

Paul's speech - a man transformed

Littlebourne - 1st October 2023 - Acts 21:37-22:21

Last week's passage from Acts saw Paul visit James at Jerusalem, and go to the temple. In the temple, Paul is accused of bringing gentiles into the places where they are not allowed. But what really causes trouble is what Paul is saying in the temple. The charge was that he was speaking against the people and law and place of the temple.

Earlier in chapter 21, there was clear prophecy that Paul would be arrested in Jerusalem. The prophet Agabus in verse 11:

And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "This says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the gentiles.'"

Now, the Jews at the temple have attacked Paul. The Romans step in, take charge of the situation and seek to resolve things by arresting Paul, binding him with chains and then getting him out of the way of the crowds so they can work out what is going on. They're carrying Paul up the steps to the barracks, as the mob continues to attack Paul, which is where we get to this week.

v37-39

37 As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, "May I say something to you?" And he said, "Do you know Greek? 38 Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?" 39 Paul replied, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people."

The tribune, who we later learn in chapter 23 is named Claudius Lysias, might be taking Paul away from the fray to some sort of safety. But in the next chapter, we'll see the intention of the tribune is to interrogate Paul by flogging. Now Paul doesn't end up flogged, as later on he explains he is a Roman citizen, though you can imagine Paul knows that his arrest is potentially a worse fate than the mob.

The tribune asks him who he is - since he knows Greek, is he the one that lead a rebellion against the Romans? Is Paul the Egyptian that lead these four thousand men, known as terrorists, assassins, murderers. The Greek word used could be more literally translated 'dagger men'. Josephus records (Jewish War 2.261–263) that these were insurrectionists lead by a Jew from Egypt, who around three years before this event had come claiming to be a prophet, leading many men and attacked the Roman garrison at Jerusalem. This didn't last long, and this Egyptian and his followers fled. Wishful thinking on the part of the tribune maybe. Is this the wanted man that he's been looking for?

Paul replies that he is from the other direction - from the north, Tarsus, rather than south, Egypt, and that he's a citizen of there.

The man Paul is mistaken for, that commanded four thousand men, that was willing to use violence and murder, forcing his will on the world, came to nothing. He's relegated to a verse in the Bible just as a side-note about mistaken identity, and a short paragraph in one of Josephus' long history books. But Paul, a man whose only real weapon was words once he had become a Christian, is one of the most influential figures of all time.

So Paul asks to speak to the people, and for whatever reason, the tribune allows this. Maybe he thought Paul would incriminate himself, speak against the Romans, give the tribune a reason to deal with the situation in a permanent way. But Paul's words to the crowd are maybe not what the tribune expects.

v40-2

40 And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying:

1 "Brothers and fathers, hear the defence that I now make before you."

2 And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said:

Paul starts by explaining to the people gathered who he was. He gives his credentials so to speak.

He's standing on the steps - these were probably the steps to the Antonian Fortress, adjoining the temple complex to its north. Since he's now above the crowd, he is able to motion them to be quiet, and somehow they let him speak.

Paul addresses the crowd in language they'll understand. The Greek says he says in the language of the Hebrews - either their colloquial language of Aramaic, spoken by the bulk of the people in the region, or in Hebrew, the language of the temple and the scriptures. Either way, he's addressing the people in the language they understand - he's showing them that he's one of them. When they realise this, and realise maybe that he's addressing them, rather than putting on a speech for the Romans, they get more quiet and pay attention.

v3-5

3 "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. 4 I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, 5 as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

Paul tells them that he's just like them, in fact he's an exemplary case. He's from Tarsus, yes, a long way away, but he was brought up in Jerusalem.

He's educated by Gamaliel, who was a leading figure in the Sanhedrin, the temple council. Gamaliel was held in great esteem by all the Jews, as we see when he appeared in Acts 5. Paul was brought up in the strict manner of the law - he is, judging from his upbringing, as qualified as anyone to be in the temple and teach. He was and is as zealous for God as the crowd is.

So Paul has the right credentials, more than most. Then he turns to what he used to do. He used to persecute the Christians, he delivered them to prison, even to death, and the Jewish leaders there in the crowd know it - they were on board. They sent him to Damascus to get the Jewish converts to Christianity there and bring them back for trial at Jerusalem.

Paul makes clear that he not only is he as educated and knowledgeable as the best of them, but that he was also of their opinion about things once. Not just of the same opinion, but willing to take action to defend those opinions. This strict religion worked itself out in his life in the self-righteousness and anger, particularly against those that showed a different way. He used to preach the opposite of what he now preaches, he used to be one of them, and he has been totally turned around. Paul now tells us what happened.

v6-11

6 “As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. 7 And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ 8 And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’ 9 Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. 10 And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.’ 11 And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.

We saw this story back in Acts 9 - Paul, then called Saul, was struck blind on his journey to continue in the persecution of Christians, and is completely turned around. He hears directly from Jesus, his former beliefs about Christianity are invalidated. I don't want to dwell too long on this - we've heard about it before and it'll come up again in Acts 26 as well. Suffice to say, this man is completely changed.

v12-16

12 “And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, 13 came to me, and standing by me said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. 14 And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; 15 for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. 16 And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptised and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’

Then, as is recorded in chapter 9 as well, Ananias goes to Paul. Chapter 9 tells us that Ananias is reluctant - he's knows what Saul the zealous persecutor is like, he may have heard what happened to Stephen and how Saul approved. God has to speak to Ananias to persuade him to see Saul, chapter 9 verse 10-17:

10 Now there was a disciple at Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 And the Lord said to him, "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying, 12 and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight." 13 But Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints at Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." 17 So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

Ananias relays the message that God has chosen Saul - this enemy of Christ, a man of violence against the truth - and now will use him for His purposes. He's taken a hardened sinner, someone that despised the truth, and made him into an instrument of the gospel.

v17-21

17 "When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance 18 and saw him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' 19 And I said, 'Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. 20 And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.' 21 And he said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"

From being the persecutor, to being the persecuted - Paul was once that man that stood by and aided the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Now, he stands in that same city, facing death himself. Paul recalls here the first trip to Jerusalem he had after his conversion - recorded later in chapter 9.

Paul's time with the gentiles was not to last though - God brings him back to Jerusalem again, this time, a last opportunity to speak the truth to his former mentors, even as they seek his death. He has traded places with those he once opposed.

Trading Places

In a similar way that Paul stepped into the place of those who were once his enemies, Jesus takes the place of his once enemies. He went to us who are rebellious against Him and became like us. There's several ways in which Jesus trades places with us.

Jesus became one of us

First, Jesus became one of us. He was born as a real human being - lived a human life. The God who created the world, that created us, humbled himself to become one of us.

And not in half measures either - he lived a life of poverty, hardship and suffering. He became one of the least of us - a lowly labourer. If God became human, we might expect him to be a King or an emperor, at least a highly respected intellectual or the like. But Jesus came to Earth to live a real human life - he really took our place and lived a life that included all the things we experience. Boredom, illness, happiness and sadness - Jesus knows all our emotions and feelings and can sympathise with us completely. God himself took our place. Paul writes to the Philippian church these words (Philippians 2:6-8):

*[Christ Jesus], being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
7 rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
8 And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

Jesus took our sins, died in our place

Jesus' life as a human was not limited to merely being one of us. He also took our place in his death. Sinful humanity, rebellious against God, deserves death. Not just the natural death we will all face, but the death that results from sin - God's wrath against our sinful selves.

Jesus takes our place in taking our sin upon himself and taking the just punishment for that sin in his death on the cross. He substitutes himself for us - he dies in our place.

Paul says Christ must suffer and also that he is the firstborn from the dead - he paid the punishment in full and came out of the other side, triumphing over death.

Jesus doesn't just become one of us temporarily either (whats 30 odd years to the eternal God?) but he always lives as one of us - eternally human after his resurrection, reigning over all things.

We gain Christ's status

This brings us to where we in a sense take Christ's place - we likewise are raised from death to life. Just as Jesus is the firstborn from the dead, we look forward to being resurrected in like manner. He gives humanity this new start.

Not just does Jesus take our sin, but he gives us his righteousness - we don't just get a clean slate, we are granted his status. We get to take his place - we become sons of God, brothers of Christ. We call God Father.

Conclusion

This is the great transformation that Paul underwent. He took place of those he once persecuted, just as Christ took the place of those that persecuted him. We persecuted Jesus in our actions - he accepted persecution that we might be free from sin. He turned things around completely. He takes our sin, we take his righteousness. He exchanges his riches for our debts.

Paul again writes, in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 (verse 21):

For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

We might not have had the dramatic experience that Paul had, but we do have the same offer of transformation. We might not have had the supernatural bright lights and the audible voice of Jesus, but we do know that Jesus is the light of the world, shining down on sinners, and we have his words written for us. We have God's revelation, Jesus' own words for us to understand what transformation is on offer.

Paul's life didn't become great - in earthly terms that is. It became a lot worse. He left a life of worldly status and authority, of control and power and gained a life of persecution and suffering. But his life had new meaning - in Christ, he found meaning even in the suffering that he experienced because of his conversion.

Paul could only suffer and endure because Christ suffered and endured for us. The first letter of Paul's that we have, his letter to the Galatians, he writes this (Galatians 2:20):

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

True transformation starts not in ourselves, not in our thoughts or deeds - true transformation starts at the cross - it did for Paul, and it should for us too.