PAUL IN JERUSALEM – HIS 'APOLOGIA'

We are in the book of Acts in the series called "turning the world upside down". Indeed, we have seen how Christianity starting from Jerusalem, going through Judea, Samaria and even beyond impacted the Jewish, as well as the pagan world. One of the most prominent leaders of Christianity in this huge effort is Paul (initially known as Saul from Tarsus). He was really storming through Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, reasoning with the Jews and trying to persuade them that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. He was preaching boldly the Gospel to the Gentiles, teaching them the Word of God with such intensity that "*all residents of Asia*, says Luke in Acts 19:10, *heard the Word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks*".

During his third missionary journey, Paul "*resolved in the spirit*" to go to Jerusalem according to Acts19:21. Accompanied by a group of Christian leaders from the Gentile churches, he brings a financial gift from these churches to the saints of Jerusalem.

As seen last week, Paul stopped in Miletus where he met the leaders of the Ephesus church and after encouraging them he continued the journey by ship towards Phoenicia. On the few stops Paul and his group make along the Mediterranean coast in this region, they visit churches and spent some time with his friends and brothers. These ones try to stop Paul from going to Jerusalem, being worried by what it might happen to him. In Caesarea, a prophet comes and tells him that he will be arrested in Jerusalem, but Paul remains unmoved in his decision to go. His famous statement "*I am ready not only to be imprisoned, but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus*" reflects well his determination to go there. And there he is now, as Luke presents it in the passage we are going to read shortly.

This man who turned upside down a fair part of the Roman Empire with the Gospel, is now on the point to turn Jerusalem upside down at the feast of Pentecost. After meeting with the elders and successfully entrusted to them the financial gift brought from the Gentile churches, Paul spent seven days in the Temple, fulfilling a ceremonial purification. At the end of this period, he is the object of a violent and angry mob. He is wrongly accused by some Jews from Asia that he is anti-Jews, anti-law of Moses, anti-Temple and that he just defiled the Temple by allowing his Gentile friends to get in. They drag him out of the Temple and severely beat him with the intention to kill him, before the roman soldiers show up and arrest him. Not having a good understanding of what happened and because of the violence of the crowd, the captain orders to bring Paul into the barracks. Right at this point, Paul is asking permission to speak to the crowd. What is going to say? Let's look at today's passage now.

Acts 21:37 – 22:22.

As seen in verse 1, Paul starts with these words: "hear the *defense* that I now make". The word 'defense' comes from the Greek word 'apologia', from which the English word 'apologetics' gets its roots from, meaning 'a defensive method of argument' or 'defending by speech or writing'.

Paul's apologetic speech in Jerusalem in front of this violent crowd is remarkable.

Just think about it: if we were to consider the man (Paul), his circumstances, the speech itself and the effect produced on the audience, this address of Paul before the Jews in Jerusalem is worthy to be ranked among the famous speeches of the ages. In fact, the speech has been recorded in the Bible and came to us after two millennia during which millions of people have read it and benefited from it. Its

simplicity and truthfulness, its wisdom and moderation, its Christ exalting and Christ centeredness are even for us today a huge source of inspiration and encouragement.

Therefore, let's pay careful attention to the details of this speech, trying to discover important principles Paul's used during his defense, principles we may apply here, today.

1. Accusations and response

In order to understand his defense, let's see first what the accusations were:

a. <u>The charge</u>

As presented by the group of Jews from Asia in **<u>Acts 21:28</u>** Paul was accused of teaching:

- Against the people (anti-Jew);
- Against the law (anti-Moses);
- Against the Temple
- he defiled the Temple

Let's note here that these three elements are the core of Jewish identity. So in these terms, this is an accusation against Paul's Jewish identity.

Let's now see how Paul is responding to all these accusations.

In fact, even before looking on his response, in order to better understand why he chose this defense strategy, we need to have a look at Paul's heart and his situation and take note of few things:

- First of all, he had a strong desire to go to Jerusalem. It's been 20 years now since he left Jerusalem and traveled across the Roman Empire spreading the Gospel.
- He knew that he will find opposition in Jerusalem, that's why he is asking the church of Rome to pray for him to be delivered from the unbelieving Jews (Romans 15:30-31).
- He had been warned by the Holy Spirit, by prophets and brothers & sisters that he may be persecuted and suffer for the name of Christ in Jerusalem.
- He loved his co-nationals very much and he wanted them to be saved. He unfolds his heart about his love for the Jews in his letter to Romans 9-11.
- He mentions the same thing to the Corinthians (1 Cor.9.19): "*To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law*".

Now, while he presents his defense before the people, let us observe Paul's attitude from the beginning. He is wise, respectful, loving, and moderate in his approach. He could have decided to leave the crowd right when the roman soldiers were taking him into the barracks, but instead he chose to speak to the people, even though he had been hurt by them. In fact, he is not only politely asking permission, but he "begs" the tribune to permit him to speak to people (Acts 21:39). This shows that he was keen to address the crowd.

Furthermore, his strategy clearly is to identify with them speaking in Hebrew (Aramaic), when he could have used the Greek language. Later during his speech he shows understanding for their zeal in persecuting "this Way". He identifies with them and their motives, as the one who also persecuted the Christians.

He shows kindness and respect in the way he addresses them right from the beginning. After their treatment in the Temple, he could have addressed the with a '*Mathew 23 Jesus style'* language: "You hypocrites, whitewashed tombs, hear my defense!", but instead he addresses them with a respectful "Brothers and fathers, here the defense…" (Acts 22:1).

Let's see now how is he responding to each one of their accusations.

b. A Hebrew of Hebrews

Not only is he not anti-Jew, but he proves to them that he is a first class Jewish citizen. He is doing that by presenting his credentials:

- Born Jew
- Educated in Jerusalem under their finest teacher (Gamaliel)
- He opposed the message of Jesus of Nazareth

Paul presents himself in company of Jews with good reputation in their community, as Ananias was in Damascus. He also mentions that at his return to Jerusalem he desired to witness for Jesus Christ before his fellow-Jews, but God sent him for another mission.

Later on, when he is imprisoned in Rome, he writes the followings to the Philippians:

Philippians 3:5 "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, *a Hebrew of Hebrews*; as to the law, a Pharisee"

c. Not against the law

In verse 3 he states that he was educated "*according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers*";

The fact that he is a Jew, and even a Pharisee, this implicitly shows that the law was on high esteem in his eyes. He affirms in Philippians 3:6 that "*as to the righteousness under the law (he was) blameless*".

He mentions in his story that in Damascus he meets this fellow-Jew, Ananias, who was devoted to (observing) the Law of Moses.

Lastly, even the fact that they met and caught him in the Temple, it is because he was accomplishing a ceremonial purification, according to the law.

So, he clearly demonstrates that he is not against the law, but rather accepting it as the one bringing the knowledge of sin according to Romans 7:7: "*Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin*."

d. Not against the Temple

The accusation that he is against the Temple is not true at all.

He mentions in Acts 22:17 that when he returned to Jerusalem from Damascus, he went to the Temple to pray.

Again, as mentioned before, where did they find him right few hours before? He was in the Temple, accomplishing a ceremonial purification. Therefore, contrary to what his opponents said, Paul did not abandon the Temple.

And the accusation of him defiling the Temple by bringing Gentiles into it made no sense at all. Paul loved too much Trophimus and his other Gentile friends that he would want to hurt them by bringing them into the Temple. That would have meant sure death for them, not for Paul, because he was a Jew and he was allowed to enter the Temple.

So, with a lot of wisdom, care and moderation Paul makes his 'apologia', proving clearly to his audience that he is innocent of all the accusations brought against him.

Now, it is interesting to observe that, while responding to their accusations, he conveys to his audience the most important message for them to hear: the Gospel. It is also interesting to see that he is not using an elaborate and complicated theological statement, but instead giving a short summary of what happened in his life carefully exalting Christ. He emphasizes the fact that even though he is a Jew, he has now a new identity in Christ. With all his credentials he was moving on a wrong path until Jesus of Nazareth intervened and changed the course of his life.

2. The transforming Power of Christ

From the beginning of his speech, Paul has tried to identify with the people, showing understanding for their zeal and their motives. He was like them, but not anymore because something extraordinary happened to him. It was regarding "this Way", which seemed to be a designation that his audience understood. None of Jews' accusations referred to "the Way", but indirectly they referred to it. Later on, when Paul is in front of the governor, this one mentions about having a good understanding about the way (Acts 24:22) – "*But Felix, having a rather accurate knowledge of the Way…*"

So Paul takes the opportunity to present to his audience the radical change that happened to him.

From a prominent Jew, well educated in the law and full of zeal for God, he becomes a totally different person as he meets the One who is behind "this Way", which Paul was so harshly persecuting: Jesus of Nazareth. This Jesus said about himself: "I am the Way…" (John 14:6).

So, in fact, Paul is brought at the point to (kind of forced to) realize that, by persecuting the Way (men and women following this Way), he was in fact persecuting Jesus **of Nazareth** (this he emphasized for his audience). In other words, he was telling his audience: "Yes, it is about him – the prophet from Nazareth, whom you crucified. You surely remember him. He is the one who forced me to see that I was going in the wrong direction, thinking I was doing service to God by persecuting those men and women. I was blind! So blind! And in order to make me realize this, Jesus of Nazareth made me physically blind, so that I needed help from my companions in order to be able to arrive in Damascus.

At his encounter with Christ, Paul recognizes immediately that he was on the wrong way and ready to change direction by his question: "What shall I do, Lord?" (v.10).

God is using a devout Jew to bring Paul on the new direction, first of all by giving Paul back his sight, as he learned the lesson. He could say: "Now I see, not only physically, but now I understand how blind and wrong I was in my zeal for God. I am ready now to do what Jesus of Nazareth wants me to do.

By the words used by Ananias about baptism, sin, calling on his name (v.16), Paul is reminding the Jews about the concept of salvation, in law (OT) terms:

Psalm 51:2: *Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin*!

Joel 2:32: *And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.*

Whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Even the Jews in his audience now.

But he needed to make a decision: "Why do you wait?" was Ananias question for Paul. By remembering this in his story, Paul directed this question to the Jews. In other words he was telling them: Jesus from Nazareth is alive! He is really the Son of God and he is God. Why do you wait? Acknowledge Him. He is the One who brings salvation. Call upon His name!"

But Paul's message for the crowd is not done yet. He still has to announce something else to them.

3. **The calling to serve Christ**.

Paul has now a new Master. He is the One who decides how Paul will serve Him.

Acts 9:15 – The Lord told Ananias that Paul "*is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel*".

In the last part of his speech, Paul is showing his audience that he had tried to "convince" God that he would be the right person to go to the Jews and give them testimony about Jesus (v.19-20), because they knew him well and how zealous he was for God persecuting the Christians.

> *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.'*

God tells him his testimony will not be accepted by the Jews. Instead, Gods decides to send him to the Gentiles.

> v.21: "*I will send you far away to the Gentiles*"

So, in other words, Paull tells the Jews: "If I went to the Gentiles and if I brought them the Gospel and teach them about Jesus of Nazareth, it is because God sent me to them".

God is sovereign and he called Paul to serve Christ among the Gentiles. If he was teaching everyone everywhere, as he had been accused, it is because Jesus sent him to do so.

Paul is not afraid to reveal to the Jews all the Counsel of God: He saves and he calls men and women to serve Christ where it pleases him to send them.

By mentioning the word "Gentiles", Paul touched a sensible issue amongst his audience. They are not willing to listen to him anymore. They are not interested to know whether he is innocent of those accusations, about his new identity in Christ and the fact that it is Christ who sent him to the Gentiles, they want one thing: to kill him.

4. **'Apologia' in the 21st century**

What about you and me today? What do we have to do with a defense speech of a man who lived about 2000 years ago? Why should we care?

The author of the book of Hebrews said in chapter 13: *Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.* [8] *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever*.

So, when it is about Jesus Christ, yes, we care. He is the same. He is the Lord of Paul and he is our Lord, as we are his church. It is He who calls the shots, it is he who calls and sends his people in his service.

And then, the verse 7 asks us to look at our leaders (Paul was one of them) to consider their way of life and to imitate their faith. He gave us an excellent example of how to make a defense of our faith. The Bible says that we should be always ready to make a defense ("apologia").

> 1 Peter 3:15: "*in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect*".

We may not be in the position to defend our faith like Paul, in front of an angry mob facing imminent death, even though, in the recent months Christians in Irak and Syria have been killed when they confessed the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We, Christians in the western world are rather confronted with other kind of obstacles in presenting Christ to people. The disinterest in God and spiritual things, materialism and the pleasures of this world are things that we have to deal with and sometimes with our own lack of enthusiasm in sharing the Gospel.

Nonetheless, the principles we learn from Paul are still valid for us today. Let me summarize some of them, as we draw to a close.

You and I may not be in the position to present Christ under pressure and in a single speech like Paul. Most of the time we would have free conversations with our friends, neighbors, colleagues or co-workers. They may be held over a period of time. It would be of great benefit to remember and to apply what we have seen today in Paul's defense speech.

- It is important to try to identify as much as possible with people to whom we witness for Christ (know their situation, their needs; love them, pray for them);
- We should be wise in presenting the Gospel, using a language people understand;
- Let us be moderate and not engaging in contradictory conversations;
- Let us not forget that the most powerful apologetic draws from the real experience of what God has done in our lives, personally;
- When we have to make a defense of our faith, let us do it with gentleness and respect, honoring Christ as Lord in our hearts;

May the Lord help us to do so!

Now, if you are here today and you are not a Christian, you may want to consider making a decision concerning Christ. The Jews preferred to "shoot the messenger" rather than to obey the message of Paul and surrender to 'God of their fathers'. Jesus is the one who brings salvation. He is in the business of saving people even today. Why would you wait? Your sins could be washed away today if you "call on the name of the Lord".If you would like to talk about this today or pray about it, please, go to one of your friends, a pastor or an elder who may help you.