

Bible Study: 4-24-24

THE BOOK OF ACTS ***Acts 21:1- 26:32***

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Facing the Enemies

The Christian faith does not sidestep the fact that sooner or later we must come face-to-face with enemies. Sometimes the enemies have been quite tangible, expressing themselves through intense personal misunderstanding and outright persecution. At other times they go under the names of “burnout,” “depression,” “disease,” and “despair.” But whatever their names or form, there will come the time when we as believers must face enemies of one kind or another.

Luke seems to focus in this lesson on the reality of opposition to Christianity as we see the Apostle Paul facing enemies. Now Paul’s opposition moves to center stage, and as we trace his experiences and how he handled them, we will see how, in turn, we are to respond to those who oppose us as we attempt to be faithful to the Lord.

At the close of our last lesson, we left Paul in Miletus on the Asian coast of the Aegean Sea as he was telling his Ephesian friends good-bye. It was a moving scene because Paul had said this was probably the last time, they would see each other. Now, as we pick up on his travels. Luke tells us that Paul’s ship sailed to the Phoenician coast (21:2-3). The third missionary journey of Paul was now drawing toward a rapid close, for he was about 120 miles from his final destination—Jerusalem.

It was during the week he spent in Tyre that Paul was confronted by “enemies,” but this time they were fellow Christians right out of the household of faith (21:4-6). This was a subtle kind of “enemy” and illustrated the problem of interpretation. When Paul met with the Christians at Tyre, they ***“said to Paul through the Spirit, that he should not go up to Jerusalem” (21:4)***. This appears to have the stamp of the Holy Spirit upon it. If we accept this as it appears on the surface, it will seem that Paul is wrong in his determination to travel to Jerusalem. But that is not the whole picture.

On two occasions Paul had been instructed and motivated by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. First, in Acts 19:21, and then in Acts 20:22 Paul says, ***“...I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem.”*** Notice if you will, in both verses in the KJV that it says “spirit” rather than “Spirit.” This could seem to imply that his decision to go to Jerusalem was based on human desire or determination (his “spirit”) rather than by Holy

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direction (God's Spirit). But this is not the case, and the puzzle is cleared up in later translations where the word in those verses is translated "Spirit" or "Holy Spirit."

Paul had been guided by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem. Now, the Christians in Tyre told Paul they had word through the Spirit that he should not go to Jerusalem. There seems to be a conflict. Luke does not imply in this story that these sincere Christians had not gotten a word from the Lord. They were not purposely being deceitful, nor had they failed to hear something from the Spirit. What happened was that they failed to rightly interpret what they heard.

The important lesson for us in this episode is that in confronting every issue or course in life we need to be sensitive to the counsel and opinion of others, but at the same time we must find our guidance through the direction of the Holy Spirit. Often this saves us from making hasty and wrong decisions.

Paul held steady in Tyre in the face of what seemed to be conflicting guidance because he knew he'd had positive guidance from God. God's repeated faithfulness and confirmation kept him from being shaken from the action that he knew was right. His guidance was not based on prejudice or on a hunch. He had positive word from the Lord, and that made it possible for him to rise above the problem of misinterpretation.

After leaving Tyre, Paul and his companions moved just a short distance down the coast to Ptolemais where they spent a day with Christian friends (21:7), and from there they went on to Caesarea and stayed with Philip and his daughters. It was here that Paul had to face a different kind of an "enemy" or problem—the problem of acceptance (21:8-15).

After a few days they were visited by an Old Testament-like prophet from Jerusalem named Agabus. Agabus predicted what would happen to Paul if he went on to Jerusalem: **"...he took Paul's girdle, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles"** (21:11). That was a positive verification of what Paul seemed to know would happen to him.

Immediately, Paul confronted opposition again, **"And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem"** (21:12). Luke, Paul's traveling companions, and the Christians in Caesarea begged him not to go on. But this opposition was not based on any kind of conflicting guidance.

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They did not question his guidance from God. Instead, their opposition was based on a deep love for Paul and their desire not to see him suffer.

We see in this what a powerful relationship Paul with his friends and fellow Christians. He knew their motive, and he knew they were wrong because of the word he had received from God. But there is a tenderness in this scene that gives us a model for genuine Christian fellowship. Those Christians in Caesarea loved Paul and he loved them—he admitted they were breaking his heart by their anguish (21:13). But he held firm to his convictions and insisted that he must go on, and it was only then that his friends could say, *“The will of the Lord be done”* (21:14).

Again, Paul and Luke and the others were on the move. They were taking the last steps on this eventful third missionary journey of Paul’s—they went to Jerusalem where *“the brethren received us gladly”* (21:15-17).

Blind Opposition (21:17-23:22)

In this next part of our lesson, we see a different kind of “enemy” that Paul had to face. Now the opposition came from his fellow Jews. And as we move along, we will see a demonstration of blind opposition that refuses to look at the evidence.

But back to his arrival in Jerusalem. Paul discovered then that a large number of converted Jews had received word that he, in his missionary journeys, was telling converts from Judaism to leave the Law of Moses behind (21:20-21). Even though this was not true, it was clear to the Christian elders that if these people believed this Paul could have no influence over them. So, they asked him to make a gesture of good faith by joining and even sponsoring four Jewish Christians in the rites of purification in the temple. It was felt that if he did this, it would prove his faithfulness as a Jew to the Law, and once and for all dispel the false rumors (21:23-26).

This is a difficult episode to understand. It raises several questions: Why hadn’t the elders defended Paul and denied the rumors before he even arrived? By agreeing to do what they asked, why did Paul do something he did not need to do? Why didn’t the Christian Jews show good faith and accept Paul’s actions? These questions have troubled Bible students over the years. The Scripture itself does not provide us with complete answers to these questions, but as we reflect on Paul’s words and actions throughout his ministry, we can make some likely proposals.

Throughout his travels, Paul had never asked gentile converts to first pledge allegiance to Jewish customs before he would consider them Christians. This was in keeping with the spirit of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). But what about Jewish con-

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verts? Here the issue was more complex. Basically, we can say that Paul asked them to make a difference between dependency and denial. In coming to Christ, they were no longer to depend on keeping the Law as their means of salvation. But they were not asked to deny their Jewish roots and customs. By complying with the suggestion of the elders and going through the rites of purification with the four other Christian Jews, Paul was trying to show that he had not completely broken with his Jewish heritage. And at the same time we know that he was not depending on those customs for his salvation.

Sadly, Paul's act of good faith by complying to the wishes of the elders did not work out as planned. Instead, the opposition increased (21:27-22:22). While it is possible that most of the Christian Jews were satisfied, all the commotion attracted the attention of the large crowds that had poured into Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost. And in those crowds were Jews from Asia, who knew about Paul and were violently opposed to his teaching. In addition to accusing him of turning people against the Law, they falsely charged him with taking a gentile, Trophimus, into the temple with him (21:28-29).

The words of Paul's detractors soon incited a mob spirit. In their bitterness and hatred they threw Paul out of the temple, slammed the doors behind him, and were "about to kill him." Luke then tells us that the uproar from the riot was so loud that it attracted the attention of the Roman soldiers in the Fortress of Antonia nearby, and they came rushing out to calm things down (21:30-38). These events caused Paul to shift to a second strategy in dealing with his opposition—public testimony.

As Paul was taken into custody, he made it clear who he was and asked to speak to the crowd (21:39-40). The chief captain, surprised at Paul's knowledge of Greek and that he was from Tarsus, granted his request. And so, standing on the stairway of the fortress, Paul addressed the crowd in their own Hebrew language.

In this marvelous speech (22:1-21) Paul explained the transformation that had taken place in his own life. But first, he clearly identified himself with Judaism, "***I am...a Jew***" (22:3). Then he goes on to give them details from his background, early training, and his early violent opposition to Christianity (22:1-5).

Next, Paul explains the cause of his amazing change—his encounter with Christ (22:6-11). Here he rehearsed all that happened to him on the road to Damascus. It was a factual account of an event that happened—nothing to incite further the opposition of the crowd before him.

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The final movements of Paul's speech (22:12-21) connect with Judaism in several ways—this reflects Paul's diplomacy/negotiation as he builds his case. His mention of Ananias in verse 12 was important, for Paul described him as ***“a devout man according to the law, having a good report of all the Jews”*** who lived in Damascus. Then he referred to God as ***“the God of our fathers”*** (22:14), implying that his new experience was rooted in and related to his Jewish faith. His entire speech up to this point had been a detached witness of what God had done for him.

He wanted them to hear his message so he avoided, if he could, language that would turn them off. But when he reached the place in the story where he had to say, ***“I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles”*** (22:21), the crowd went wild, and they shouted, ***“Away with such a fellow from the earth: for it is not fit that he should live”*** (22:22).

What do we learn from this incident? Most of all we learn that there may be times when we are called upon to express our beliefs and faith to people who disagree with us. But the example Paul has given us in this speech is very important—the spirit in which we do it is equally important. Witnessing to our faith should not be taken as an opportunity to drive a wedge, but to build a bridge—if we want to be effective.

We see now in verses 22 and 23 the frenzy of the lynch mob in Jerusalem that day. The commander of the Roman garrison in the Antonia Fortress intervened and had Paul brought into the castle for interrogation. And as was the practice then, the questioning would be accompanied by scourging/punishment to insure getting the truth. It was a cruel practice in which a victim was bound and then whipped with leather strips to which were fastened pieces of bone or metal. It was against the law to use this type of punishment on a Roman citizen.

When Paul's attempt to defend himself by action and word failed, he moved to his third strategy—official appeal (22:25-29). He used his Roman citizenship to prevent a beating. It is believed he did not do this because of a fear of death, but his mind was set on getting to Rome, and he did not want to be disabled in any way.

When Paul informed the centurion that he was a Roman citizen (22:25), the soldiers immediately reported this to his captain. Luke then tells us that when the chief captain had verified this fact, he ***“was afraid”*** (22:29) because the law had been broken when they tied Paul up. But then his next move was strange. For a reason that Luke does not clarify, the chief captain insisted that the Sanhedrin be called into session, and when they were together, he ***“brought Paul down, and set him before them”*** (22:30). This was exactly what Paul was hoping for, and he seized the opportunity.

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Paul chose his opening words carefully to put himself on their level (*“Men and brethren”*) and stated that his conscience was clear before God (23:1). With this bold statement the high priest ordered that he be struck in the mouth because of what was interpreted as blasphemy/wickedness. Paul knew this humiliating act was uncalled for even illegal under the circumstances, and he lashed back at the one who gave the order, *“God shall smite thee, thou whited wall: for sittest to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law”* (23:2-3).

No doubt, Paul was angry, but when it was called to his attention that the object of his verbal attack was the high priest, Paul apologized immediately, *“I wist not, brethren, that he was the high priest: for it is written, thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people”* (23:5)—a quotation from Exodus 22:28.

Next, we see Paul as the master technician. He knew the Sanhedrin was made up of two conflicting groups—the Pharisees and the Sadducees—so he identifies himself as a Pharisee and the son of a Pharisee (23:6). This threw the council into an uproar because of the opposing positions of the two parties over the subject of the resurrection.

At least some of Paul’s fellow Pharisees were all for letting him go at this point, but the rest of the crowd created such an uproar that the Roman chief captain took him into custody again to save his life (23:7-10). In this scene Paul proved a point that both frustrated and infuriated his enemies—if they could not agree among themselves about the interpretation of the law, on what grounds could they accuse him of being unfaithful to it?

Luke now tells us that Paul’s reward came as assurance from the Lord that his dream would come true, *“Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of Me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome”* (23:11). This was a promise Paul would have cause to lean upon many times in the months and years ahead.

But the plot against Paul thickens as Luke tells us how more than forty men banded together and swore to kill the Apostle, *“We have bound ourselves under a great curse, that we will eat nothing until we have slain Paul”* (23:12-15). This was not a threat to be taken lightly. The conspirators were deadly serious as they devised their plot.

Paul’s nephew heard about the plot and was able to get to his uncle and warn him. Paul, in turn, sent the young man to the chief captain where he revealed the details of the plot. Paul recognized the seriousness of what was about to happen. He knew

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his life was in jeopardy, so he took the one course of action that was open to him—to seek personal protection. He knew there was no way he could protect himself, so he had his nephew act in his behalf (23:17-21).

Now we get a vivid picture of just how dangerous this situation was. The chief captain to whom Paul's nephew reported had to be a seasoned Roman soldier with wide experience. He recognized the danger and took steps to move Paul out of Jerusalem to Caesarea, the seat of the Roman government in Palestine. But look at the precautions he took. The escort party was made up of 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen—a total of 470 men.

But this hardened soldier knew what he was up against, and he was not taking any chances. As soon as he drafted his official letter to Governor Felix, the procession took off under cover of darkness, traveled the sixty miles to Caesarea, the delivery of the prisoner was made successfully and without incident. Paul was now a prisoner in Herod's palace.

We see in this story that Paul knew his life was important—God had assured him of his worth even as He had assured him he would “bear witness also at Rome.” Paul was willing to risk much for the sake of the gospel, but he never did it with the attitude that “my life doesn't matter.” The whole point of this final drama is that his life did matter. And when it became clear that he was in danger, he took the necessary steps to protect himself.

From these experiences of Paul's, we are reminded again that we are important to God. Our welfare and our lives are significant in His plan. While most of us do not face physical danger because of our faith, we are at times exposed to social, vocational, and even spiritual pressures that are crippling and possibly a serious threat to our emotional health. In such times of stress, we can be certain that God cares. But at the same time, we, like Paul, are to use all the means at our disposal to protect ourselves against those people and forces that seem determined to defeat us—this is consistent with Christian discipleship.

An interesting and unique technique that at times enters our relationships with other people is what is sometimes referred to as being “stonewalled” or “managed.” This simply means that the opposition gives every appearance of being open and interested, but, that is nothing more than a cover-up because that openness is never acted upon. This is a terribly frustrating way to be treated, and it can often be recognized when the other person says such things as, “I hear you” or “We will certainly look into that.” But that is the end of it because nothing ever happens.

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Chapters 24, 25, and 26 of Acts show this process at work in Paul's life. The time span for the events in these chapters is two years (A.D. 58 to 60). Paul remains in prison in Caesarea all of this time. During his incarceration, he makes three appearances before the authorities. And each time we see that he is being stonewalled or managed. But Paul handles each of the three appearances with a forthrightness that underscores his genius and leaves with us a model for Christian action when we receive similar treatment.

Paul's first trial opened just five days after being put in prison in Caesarea. The Jewish elders headed by Ananias, the high priest, traveled from Jerusalem to lay their charges against Paul before Felix, the Roman governor. The prosecuting attorney for the Jewish hierarchy was a lawyer named Tertullus who opened his arguments with a layer of flattery aimed at Felix that was to make a favorable impression (24:1-4).

After his flattering introduction, Tertullus spelled out the charges against Paul: 1) He was a pesty troublemaker; 2) he was the ringleader in the Nazarene sect; 3) he had de-filed the temple (24:5-6). He then condemned Lysias, the chief captain, for taking Paul out of their custody "with special violence." The prosecutor built his case on false charges and half-truths.

At a signal from the governor, Paul gave a brilliant response to the charges (24:10-21). Perhaps the most interesting thing Luke tells us about Felix is that he was very familiar with "the Way"—a term for the Christian movement at that time (24:22). And now Paul had made a strong impression on the governor because after Paul made his defense, Felix adjourned the court for a few days in order to give Lysias the opportunity to appear (24:22).

Some days after that, Felix, with his wife Drusilla, "***sent for Paul, and heard him concerning the faith in Christ***" (24:24). It may be that Felix just wanted to show off his prisoner before his young wife. But Paul's witness to the power of the Christian gospel was so strong that Luke says, "Felix trembled." The Greek word used here is much stronger and implies that the governor was struck with fear.

This is understandable because Paul spoke of the need for righteousness and self-control and of the coming judgment. All of this moved Felix deeply but not to the point that he was willing to accept Christ. Luke goes on to tell us that there were several such confrontations later, but he felt the governor's sole purpose was in the hope that Paul would try to purchase his freedom (24:25-26). Instead, Paul was kept in prison for two years, and Felix comes down to us as example of how a person can be knowledgeable indifferent.

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We have known people who know (or think they know) just a little bit about Christianity—but not enough to have really experienced it. This kind of person is either hostile or, like Felix, indifferent. Either way, we like Paul, are to be faithful to our witness in words and actions and leave the results to God.

The action in the Acts story picks up again. Felix is recalled and is replaced as governor by Porcius Festus. In a series of fast-moving verses (25:1-8), we find Paul making his second trial appearance before the authorities. Again, the Jewish leaders leveled their old false charges against him. For two years they had been blocked in their efforts to get rid of Paul once and for all. Festus saw that their case was weak, nevertheless, he was anxious to escape responsibility. He was basically a descent man, but he was anxious to win the favor of the Jewish religious leaders, so he asked Paul if he would be willing to be tried in Jerusalem (25:9). This was a clever dodge on the part of Festus, but Paul knew that to go to Jerusalem would mean certain death.

In the case of Festus, Paul was now having to cope with a different kind of “enemy”—considered detachment. It was obvious that Festus was trying to find an easy way out. If Paul had agreed to a Jerusalem trial, Festus would have been sort of “figurehead judge”—a part of the scene, but not really, because they would be in the religious environment in Jerusalem. Paul saw what was happening and made his formal appeal to Caesar. With this action, the future course was set. Paul would head for Rome and, no doubt, Festus was pleased because this took him out of the picture (25:10-12).

Whenever someone says, “Do whatever you have to do; just leave me out of it,” we are confronted by an “enemy” of detachment. When we really care about a person or situation, we become involved.

The final act in this drama brings Paul face-to-face with King Agrippa who, as we shall see, came to represent the “enemy” of interested activity. Agrippa was basically an unimportant king who rules over a small piece of Palestinian territory. He moves into the scene now along with his wife Bernice to pay his respects to the new Roman governor. Festus knew that Agrippa was familiar with the Jewish religion, so we find him explaining Paul’s case to the visiting king (25:13-22). And next we learn that Agrippa was so interested that he said, ***“I would also hear the man myself.”*** And now we move into one of the most interesting stories in the book of Acts.

Historical information would give us cause to believe that Agrippa’s desire to hear Paul was based on more than just a fulfillment of duty. He was a grandson of King

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Herod, who had been told about the birth of Jesus by the wise men and had then ordered the murder of the male children in and around Bethlehem. His father, Agrippa I, had executed James and imprisoned Peter. The tragic death of Agrippa I is described in Acts 12:20-23. When Agrippa II appears on the scene, we could almost say that animosity for Christianity was in his genes. Nevertheless, he consented to hear Paul out (25:22), although we are not told why he wanted to get involved in the dispute.

In Paul's testimony before Agrippa, we find several reminders of attitudes and approaches that can help us as we bear witness for our faith. First and up front, we detect a note of courtesy (26:1-3). In our witness for Christ, we must remember that no good can come from any other approach. Whenever we lose respect for another person's humanity and position, we have undermined the opportunity for fruitful interpersonal relations and Christian witness.

Second, we cannot help but to be moved by the content of Paul's witness. Paul wanted to give the king enough to go on to make a personal decision about the faith. On this occasion, Paul began with himself and ended with Jesus—showing how Christ had led him to embrace an entirely new lifestyle. Basing his words in Agrippa's supposed authority, the Old Testament, Paul showed how Moses and the prophets would support his experience and testimony. But if Moses and the prophets were too far in the past, he offered himself as a living example of all they had said. This blend of information and experience should always characterize the content of our witness.

Third, Paul gave a clear challenge. Agrippa himself, saw that Paul's few words were intended to do more than report an experience. Their purpose was to lead Agrippa to a personal experience with Christ as well. Witnessing without an invitation to commitment is only part of the story.

As we read the lines and between the lines of Luke's closing scene in this drama (26:30-32), we catch a hint as to just how impressed the Roman governor and the king, and queen were with Paul. And I am sure it was not just his words that got through to them, but also his calm attitude and demeanor. They were impressed!

As we have walked with Paul through this lesson, there has been much to learn. But Luke, in all that he had to say, helps us, I believe, to realistically face the fact that we will confront "enemies" of all kinds and degrees in our Christian walk. But in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we receive the ultimate proof that **"...greater is He that is in you, than He that is in the world" (1 John 4:4)**. This was the confidence that Paul had as he faced the various enemies in his life. And that is our confidence, too. Christ is risen! Christ is alive! Christ is with us!

[04/17 & 24/ 24]