

Open Heart, Open Bible

Joshua and Acts of the Apostles

Linking Theme: Fulfilment

Passage for weekly reading (Week 36):

Acts 21 – 24

Turmoil in Jerusalem

Luke is still travelling with Paul and his friends on the sea passage which takes them via the Greek Islands to Tyre. Another emotionally charged time of prayer concludes this visit after a seven-day stay, and two days later they arrive at Caesarea, where we read of another meeting with the prophet Agabus (see 11 v.28). His ministry to Paul on this occasion is just as insightful as previously, but the Apostle is not to be dissuaded or deflected by the local believers. His arrival in Jerusalem effectively brings the third missionary journey to its conclusion, for the events from this moment are taken out of the Apostle's control, as the prophetic word had indicated.

Paul sees the believers and the leaders as his first priority, and is informed as to the rumours in circulation which incriminate him as undermining to the law of Moses (v.21). He is therefore advised to undergo the rites of purification once more (see 18 v.18), along with four others, to give demonstrative evidence of his loyalty to Judaism. In spite of this, he is seized by some troublemakers before completion of the purification period, and a riot starts which is only quelled by the arrival of the Roman commander and a detachment of soldiers.

Paul is then given the opportunity to speak up for himself, testifying to his experience of the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, some 25 years previously, dating Paul's arrival in Jerusalem on this occasion at A.D.59/60. We learn a little more here as to what Ananias actually said to Saul when praying over him (v.'s 14-16). The Jews react abusively once Paul speaks of his calling to the Gentile world, implying their own rejection, and the commander again has to deal with the commotion by removing his man to the barracks for flogging and interrogation. At this point, Paul speaks up as to his Roman citizenship, and the commander, feeling out of his depth, orders that he be brought before the Sanhedrin to ascertain the truth of the matter. The Apostle's detailed knowledge of the law, and his ability to exploit the tensions between Pharisee and Sadducee, throws the meeting into confusion, and the poor commander is forced to abandon the session in a much worse state than it began. Paul experiences another night-time encounter with the Lord, and his resolve is strengthened through it (v.11). The plot to kill him is foiled by the timely assistance of his nephew, and once again Paul is smuggled away under cover of darkness, this time to Caesarea and to the Roman Governor at

the garrison town. Perhaps the sheer scale of the operation says something of the increasing panic in the heart of the commander as his efforts to deal with the situation have met with continued frustration. He must have been a relieved man when the handover was complete. The Jewish leaders now have to present their case before Felix.

After a five-day delay, Ananias the high priest and his entourage arrive at Caesarea together with a lawyer, Tertullus, to plead their case. Paul is given the opportunity to speak in his own defence. He states clearly the reasons for his visit to Jerusalem and the peaceable nature of his conduct having arrived there. He speaks directly as to his allegiance to “the Way”, but also points out that that allegiance is totally compatible with belief in the Jewish Law and Prophetic writings. In that, he is no different to his accusers. His obedience to the ceremonial law having arrived in the City now stands him in good stead, and he states that the earlier hearing before the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem foundered simply because of the question as to the resurrection from the dead. Felix could see no future in this line of enquiry, so adjourned the proceedings for a later date. When in doubt, hesitate! The Governor’s basic insecurity and dishonesty also surface as he continues to question Paul in private, but like the commander before him, he is also out of his depth, and the case drags on with no resolution for two more uneventful years. At least, Paul was not badly treated during this long time of inactivity (v.23).

Food for thought / discussion / prayer

1) Paul never questioned the benefit to the Jews of continuing to observe the law of Moses. The issue for him was that Gentiles should not be made to follow the same ritual. This comes through clearly in his teaching to the churches in Romans 1 Corinthians and Galatians. Why then do you feel that the Jews were always so quick to misunderstand him and to react so abusively?

2) In ch.23 v.’s 1 – 11, Paul’s confidence as a trained Pharisee shines through as he single-handedly gets the better of the high priest and throws the whole gathering into chaos. The Lord uses these abilities, for it is His plan to have Paul testify in Rome. How does the Lord most frequently use you – through your acquired abilities and specialist training, or in the more obviously spiritual gifts we have looked at in Paul’s letters? Is it helpful to make a distinction between gifts which are naturally acquired and gifts which are spiritually given - such as Agabus’ ability to prophesy?

3) Paul is left in prison needlessly for two years. How do you imagine that he “kept his spiritual fervour”? (Rom. 12 v.11)

Next week’s passage: Acts 25 –28