

The First Defense

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[0 : 00] Please pray with me. Almighty God, we pray that you would now visit us, visit our hearts and our minds, strike us with your word by your spirit.

Help us to be more like Jesus. In his name we pray. Amen. Amen. You may be seated. Amen. Our text, our text this morning as we hear from the living God in his word begins in Acts chapter 21, verse 37.

We are now at the beginning of the end of Acts. Paul has concluded his three missionary journeys in which he's preached the gospel.

And established the church and nurtured the church among the Gentiles. And the gospel is going to the ends of the earth. But now at the end of Acts, we're reminded that the gospel started in Jerusalem.

[1 : 17] And that this gospel, whatever else it is, is rooted in the Jewish story, and the Jewish people, and the Jewish history.

From this point on, there's a shift in Acts. Beginning in chapter 21, Paul is a prisoner. And he's going to stay that way. And from here on, Luke presents his defense as a prisoner.

There will be five defenses altogether, including today's, in the coming weeks. And if you read them carefully, what you find is that they are all directed primarily against the charge that Paul and the gospel he preaches are anti-Jewish.

That his mission is a fundamental attack on the Jewish people and its faith. And rather, Paul is going to argue that this new faith has very old roots in the Jewish faith.

And you know, if you've ever even casually read Paul's letters, that the relationship of the gospel to non-Christian Judaism was a front-line issue in Paul's life.

[2 : 40] It is the issue that now takes center stage in the book of Acts. So there's a shift now of both theme and genre.

What we have are not missionary stories and evangelistic sermons any longer, but apologetics. Paul is engaged in defense. And the central issue is how the gospel of Jesus Christ relates to the Jewish faith.

Now as I wrestled with this text this week, I was surprised, I think, when I realized that my biggest challenge in dealing with Acts from this point on is that at some level I just don't get the big deal. And it may be that you will have a bit of a hard time identifying with Paul now in these chapters because as Christians in 2010 in Canada, we have a hard time understanding why this question of whether Paul's gospel was anti-Jewish even matters.

Is that not true? If it's not true and it's just my problem, then I apologize for the rest of the sermon.

[4 : 01] Today we pick up Paul's first defense after he's been arrested in Jerusalem. The arrest itself happened last week. Well, in last week's text, you remember how Paul visited James when he came to Jerusalem.

And in verse 19 of chapter 21, Luke said he related to James one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And that's Acts so far in a nutshell.

Paul's ministry among the Gentiles. But now he's back in Jerusalem. The center of Judaism. And Paul's here, I think, in part because his heart is broken for the Jews of this city.

There's a problem that James talks to Paul about. The Jews have heard that Paul is forsaking Moses. That's the rumor. And you'll remember then how Paul goes along with a plan to counter that impression and he purifies himself and he goes to the temple in the city.

And it's there that the Jews from Asia stirred up the crowd and listen again to what they said in verse 28 of chapter 21. This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people.

[5 : 20] That's the Jews. And against the law and against this place. That's the temple. And the whole city stirred up over this and they ran to the temple and they dragged Paul out and they beat him and they would have killed him.

But for the arrival of the tribune with his soldiers to arrest Paul. That's the wild bloody scene that we left last week.

But make the observation that the reason Paul is arrested in the first place by the Romans has to do with the violence brought about because the Jews thought Paul was against them and against the law and against the temple.

So as we come to our text the tribune is taking Paul to the barracks to interrogate him and the soldiers have to carry him there. The crowd is so violent and verse 36 ends with the picture of the Jewish mob following him and they're crying out away with him.

And now here we are in our text verse 37 if you have your Bibles with you or open to the page verse 37 of chapter 21 in Acts as Paul was about to be brought into the barracks he said to the tribune may I say something to you?

[6 : 44] Paul knows this may be his last opportunity so he asked to speak. He doesn't want to talk to the guards actually he wants to talk to the crowd but he has to get permission so he speaks to the tribune and what he speaks is an educated stylish Greek sentence is it permitted for me to speak to you literally and based on Luke's account here you have to picture this tribune sort of stepping back in surprise this man knows Greek and polished and educated Greek the tribune had no idea who Paul was but now that he knows he speaks such eloquent Greek he thinks he might know verse 38 are you not the Egyptian then who recently stirred up revolt and led the 4,000 men of the assassins out into the wilderness I mean wouldn't that have been your first guess

I mean it's a little bizarre actually it's hard to sort that out to be honest as best we can tell from other sources the Egyptian that's referred to here and the assassins weren't even connected movements though they're both spoken of by the historian Josephus so I'm not sure whether the guard was confused here or what's going on but the point is regardless the point is that the tribune mistakes Paul for some kind of dangerous revolutionary perhaps even a messianic pretender which is what that Egyptian was to whom Josephus also refers in his history whatever the case Paul denies it and then makes it clear who he actually is verse 39 I am Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia a citizen of no mean city I beg you let me speak to the people now in antiquity people were judged by the importance of the place where they were born and Tarsus was a well respected cultural and trade center a city of half a million people at its height and Paul was a citizen from there which means he was in the elite of Tarsus and he uses all this to his benefit he wants to speak now consider this

Paul had been beaten by this Jewish mob they would have killed him why does he want so badly to speak to them that's the critical question because if we misconstrue Paul's motivations here we'll misread this chapter and then we'll be going in the wrong direction for the whole rest of the book of Acts Paul got permission to speak so verse 40 Paul standing on the steps motioned with his hand to the people and when there was a great hush he spoke to them in the Hebrew language saying brethren and fathers hear the defense which I make before you now we can't know this for sure but by speaking in Hebrew or likely speaking in Aramaic which was the dialect of Hebrew that was the common language at the time by speaking in Aramaic

Paul's entire speech was likely not something this Roman tribune and his soldiers even understood so this is a defense but it's not directed at the Roman authorities when we hear the word defense we just assume Paul's trying to defend himself meaning that he's trying to save himself right from going into the barracks where he's likely to be beaten that's not Paul's objective at all he knew he would be imprisoned and afflicted the spirit had told him that in chapter 21 Paul said he was ready for that in verse 13 of chapter 21 that's not what's going on we're standing here on the steps of the Roman barracks probably in view of the temple listening to a man who has come close to being killed because of accusations that he's defiled the religion of Israel and Paul speaks directly to the Jews in their own language who tried to kill him he's not giving a defense for his own sake he's giving it for their sake he's pouring out his heart one last time directly to the

Jewish people his own people who he loved so much church because I think Paul hopes against hope that maybe this last time some of them will hear what he has to say and be saved and you say how do you know that Ganser and my answer is that it would fit perfectly with what Paul himself says is on his heart we haven't done much of this as we have looked at Acts but we should keep in mind that as we follow the life of Paul in this narrative he is at times busy writing letters along the

way and maybe you remember from two weeks ago how we said just so briefly that Paul wrote Romans while he was in Greece at the beginning of chapter 20 Romans and from that point in chapter 20 you remember Paul just basically makes a quick dash back to [12:38] Jerusalem stops in Ephesus talks to the elders but then on to Jerusalem so Romans was written literally a matter of just several weeks now maybe months before he's back in Jerusalem but not very long before he's before this Jewish mob so take your Bibles and go to Romans just a few pages to the right just a few pages to the right go to Romans chapter 9 I want to spend some time framing Paul's speech so that we read it the right way and so that we read the rest of Acts rightly along with it because if you want to know what's in Paul's heart as he stands on these steps ready to make a speech to the people who nearly beat him to death read Romans Romans 9 verses 1 to 5 this is Paul he says I am speaking the truth in Christ I am not lying my conscience bears me witness in the

Holy Spirit what is it that Paul is so concerned that his readers believe about what he thinks here it is that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart why Paul for I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren my kinsmen my race they are Israelites and to them belongs the sonship the glory the covenants the giving of the law the worship and the promises to them belong the patriarchs and their race according to the flesh is the Christ who is God over all blessed forever amen it's all theirs and they don't see it and one more just run your run your eyes over to the beginning of chapter 10 and look at verse 1 we'll come back here again actually later but just look at verse 1 for now

Paul still talking about Israel the Jewish people and he says brethren my heart's desire and prayer for God for them is that they may be saved this is deeply personal for Paul he cares so much about the lostness of his fellow Jews that he says he stands on the brink of damnation and he's ready to throw himself into it if he could for them he can't so he just grieves great sorrow unceasing anguish this is the heart of Paul straight from the book he wrote weeks before where he stands today beaten by his own people that he loves so much and he wants to speak to them I beg you he says to the tribune let me speak to the people now what do you think he wants to accomplish to get himself off the hook no he wants his own people to see and believe in

Jesus in light of all they know already and all they have as the people of Israel he wants them to be saved that's the heart of this man they beat him and he loves them so much he wants to talk to them oh I bet Paul would have recognized some faces in that crowd probably some people he studied with 20 years before maybe some relatives of his it was where he grew up after all these are his people so try to get a sense of what he's feeling here haven't you ever had people in your life whom you love and they reject the Lord and you grieve as you long for them to be saved I can't imagine that you don't know something of what that feels like if you're a Christian well take that kind of personal connection because

Paul sure had that with these folks and then add to that the whole weight of the history of the chosen people of God and all they had the law and the they just tried to kill him but Paul must do it for their sake for the sake of the gospel for the sake of the glory of God one more time in hopes that they might be saved but they won't be saved not now not yet Paul's going to give it everything he's got but he'll fail he's going to have their attention at first as he establishes his credentials impressive credentials from his life before meeting

[18:09] Jesus brought up in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel the best rabbinic education could provide intimate knowledge of the ancestral law the mosaic code zealous for God just like they are relentless in persecuting the way the Christ followers to death personally endorsed by the high priest and the council of elders with letters from them to bring Jewish Christians from Damascus back to be punished these are impeccable credentials for this audience and as impressive as they are for all they mean to his audience it will fail it is not enough he is going to tell them about his conversion story first hand make it clear that he met with the Lord the Kurios himself on the road to Damascus that the glory of the light that blinded him verse 11 should say the glory of the light not the brightness of the light the glory of the light that blinded him at the noon hour the Shekinah glory of the self manifestation of the

God of Israel and the voice that claims to be Jesus of Nazareth the Jewish Messiah whom Paul is persecuting he'll tell them all that and they won't believe it and they won't accept his deeply Jewish account of conversion they won't be changed as Paul was changed and he's going to tell them so carefully how he went to Ananias and what a devout and orthodox and well respected Jew Ananias

was and how Ananias called him brother Saul and how he called the God the God of our fathers and he'll make clear that Ananias referred to Jesus as the just one the tzaddik the term full of revered overtones for the Jews he's going to describe how on his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion he went to the temple not so he could proclaim it was blasphemous nonsense he was praying there and it was there in the temple there and then that Jesus spoke to him again and he'll tell them that even when Jesus told him what the result would be the result that's now coming to pass he argued back to him that surely these people in Jerusalem knew he'd been there approving as they stoned

Stephen when Stephen preached of the fulfillment of the covenants in Jesus Paul will say all of that and he'll fail and as carefully encrafted and balanced as Paul was it fails because of verse 21 the command Paul received from Jesus depart for I will send you far away to the Gentiles there there it was now they'd heard it with their own ears from his own mouth verse 22 up to that word they'd listened to him then they lifted up their voices and said away with such a fellow from the earth for he ought not to live he was the man they thought he was he was the one telling the Gentiles that they're all right he was the one telling

Jews all around the world to live like Gentiles and to accept table fellowship with anyone and everyone purely on the basis of faith in this Messiah that he's talking about this blasphemer Jesus who'd caused all the trouble in the first place oh Paul's guilty Paul's guilty as the Gentiles whose friend he'd become he's guilty as sin itself whatever they'd thought up to this point now they know his words are wicked and blasphemous and repugnant and that's their response they're outraged why are they outraged why at the mention of the Gentiles is everything lost apparently they swallowed Paul naming Jesus they didn't stop him there at least for the moment they took that but this is the last straw there's two ways to look at that question and really you can't separate them there's historical reasons here and there's theological reasons here historically at this point in the mid 50s

AD in Jerusalem it was a time of intense Jewish nationalism one insurrection after another rose to challenge the Roman overlords all of them brutally suppressed Jewish hatred for the Romans and anti-Gentile sentiment ran deep and the Jews in Jerusalem would have been very eager to stamp out any movement that seemed to threaten their survival as a distinct ethnic and religious group for Paul to have the audacity to claim that their Messiah would say to go to the Gentiles you understand it wasn't even conceivable that that could happen the Messiah they sought was a political deliverer the one who would finally conquer the Romans and free them from the Gentile rule but it goes beyond that because theologically branded into every soul of the

[23 : 40] Jewish people for centuries of tradition that had made it impossible for them to understand their own scriptures rightly there had been developed a sense of lasting horror at the Gentiles there were the stories from their history layered with interpretive tradition stories of persecutions of exile of shame of vile foreign rulers doing unspeakable things there was the historical and the contemporary revulsion to the practices of pagan religions and temples of orgies and blood and child sacrifice and there's the songs from their own scriptures applied to their context now songs of the creator god putting the heathen gods in their place lamenting for Israel's shame at the hands of the foreigners delighting in Israel's victory over them of Yahweh summing the nations to meet him at Mount Zion to show them who their king really is that's the mindset and unless you have some sense of that unless you dwell on those realities and see this picture of what their loyalty looked like and how it led to the horror of everything that dishonored God and everything that lived outside the doors of the synagogue and outside of the holy land only then can you understand the response of a first century Jew in Jerusalem to the claim that their

Messiah sent Paul to the Gentiles Paul's defense failed of course it failed but if you could just block out for a second just block out the shouts of the crowd and get the dust out of your eyes that they're flinging into the air you might just ask yourself the question that I bet Paul was asking himself right then did it have to be this way is this what happens in the long term when the prodigal comes home and the privileged elder brother who always had the father refuses to accept him is all of this just inevitable well Paul himself would conclude that it was it's not an easy thing to say but he would also say thanks be to God that that would not be the last word listen just listen to Romans chapter 10 starting in verse 2

Paul said I bear them the Jews witness that they have zeal for God but it is not enlightened for being ignorant of God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own they did not submit to

God's righteousness for Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes that's Romans and there's the bottom line they are Paul says ignorant of God's righteousness of what God is doing in the world in their history and supremely in Jesus as the revelation of his faithfulness to their covenant his righteousness righteousness Paul says they seek their own righteousness to be always the righteous ones on their own as the exclusive people of God and so Paul says they will not see that God stands here to offer them all of that and more the fulfillment of their covenant the final return from exile the gift of a law not just as a book to be studied but as the very beating of their own hearts and above all their

Messiah Jesus the one they reject he's the goal he's the completion he's the crown of it all he's the one who brings to the destination the long sad story of God's people and takes upon himself all their anger and all their bitterness and all their sin of the centuries and he makes an end of it except for those who are so identified with that anger and bitterness and sin that they dare not let it go if only they would believe in this Messiah the Lord of Jew and Gentile alike then they would find the true fulfillment of all their dreams but they don't all day long God says I stretched out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people but Paul hasn't given up because he knows that won't be the last word and so he says in

Romans 11 in as much as I am an apostle to the Gentiles all of Acts that we've studied so far I magnify my ministry in order to make my fellow Jews jealous and thus save some of them as Paul stood on the steps of the Roman barracks he hoped for something of that to come to pass and supposing just supposing that they had happened to just for a moment reflect that the Gentiles were coming to share in their promises and their patriarchs and their covenants and their Messiah might they not decide it was time to stop and see the point and join in it's only that hope I think that can explain Paul's foolish defense in Acts 22 starting here and throughout the last quarter of the book of Acts now Luke is concerned to defend

[30 : 07] Paul and his ministry to the Gentiles as the fulfillment of the call of God to Israel because this is the gospel the offer of unbroken life with God to every nation Jew and Gentile through the Jewish Messiah and in the rest of Acts Paul will defend the promise and faithfulness of that Jewish God and in doing so does he not claim those promises and those patriarchs and those covenants and that Messiah and say to us they're yours too Christian in Canada in 2010 this story is your story it is my story it is our story and it can be the whole world's story as we go out with the gospel to the ends of the earth thanks be to

God Amen please sit or kneel for prayers our heavenly father we praise you and thank you for the hope of Jesus Christ our Lord which is our hope and the hope for the whole world our help comes from you Lord who made heaven and earth you'll not let our feet be moved you our shepherd the one who keeps us will not slumber we praise you dear Lord that you created heaven and earth that we too are yours we praise you for we are fearfully and wonderfully made by you wonderful are your works our souls know it very well our frame was not hidden from you when we were being made in secret intricately woven in the depths of the earth your eyes saw our unformed substance in your book were written every one of them the days that were formed for us when as yet there were none of them dear God we offer you praise that you made us in your wisdom and love and you sustain us now in our present circumstances with strength gentleness loving kindness and wisdom beyond anything that we can imagine

Lord in your mercy the example of the apostle Paul Lord is one which gives us pause to consider how you will use us in the station in life and surrounded by the people with whom you have surrounded us we confess dear Lord that at times we lose sight of you and focus on our present condition even thinking at times you have abandoned us or never existed in the first place we confess that we have harbored evil even murderous thoughts in our hearts and have taken steps contrary to your love and love for our neighbors we thank you that in your great love you have rescued us through Jesus Christ who has paid the price that we deserve to pay you make us new and more you intend to live your life through us broken as we may have been to your glory we confess dear Lord that at times we wonder why we are in the situations or predicaments in which we find ourselves and we offer thanks to you dear Lord and rejoice always in the hope that as you have touched us and called us when we first turned from our own stubborn ways to accept your embrace even now you continue and will continue to the ends of our lives to be our guide our safe master and shepherd giving us wisdom when we need it and extending your call through us to others as we rest in you

Lord in your mercy thank you dear Lord for those who have specific missionary callings among us for Catherine Gannett called to work with indigenous ministries for Sharon Thompson called to minister in Africa for Doug and Anna Marie Graham called to minister in Asia for Brian McConaughy called to bring hope to Cambodia and this week we also ask your hand on Jan Chris Carl and Graham who are in Cambodia protect them give them strength and adversity equip them for the task at hand to work on the sanctuary that would be a center where the community there would know the healing power of Jesus Christ dear Lord for the Anglican Church worldwide in North America and here in British Columbia we give thanks for the clear witness of the truth of your saving and renewing power that is evermore alive we pray for all bishops priests assistants Sunday school teachers and parishioners that in love and unity and with grace to those who have disputes your work will continue for the furtherance of the gospel of Jesus Christ Lord in your mercy we ask dear Lord your hand on those whom you have put in positions of authority and power as our government and financial leaders may they have wisdom may they keep the needs of the downtrodden in their sights and make decisions accordingly we pray for the military leaders of the nations of the world asking that you would guide their decisions such that the innocent are protected the evil one restrained and your word is able to go forth bringing the only true victory over darkness we ask your hand of protection safety and wisdom for our troops serving in Afghanistan may you support the wounded and support the families of all Lord in your mercy here at [36 : 37] St. John's we offer thanks for the steady healing that you are giving to David Short and we ask your continued hand on his life and on Bronwyn and the family thank you for Dan Jim Keith Eric Aaron and the many others here whom you have called to equip us all for their continuing steadfast work among us we ask your healing hand on those who are ill and those who face ongoing difficult emotional physical or financial situations we remember these by name Ken and Gail Rowena Rosemary the Linnington family in the loss of Harold may you draw close to yourself Fran Wendy Michael Eric Colin and Adam and we ask that the light of your truth and the depth of your love may touch and sustain those we now raise before you privately in silence lord in your mercy how precious to us are your thoughts oh god how vast is the sum of them if we could count them they are more than the sand we consider our lives and we are still with you search us oh god and know our hearts try us and know our thoughts and see if there be any grievous way in us and lead us in thy way everlasting through through jesus christ our lord we pray amen