

Paul arrived in Jerusalem in time for the feast of Pentecost. He brought with him representatives from the Gentile churches, and the offering that they collected to aid the members of the church in Jerusalem. James and the elders received Paul, and the offering, but warned that there were thousands of Jews who had turned to Christ, but they resented Paul for his work with the gentiles. They accused him of teaching things contrary to the Law, the customs, and traditions of the Jews. They accused that Paul taught against Judaism, and told Jews that they had to turn away from the Jewish practice of their faith.

This, of course wasn't exactly the truth. Paul did not teach against the law, nor did he teach Jews to not follow their consciences. He did teach, however, that being a Jew does not save a person. Jews, like Gentiles, need to repent of their sins and trust Jesus, and His sacrifice, in order to be saved.

Paul agreed to enter into the purification rights of four other men, and pay their expenses in order to prove to the Jewish brothers that he adhered to Jewish customs. For nearly a week, Paul fit in with the huge crowd of people in Jerusalem for Pentecost until some Jews from Asia spotted him. The actions of these Jews represent the feelings of the Jews throughout Asia that persecuted Paul for his beliefs. They further accused Paul of bringing Gentiles into the Temple. The Christian Jews joined in with their Jewish kindred to strike out against Paul.

The outcry was so great that the crowd turned into a murderous mob. They would have surely beaten Paul to death had not God delivered him through the hands of the Roman soldiers. Two hundred plus men surrounded Paul, hoisted him on their shoulders, and carried him through the crowd to safety. Still the mob violently pressed in, trying to get to Paul. In tonight's passage, Paul makes his defense before the crowd, but without the desired results. Please read along with me, Acts 21:37-22:29.

The Jews knew exactly who Paul was, but it was a case of mistaken identity with the Roman soldiers. Apparently they had instructions to be on the lookout for a particular man who stirred up a lot of trouble, and they thought that Paul was that Egyptian insurrectionist. They were surprised to find out that Paul was a Jew from Tarsus. They learned that Paul was an educated man when he asked them in Greek for permission to address the crowd.

Picture in your mind the scene of Paul's defense. He takes an elevated position, probably on the steps of the Temple, with the gates closed behind him. Two hundred soldiers form a human shield to protect him on every side. They hold back the angry mob, while Paul boldly quiets the crowd to listen to his defense. When the crowd falls silent, he speaks to them in their native language, Aramaic.

Some manuscripts say that he spoke to them in Hebrew while others say Aramaic. The two languages are very similar, somewhat akin to the similarities between Spanish and Portuguese. Probably the people spoke in a blend of these two languages. The point is that the Jewish people could understand everything Paul said, but probably not the Roman soldiers. When the people heard Paul in their own Jewish language, they willingly listened to everything he had to say.

What follows is Paul's personal testimony of his Damascus Road experience. We read the account of that event back in chapter 9, and Paul will share his testimony again in chapter 26, when he makes his defense to Herod Agrippa.

Paul begins by relating to his audience. He tells them that once, "I was just like you." I am a Jew, trained and educated in the faith by Gamaliel, one of the most respected Rabbis of the

day. Paul was zealous for the law. He persecuted the church. Paul tried to stamp out Christianity for the sake of His Jewish faith. He was a man of great convictions, and invested his life in his faith.

Paul had a powerful testimony, with a strong appeal to his audience. He identified with them, right where they were in life. Our testimonies are not the same as Paul's, each of us have our own story, but notice that Paul did not embellish his testimony. He simply gave an account of how he came to know the Lord.

In order for us to have an effective witness, we have to be able to identify with people. We have to be truthful, and real. Our words may not bring conviction to others over their sin, if we cannot show that we empathize, because at some point we realized that we are sinners as well. Our words will be hollow concerning the power of God to change lives, if we cannot testify to the power of God that worked to change our lives.

Paul shared his life before his Damascus road experience, and then he told them how he came to know Jesus. I don't think any of us came to know Jesus exactly the same way as Paul. A bright light from heaven did not blind us, and probably no one here heard the voice of God with his or her physical ears, but many can testify that they heard the Lord's voice unmistakably, in a different way, when He called them to repentance and faith.

If you are a born again believer, you had a personal experience with the Lord. It may have happened during a Sunday morning sermon. Perhaps it was in response to the personal testimony of some believer. You may have seen the gospel preached on television, or heard it preached on the radio. Reading a bible in a hotel room has led some to saving faith. Perhaps you are one of those blessed individuals, who grew up rich in the things of God, and you came to know the Lord gradually over time, but you cannot point to a particular point in time, or a place. You just know for certain that you have a personal saving relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.

The point is that your salvation experience was personal, and your testimony is yours alone. In order to have an effective witness, we need to be able to openly share that experience in our witnessing encounters. It is natural for some people to struggle with putting into words how they came to know the Lord. That is why every believer should reflect upon their salvation experience, and prayerfully find the words to express what happened to him or her.

Paul quotes Jesus five times during his testimony. He says that the Lord spoke to me. The Lord revealed Himself, and His will for my life clearly, and Paul says, in effect, "I did what He told me to do." There have been a small handful of times in my life when I had the experience of the Lord speaking to me so clearly, and so unmistakably, that I perceived it as His audible voice. I feel blessed and overwhelmingly honored over those experiences. They are a powerful reminder for those times when my faith is put to the test.

But the Lord speaks to all of us in much more subtle ways, if we have ears to hear. The Lord speaks to me daily through His Spirit, and His word. Sometimes He speaks to me through the encouragement or wisdom of a brother or sister in Christ. I often find insight or conviction during a Sunday morning worship experience, a bible study, or during my preparation for preaching or teaching. I am most sensitive to the Lord's voice when I am in a spirit of prayer, and open to whatever He has to say.

If we have a vibrant, living, personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, He speaks to us all the time to reveal His will. In our personal testimonies we need to be able to talk about how God reveals Himself and His will to us personally. That portion of our testimony will have

power, however, only if others can observe our obedience to His revealed will, and how that has changed our lives for the better.

So, Paul shared his testimony, and thousands upon thousands of the Jewish people came forward to give their life to the Lord. While we wish that were true, the people's anger grew, and they wanted to kill Paul more than ever. Why? Because a part of Paul's testimony brought conviction over their prejudice. Rather than confessing their sin before God, they struck out against the man who shared his witness.

Prejudice is alive and well today, and it is a great hindrance to the kingdom of God. Fear or disdain for another can only be overcome with love and concern. Victory can only come when we allow God to change our hearts so that we love others, the way He loves us. I wish I could say that I have complete victory over prejudice, but I don't. When I see Muslims out in the community, I don't hate them, but I am suspicious, because of the atrocities some Muslims commit towards Christians. When I meet a black man for the first time, I am willing to develop a relationship with him, but perhaps a little more guarded because of past experiences with some blacks. I need to get to know him before I open myself completely. There exists a tension between people when there is a perceived threat, a different worldview, or when people are in some way different than we are. We must break through that tension in the love of Christ to share the good news, so that people who are different than us can become our brothers and sisters in the faith.

The tension between Paul and his audience came to a head when Paul recounted that the Lord told him in verse 18 to "Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me," and in verse 21, "Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles." This sent the Jews over the edge, so that they once again tried to kill Paul.

For what it is worth, I want to point out that early on in Paul's ministry, God told Paul to leave Jerusalem because the Jews would not accept the gospel message. Yet, Paul is back in Jerusalem, and the Jews will not accept Paul's testimony about Jesus. God sent Paul far away to the Gentiles, but at this point, he is not ministering to the Gentiles, but to the Jews in Jerusalem. Is it just possible, that God's will was for Paul to continue his ministry to the Gentiles, and not to have returned to Jerusalem at all?

The crowd turned back into a mob. The Roman soldiers wanted to get to the bottom of all of this so they determined to flog Paul until he confessed to what he had done to make the crowd hate him so much that they would disrupt the peace. That is when Paul revealed that he was a Roman citizen. It was against the law to flog a Roman citizen without a Roman trial. This put the Roman commander in a precarious position. He had to maintain the peace, but he had to be careful how he treated a Roman citizen. Romans enjoyed certain rights that others did not.

We will face opposition from the world if we are consistent in sharing our faith, but in America, we have certain rights that protect us. If we are to be bold in our witness we must take advantage of our rights, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and we must stand with courage. In Milton Florida, we may be mocked, laughed at, ridiculed or threatened, but we have every legal right to share our faith with others. If we do not use our rights, we will lose them. We cannot advance the kingdom of God if we are shy about our witness. The world needs to hear the good news that Jesus is God in the flesh, who came to offer His life as a sacrifice for our sins. On the cross He bore our sins. He was dead and buried in a tomb for three days, but He arose in victory, ascended into heaven, and is coming again.

If we confess our sins to God and receive Jesus as Savior and Lord, God receives us unto Himself as His children, and He puts us to work to reach others with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

If there is anyone here who has questions about how to be saved, please come and talk with me right after the service.