

## How to Face a World That Despises You

Acts 21:27-40; 1 Peter 4:12

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The world despises the Christian that will stand without compromise for the truth of Scripture. Why? Because the world hates Jesus Christ and the uncompromising truth He proclaimed—Jesus Christ and His truth are light and that light reveals and reproves the darkness and sin of the world (John 3:20). Likewise, because the world hates Jesus Christ and His truth, the world also hates all those who cling by faith and testimony to Jesus Christ and His truth—they hate us because they first hated Jesus Christ (John 15:19). Thus, the world attacks, opposes, slanders, persecutes, and seeks to silence the Christian and the testimony he/she bears for Jesus Christ. It is only God's sovereign restraint upon the evil of man that preserves us each day (it is neither our goodness nor the goodness of others that preserves us).

That being the case, should we be shocked by the insults, mocking, and lies that come our way for our Christian testimony at work, by family members, and by neighbors? It may be painful, but we should expect it (1 Peter 4:12). How should we who love the Lord Jesus use those opportunities when we are attacked? The Apostle Paul gives us a faithful example that we should seek to follow in our bearing testimony for Jesus Christ and His truth. Let us consider the following main points from our text: (1) A Riot Formed against Paul by the Jews (Acts 21:27-31); (2) A Rescue Brought to Paul through the Romans (Acts 21:32-36); (3) A Testimony Sought by Paul to Give to His Persecutors (Acts 21:37-40).

### I. A Riot Formed against Paul by the Jews (Acts 21:27-31).

A. In the previous passage from Acts, a false report was raised and circulated within the Church of Jerusalem against Paul in order to attack him and the true gospel he preached. His chief concern upon hearing this from the Presbytery in Jerusalem was not to vindicate himself, but rather to take steps proposed by the Presbytery in Jerusalem in order to demonstrate his love for the Church in promoting the peace, purity, and unity of Christ's Church. The steps proposed were for Paul to join with four Jewish Christian men who were going through the purification process associated with taking Nazarite vows. Paul agreed to do so—not out of a legal obedience to the Ceremonial Law of the Old Testament, but out of love to use that which was abolished by the death of Christ as a means to minister to Jewish Christians who had heard the lie that Paul taught that all Jewish Christians should immediately forsake all Mosaic ceremonies (which he had not taught). These ceremonies were legally abolished through the death of Jesus Christ, but they were being given an honorable burial during this transition period prior to 70 A.D.

B. As our text opens (Acts 21:27), Paul is now in the Temple with these four Jewish Christians, and the seven day purification process associated with the Nazarite vow is nearly completed. This was at the time of the Feast of Pentecost (57 A.D.) when Jews from all around the Roman Empire gathered in Jerusalem (some estimate that a million or more Jews might be drawn to Jerusalem). This is then 27 years after the death, resurrection, ascension, and Pentecost in Acts 2 (30 A.D.) and about 24 years after Paul's conversion (33 A.D.). We read that Jews from Asia Minor (likely Ephesus where Paul had ministered for about three years) recognized Paul in the Temple, they grabbed him and began shouting lies about Paul in order to set the Jews into a fiery frenzy against him (Acts 21:28). These were the lies (which sound very familiar).

1. **Lie #1. Paul taught all men everywhere against the people (i.e. the people of the Jews).** Where Paul shook off the dust of his feet in ministering to obstinate and hostile Jews in one city, he would out of love begin by taking the gospel to Jews in the next city (Romans 1:16; Romans 9:3; Romans 10:1).

Because Paul preached the gospel to Gentiles did not mean he was against the Jews. All have sinned and are under God's wrath (both Jew and Gentile). Therefore, all need a Savior, and all who trust alone in Christ alone are justified before God.

2. **Lie #2. Paul taught all men everywhere against the Law of Moses (particularly against the Ceremonial and Dietary Laws of Moses).** Since this was the false accusation already circulated throughout the Church in Jerusalem as well, and since I dealt with that lie in the previous sermon, I will refer you to it. Paul did not teach against the Law of Moses as if it were evil and should be discontinued immediately. The Law of Moses was given by God, but God intended it to be temporary (as a tutor to lead the Jews to Christ, Galatians 4). The ceremonies (including holy days) were a shadow of Christ and His work to come (they were at least appointed by the Lord, unlike Christmas). All these ceremonies were legally nailed to the cross of Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:14), but they could be used as a means to reach Jews for Jesus Christ (as long as they were not required for either one's justification or one's sanctification).

3. **Lie #3. Paul taught all men everywhere against the Temple.** Again, the Temple and all its ceremonies were shadows pointing to Jesus Christ and the new and more glorious living Temple of Jesus Christ—the Church (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:21). These were similar charges Paul and others had brought against Stephen (Acts 7:13). Paul is now suffering the same lies he once hurled against Stephen. But that is the lot of the Christian (we are not above our Master). If Paul taught all men everywhere to immediately forsake the Temple and its ceremonies, and never use them under any circumstances, why was Paul in the Temple using one of the ceremonies of the Old Testament?

4. **Lie #4. Paul brought Gentiles into the Temple.** This lie was fabricated on the basis of having seen Trophimus (an Ephesian elder) with Paul in the streets of Jerusalem (Acts 21:29). The fact that these Asian Jews also recognized Trophimus further confirms they were Jews from Ephesus. In fact, they may have been the very ones to whom Paul preached in the synagogue of Ephesus and who had hardened their hearts against Paul and the gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 19:8-9).

C. Not only were lies being spread throughout the Church in Jerusalem about Paul, but now they are being circulated to all Jews in the Temple (mostly unbelieving Jews). Lies beget lies in order to cover previous lies. Dear ones, how we must guard our tongues in how we represent one another. There is nothing that so quickly damages our own character (and especially that of a minister) than when we do not accurately represent what others believe. Rather than destroying others, we will destroy ourselves. We are to be lovers of the truth, even when we represent the errors of others. We do not have some special license to distort what others believe just because we believe they are promoting an error. More often than not, those misrepresentations will blow back in our own face like one spitting into the wind. We must expose error, but not at the expense of telling the truth. That will not build trust, but rather distrust and suspicion.

D. Notice how quickly these lies spread and how quickly it turned from saying what was false to doing what was violent (Acts 21:30-31). Character assassination is often the first step to bodily assassination. The crowd quickly became a mob that was dragging Paul out of the Temple (Court of Israel) and into the exterior of the Temple proper (Court of Gentiles). They set out to kill him on the spot by beating him with fists and kicking with feet. What really set them off was the lie that Paul had brought Gentiles (Trophimus) into the Temple Court of Israel. There was a barrier between the court where only Jewish men could go and where Gentiles were permitted to go in order to pray and call upon God (the Court of the Gentiles was the one out of which Jesus turned over the tables of the moneychangers and chased them out because the chief priests had pushed the Gentiles out from worshipping God in exchange for the financial profit they would make, Mark 11:17). At the entrance to the Court of Israel was written (*The Book of the Acts*, F.F. Bruce, p. 434):

No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the Temple and enclosure.  
Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.

E. Dear ones, this was all ordained by the Lord, from the lies told to the violence brought against Paul (Acts 20:23; Acts 21:11). Did the Lord cease to love Paul? Were these lies and these violent afflictions a sign that Paul was living in some unrepented sin? Absolutely not! This was all ordained to the furtherance of the gospel; for Paul would give his testimony before this Jewish crowd, before the governor, before the king, and finally before the emperor in Rome. Paul's suffering was one of the greatest evidences of his union and communion with Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 2:11-12; Philippians 3:10). Did Paul see this as some unexpected, unforeseen glitch in the plan of God? How often do we encourage others to see that their trials and afflictions are not a mistake, but are God's plan to glorify Himself through what they suffer (like Joseph and Paul)? But, what a different story it is to swallow our own counsel and encouragement to others when God ordains those same trials for us. We need both the biblical examples of falling (like Peter), but we also need the biblical examples of standing through Jesus Christ (like Paul). But listen closely, dear ones, no Christian is a failure who falls and rises again as he/she repents and eyes the mercy of God in Christ Jesus. It is the one who doesn't rise again unto repentance that is the failure.

## **II. A Rescue Brought to Paul through the Romans (Acts 21:32-36).**

A. When the report of this commotion comes to the chief captain (Claudius Lysias, Acts 23:26) of the Roman garrison stationed in Jerusalem, he immediately takes soldiers and centurions to the Temple in Acts 21:31-32 (he had with him at least two hundred Roman soldiers). When they arrive, the Jews cease from beating Paul. The Roman soldiers were able to arrive with great speed because the Castle of Antonia where they were stationed was almost attached to the outer courtyard of the Temple—a flight of steps led upward from the Temple to the Castle. When Paul was bound with chains (Acts 21:33), the prophecies that had been given to Paul in the various churches came to pass. How do you know whether one is a true prophet of God? He teaches and prophesies that which is true (Deuteronomy 13 and 18).

B. When the commander asks the mob who Paul was, there was so much confusion with some saying one thing and others saying another thing that he had Paul carried up the stairs to the Castle to investigate the matter further (Acts 21:33-35). The mob was so filled with rage that they followed behind the soldiers crying out, "Away with him" (Acts 21:36). Now where have we heard those words before? This was what the mob shouted in a frenzy to the Roman officials at the trial of Christ (John 19:15). "Away with him" did not mean in context here to simply get Paul out of their sight, but rather to take him away and kill him. Paul was being conformed to the suffering and death of Christ.

C. Isn't it interesting who the Lord uses to rescue Paul from a painful death by beating at the hands and feet of the Jews? Roman soldiers—Roman soldiers that had no lawful right to have invaded Israel and to subject Israel (God's covenanted land) to their idolatrous emperor. David fled to the Philistines and found protection from King Saul from the idolatrous Philistine king (1 Samuel 27). God is not limited by any means to save by many or few, by godly or ungodly (that is why we pray for peace even from the ungodly in power). Paul finds help and protection as the soldiers bear him above their heads to carry him from certain death at the hands of his own countrymen. God has more for Paul to accomplish, and Paul is indestructible until such a time. God chooses and ordains the means to our physical salvation and spiritual sanctification—and they are not always pleasing or comfortable to us (Mark 7:32-34). The way of the cross is hardly ever easy and comfortable—it wasn't comfortable to Christ or to Paul, and it will not be comfortable for you or me either. But the question is: Will you by faith submit to the way of the cross of Christ, or will you rebel? Will you

trust the Lord Jesus though it be painful, or will you take the easy way out? Reading your Bible and prayer in the comfort of your home or Baptism and the Lord's Supper with the Church are not the only ways you have communion with Christ. Your suffering for and with Christ is also communion with Christ.

### **III. A Testimony Sought by Paul to Give to His Persecutors (Acts 21:37-40).**

A. As Paul was taken up the stairs from the outer court of the Temple to the Castle of Antonia, Paul seeks a request from the Roman commander. The commander is somewhat surprised that Paul speaks Greek (the language of culture and education). The commander had mistaken Paul for an Egyptian that had raised an insurrection in Jerusalem about three years earlier. Paul corrects the commander by identifying himself as a Jew from one of the cultural centers of the Roman Empire—Tarsus of Cilicia, behind only Athens and Alexandria by way of fame at that time. Paul requests that he might speak to the Jewish mob gathered below who are gathered in the Court of the Gentiles. The commander gives Paul permission and he waves with his hand to gain the attention of the Jews below. Paul then proceeds to address the Jews in the language of the people in Israel: Hebrew (Aramaic). We will not hear Paul's words to them until next Lord's Day (God willing).

B. What I believe is important to understand here about Paul is how he took a terrible situation in which he is slandered, despised, hated and beaten with the intent to murder him, and as he is lifted up above the mob who are still trying to grab him from the soldiers, Paul is not fearing for his safety or for his life. He is not filled with vindictive rage at these hateful Jews. He is not feeling sorry for himself and licking his wounds because he has been so horribly mistreated. He is looking for a way to glorify God and to bear testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ who saved him from his bitterness, anger, and violence to Jesus Christ. What we receive from others is simply what we would be dishing out to uncompromising Christians is the Lord Jesus had not captured us by His amazing grace.

C. Dear ones, are we so filled with ourselves when we are despised and hated, when others lie about us and attacks us that we have no thought of asking God to give us the opportunity to bear a good testimony for Jesus Christ and to show that we harbor no anger or resentment against them? Do we so hate and despise the trials we are going through that we cannot see that God intends those very trials to be the path He has in His sovereign wisdom and love chosen by which to sanctify us? What is more important to you: your comfort and pleasure, or your growth and sanctification in Jesus Christ; the works of the flesh or the fruit of the Spirit? How we respond to the trials God ordains for your life and mine will reveal where our heart is and what is most important to us. Afflictions, trials, and rejection may be bitter to the taste, but when we see every one of them as a God-ordained opportunity to bear a faithful testimony for Jesus Christ (even to the spiritual unseen world), the bitterness will turn into a sweetness in the soul. When we take the very trials with which Satan intends to discourage us and use them to bear a faithful testimony for Jesus Christ, God shakes the very foundation of the enemy by His Almighty power. Suffering for and with Jesus Christ is not weakness; it is the power of the Holy Spirit in action.

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