 *The next morning some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul...²² The commander dismissed the young man with this warning: "Don't tell anyone that you have reported this to me."*

- **Few details here!**
- **Some of Jews seeking to silence Paul decide to take things into their own hands, and hatch a conspiracy to have him killed. Oath they swear is very strong- basically a vow that if failed to fulfill would place you under a curse. Only other place in NT where we see this was when Peter swore oath he didn't know Jesus.**
- **Roman Commander here is same person who had arrested Paul during the riot on the temple mount, and who had learned of Paul's citizenship right when he was about to have him flogged.**
- **Turns out Paul has family in city, and Nephew learns of the plot. The fact the nephew was allowed to enter the barracks and speak to Paul indicates the commander himself didn't believe Paul to be guilty of anything- his primary concerns is protecting his Roman citizen.**
- **So the commander is tipped off, he dismisses Paul's nephew in secrecy, and then takes immediate action.**

✠ **The trip to Caesarea**

Acts 23:23-35 *Then he called two of his centurions and ordered them, Then he ordered that Paul be kept under guard in Herod's palace.*

- The commander- whose name we learn is **Claudius Lysias**- he is not messing around. He calls us a full regiment of 470 men to escort Paul to Caesarea that very night. Paul is given a horse to ride, along with 70 mounted cavalry, and there are two hundred spearmen.
- **Claudius is expecting a full-fledged attack, and he's not taking any chances.**
- **It was about a 60 mile journey to Caesarea, a coastal port city just north of modern day Tel-Aviv. Caesarea was the seat of Roman authority in all of Judea/Israel at the time, and residence of the Roman governor- a particularly hated man named FELIX.**
- **Felix's reign ran from about AD 52 to 60, when he was recalled to Rome for his failure to contain the growing violence and Jewish rebellions. Not that he didn't try- reign was marked by ruthless tactics to suppress the Jewish insurrections, which only led to increase in violence.**
- **As a historical character Felix is somewhat unique. He actually was a freed slave, having found favor with the Emperor Claudius, he became very well connected politically, and was given the governorship of Judea. Felix's first wife was the granddaughter of none other than Marc Antony and Cleopatra.**
- **In any case, the Roman detachment deliver Paul to Felix, who places him safely under guard in Herod's palace until Paul's accusers arrive from Jerusalem.**

– **OKAY.. THAT'S STORY-** look closely at a few of details.

– **FIRST... conspiracy to kill Paul**

✠ **The conspiracy: Disobeying God to honor God?**

- **KEY: These 40 men- along with the Sanhedrin and High Priest Ananias- in their minds they are seeking to defend the Honor of God- protect the Law. But in reality they are in direct disobedient to God, placing themselves in opposition to what God is actually doing.**
- **One of the chief accusations against Paul is that he was seeking to undermine THE LAW- the Mosaic Religious Law that was the foundation of all the Jewish traditions, the Temple, and life itself. And if The Mosaic Law had a beating heart, it would be the... 10 COMMANDMENTS. THE BIG 10! If you are going to avoid breaking any of the law, it would be these!**
- **If we start at the end of the list, we see that Paul's opponents have stomped all over it...**
 - **9.... No false witness: Entire case against Paul was built on false accusation, and the plot to kill him was itself a lie.**
 - **6... Don't murder! This is their sole objective.**
 - **2... No idols! But these men had made an idol of their anger, vengeance, and own desire**
 - **1... THE BIG ONE.... You shall have no other God's before me. SHEMA- Deut 6- "Hear oh Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One- You shall Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might"... in Other words, NO OTHER GODS BEFORE ME- nothing supersedes authority of God.**
- **AND YET, by their actions these men declared their highest authority was themselves. The great irony is that they take an oath before God that actually violates God's nature and His will.**
- **It's easy for us to judge these men... and yet, are we at times guilty of the same thing?**
- **A 'temptation common to man' is to compromise our integrity by engaging in THOUGHTS and ACTIONS that violate God's nature within us-- telling ourselves we are doing so to protect or advance a greater good.**

- **More specific-** as people who see society and issues of morality through the lens of a Biblical worldview (or our interpretation of a Biblical worldview)- a lie enemy will use against us is the temptation- chiefly a temptation of fear- is to denigrate, shame, push aside, or fail to love people who offend us- people we may see as morally or socially out of step with a Biblical worldview.
- **THE PROBLEM** is this leads us to fail at the greatest of all NT moral imperatives- to bring the love of God to our neighbors- **AND** if we justify this failure in the name of defending what we believe to be morally and socially right- we are as guilty of violating God's nature as the very people we are reacting against.
- **This is a temptation in our relationships, in our social dynamics, religious denomination, and it is a HUGE issue in American politics today- AND HERE'S THE PRINCIPLE-**

Reality- God will **NEVER** lead us to violate His nature in order to accomplish His purposes.

- **This isn't to say we don't wrestle with ethical and moral dilemmas- we do- and they can be HARD, messy, and very personal!**
- **This isn't really question of "What would Jesus do", but "What is Jesus doing!"**

Philippians 2:12-13a *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.*

- **If it is GOD working in and through us to accomplish His purposes, God is not going to violate His own nature to do so.**
- **MOVING ON... this story reveals another core temptation of the human condition...**

† The temptation of **SELF-** exaltation

- **The culprit here is our commander, Claudius Lysias. Listen again to the opening of his letter to Felix...**

Claudius Lysias, To His Excellency, Governor Felix: Greetings. ²⁷ This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, but I came with my troops and rescued him, for I had learned that he is a Roman citizen.

- **Hmmm... somethings omitted there. Claudius didn't 'rescue' Paul because he had learned of Paul's Roman citizenship! He arrested him to stop a riot, and had Paul strung up and was about to scourge him when Paul himself revealed his citizenship.**
- **I'm sure it seemed like a minor thing to Claudius- and even to us- but here he engages in just a bit of self-protection and self-elevation. He makes it seem like he was more on top of things than he was, and he isn't honest about the very near miss of flogging a Roman citizen.**
- **Again, we can't judge Claudius because we do this all the time- self exaltation is at the core of humanities rebellion against God, and it is the essence of PRIDE.**
- **We may not consciously 'exalt' ourselves, but the urge to dishonestly ELEVATE ourselves is always there.**
- **Example... person says to me "Ethan, I heard this amazing sermon by the great Christian teacher 'so and so'... wow- you know who so and so is, don't you?"**
- **The truth is, I don't have a clue! But I find myself saying... Oh yeah! Yeah I'm pretty sure—haven't heard that particular talk...." I'm LYING to protect my image to this person!**

- **Why would I do that? Because even though I KNOW my identity is in Christ, and that my identity is SECURE, that I am a child of God, a son of the most high, the only opinion that really matters is GOD’S, in Christ I am complete, precious, and dearly loved... EVEN THOUGH I KNOW THIS IS TRUE... my flesh really likes the approval of other people!**
- **And when I give in to this temptation- however small it may seem- a part of my heart is saying that the approval of people is more important than my integrity before God. THIS MAY SEEM like such a small thing, but it is PRIDE, and PRIDE is the greatest force of the enemy that separates us from God and from each other.**
- **IN CONTRAST, the nature and character of Christ in us is HUMILITY. We don’t need to exalt ourselves, because we have been GIVEN FULLNESS by the only one worthy of being exalted, God himself.**
- **Just as pride is a powerful tool of the enemy to bring destruction, HUMILITY is a powerful force of God to bring healing, peace, and goodness. Consider the following scriptures....**

Luke 14:11 *For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

Romans 12:3 NASB *For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.*

Ephesians 4:1-2 *As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ² Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.*

1 Peter 5:5b-7 *All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.” ⁶ Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. ⁷ Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*

- **HUMILITY sets us free from the pressure of building ourselves up, because Christ’s love is our source of identity and validation.**
- **HUMILITY sets us free from the trap of believing our own PR**
- **HUMILITY yields patience and gentleness**
- **HUMILITY enables us to take our fear, worries, anxiety, and give it to God, because we are able to let go of the notion that we must handle everything ourselves.**
- **NEXT we see one of great ironies in Luke’s entire history, and that is how church grew from one room of people in Jerusalem to thousands of believers penetrating the full breadth of the Roman Empire- and this happened in large part through...**

✠ The protection of Rome

- **Think about this for a moment, because it is remarkable.**
- **The Roman Empire and its system of government was NOT a benevolent force. It was ruthless, self-seeking, brutal, and pagan to its core.**
- **If you’ve even cursorily studied the history of Rome you may respond that Rome bequeathed to us important concepts of the rule of law, religious tolerance, sophisticated infrastructure, and a sense of civilized peace that it took over a thousand years to replace after Rome’s final collapse in the 5th century. This is true.**
- **But we can’t forget that Rome’s accomplishments, while many, were built through devastating wars, genocide, mass slavery, and the violent imposition of its will on much of the world at that time.**
- **Much said about “Pax Romana”- One historian said**

“Rome creates a wasteland and calls it peace.”

- **Point is if Roman empire existed today, behaving as it did in 1st Century , it would be our most bitter enemy, accused of atrocities in contrast to everything we consider good and right.**
- **In time when we- as Americans- seem to be so bitterly opposed to people of our own country who think different from us - IF people like the Roman authorities existed in America today we would probably be doing everything possible to resist them, silence them, condemn them, and shut them down- and the church would likely be a big part of such an effort.**
- **AND YET, in first century, there NO evidence Paul and early church resisted or spoke out against the Romans.**
- **Paul respected the Roman authorities and evidence he actively sought positive relationships with them.**
- **But most ironically, even though they often were the antithesis of everything the Gospel stands for, it was the Roman system, and the Roman authorities, that God used to facilitate the rapid expansion of the church across the Roman Empire, protecting it as it grew.**
- **NOW, in time this will change- but even when the Roman government’s policy becomes officially anti-Christian, the Roman people themselves remained very tolerant, if not supportive, of the Christian community.**
- **AND, in AD 57, even though Nero the psychopath was the Roman Emperor, Paul remains safe in the custody and protection of the Roman Authorities.**
- **To use a common expression, GOD WORKS IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS.**
- **There’s a phrase for this concept, not quite as common... idea of...**

✠ The providence of God

- **Imagine a moment we are part of group Paul met with in Tyre, at the end of his 3rd journey. Paul has shared with us all God has done on this journey, including his conviction the Spirit is leading him to Jerusalem, and after that to Rome. HOW DO WE RESPOND?**
- **You want to go to Rome? Well, MOST OF ALL, DON’T GO TO JERUSALEM!!! If you go there you will certainly be arrested, probably killed! Going to Jerusalem and ending up dead or in prison is the WORST thing that could happen! NO- Paul, you’ve traveled almost all of the Roman world, just put together another team and travel to Rome yourself. THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN OUR ADVICE.**
- **But following Spirit’s leadership, Paul did go to Jerusalem. Was arrested, was placed in the custody of Romans- AND AGAINST ALL EXPECTATION, as a Roman prisoner, within weeks had shared his testimony with**
 - **The Jewish leadership of Jerusalem**
 - **The Roman leadership of Jerusalem**
 - **Within next two years he will share the gospel with two different Roman governors of Judea, King Herod Agrippa II...**
 - **And he will receive an all-expense paid trip directly to Rome, with a brief stop on the scenic Isle of Malta, and our story will end with Paul under comfortable house arrest in Rome, able to receive visitors and sharing the Gospel with the highest levels of Roman society.**
- **NOBODY- not Paul’s friends, not his adversaries, not even Paul himself, would have foreseen God working in this way.**

- *What Paul DID believe was that God had a plan, and that God could be trusted.*
- *SO, when opportunities presented themselves, Paul took them. When barriers arose, Paul didn't force them.*
- *When it seemed wise to make longer term plans Paul did so, but he held them loosely and was willing to change course, sometimes in profound ways.*
- *When he was persecuted and suffered, Paul remained strong and patient in his faith.*
- *When he had an opportunity to wisely preserve his ministry and avoid persecution by claiming his Roman identity, he did so.*
- *PAUL ENGAGED each day, and each stage of his journey, with energy and purpose, and underneath it all he TRUSTED GOD. Far more than being a long term planner, Paul was OBEDIENT in the PRESENT.*
- *And God, in his sovereignty and providence, did indeed carry the bigger picture that Paul and the early church trusted Him to carry.*
- *Important- God's providence didn't always mean his servants were kept safe from harm. In his providence God allowed Stephen to be seized and unjustly stoned to death by a mob outside of Jerusalem. But also in His providence a young man with the Jewish name of Saul stood to the side, approving and yet hearing Stephens's testimony even as he glorified God with his death.*
- *And now, almost thirty years later, this same Saul, now known by his gentile name Paul, sits in Roman custody, at peace and trusting God- ready to take the next step, whatever that step may be.*

IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD AND UNCERTAIN TIME, may this be said of us