

JUSTICE IS DEFERRED

ACTS 21:31-40 DECEMBER 9, 2020

Yesterday, Pastor Mike McClure and other representatives from Calvary Chapel San Jose stood before a Santa Clara court and were found in contempt for continuing to hold church services during the COVID-19 pandemic. The judge ordered they pay \$55,000 as a result. The church also faces county fines as high as \$700,000 for keeping their doors open.¹

As Christians we watch these court cases with interest. Unfortunately, throughout 2020 the trend has been clear that the powers that be don't have much of an interest in making sure Christians are able to gather before God week after week. Even when it *seems* like courts rule in favor of churches, thus far it hasn't been any kind of great victory. Instead, a few courts have simply ruled that churches should be held to the *same* restrictive standard as any restaurant, retailer or secular business.

We know that our historic experience of religious freedom is the *exception*, not the norm for most Christians in most places through the last few thousand years. Yet, reading the Bible, seeing the power of God wielded on behalf of His people, hearing how the Lord talks about mountains moving and how no foe can stand against us, we might expect that Believers would chalk up a victory in every single battle. But, not every story of oppression ends with the parting of the Red Sea.

Though that is true, we need not lose hope. As we learned this past Sunday in our study of Psalm 146, good is *going* to win. We look forward to a future victory, one that is complete in every way. Where all injustices are righted, all injuries are mended, all insufficiencies made whole. But today we walk in the midst of trouble. And some of those troubles will not be immediately removed or overcome. But, it still surprises us.

Even reading through a book like Acts we find surprises like this. If you were reading through the book of Acts for the first time and keeping score, you'd notice that, *yes*, sometimes scary things happen to God's people. But, thus far, usually the Christians come *through* the adversity. They come out of the dungeons. They are taken out of the chains. There have been some exceptions along the way - men like Stephen and James (the brother of John). But now we're dealing with *Paul*, the man of steel! You arrest him, the earth shakes. You stone him, he comes back to life.

When we left off last time a violent mob had seized Paul after he was accused of something he would *never* do. Today, we see what happens next. But, many of you are familiar with the story and you know that *this* attack and arrest do not end in his exoneration or even escape. He's going to *stay* arrested through the end of the book. In the mean time, he'll be wrongfully imprisoned, targeted for assassination, shipwrecked, and gnawed on by a viper. Where is God when Christians take such heavy blows? And how might we stay on our feet to fight another round? Those are some of the questions before us in our passage tonight. We begin in verse 31.

Acts 21:31 - ³¹As they were trying to kill him, word went up to the commander of the regiment that all Jerusalem was in chaos.

On the whole, if we were keeping score, it will feel like the good guys are losing points. As we've covered before, some commentators are passionate in their opinion that Paul was outside the will of God throughout this entire period, and we've talked about why we don't see it that way. But *even if*

¹ <https://www.lmtonline.com/crime/article/Judge-finds-San-Jose-church-in-contempt-for-15785684.php>

he was, God does not base His love for you on performance. He doesn't *stop* loving you or *stop* offering His grace when we make a mistake. Praise God for that!

But, no matter *why* Paul was in this situation, here he was. And the Lord was with him. He's going to be savagely beaten, then wrongfully arrested, and he's going to *stay* that way for *years*. Knowing that there's a long haul of persecution ahead in his story, I am so thankful and encouraged to see marvelous notes of providence in these verses.

We see at least 2 here. First, "as they were *trying* to kill him." The Temple complex was full to the brim. Paul is one man. No one is defending him. He's got no body armor. It's not *that* hard to kill someone in a situation like this. People kill individuals on black friday without even *meaning* to. There in 2 Kings chapter 7 the people had been besieged and were starving in the city of Samaria. God brought deliverance and when the weak and weary townsfolk rushed out to the enemy camp for food they crushed the captain of the king's guard.

So why was it that a highly motivated, enraged mob of killers could beat Paul but were unable to kill him? I have to call it providence. Second, "word went to the commander." How did that happen? They had strategically shut the gates of the temple. God found a way. He provided a messenger to go and deliver the necessary news to bring the soldiers in.

Why not send an angel? Why not open up the ground and swallow these blasphemers whole? Well, knowing the rest of the story we know that God's desire was to put Paul before governors and kings. To inspire him to write more epistles. To use him as a missionary among many Roman military men.

Acts 21:32 - ³²Taking along soldiers and centurions, he immediately ran down to them. Seeing the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.

Historians believe this officer would've been in command of 1,000 Roman soldiers. The wording here gives us the impression that he mustered at least 200 to go with him into the riot at the Temple. Despite the bedlam and the barriers, the police response time was incredible! In fact, I'd say it was providential. Years ago our house was being robbed on a Sunday morning. We happened to be at Calvary Tulare that day and my alarm company called and asked if I wanted to dispatch the police. I didn't think anyone would *actually* break into my house in broad daylight on the Lord's day, but I said they should. Even if we *were* be robbed, I figured it would be too late by the time the police showed up. But, as it turns out, there was an officer very near by. He arrived while our uninvited guests were still doing their thing and, despite some property damage, no harm was done.

Here you have a huge mob beating a man to death (a man who, stubbornly, won't die!) but the peace officers were able to get *right* where they were needed in no time flat. That's providence.

By the way, a scene like this highlights the fact that human beings *need* governance. We need police. We need laws. We need enforcement of those laws. And we are thankful for those who put themselves in harms way to protect and serve and keep the peace.

Acts 21:33 - ³³Then the commander approached, took him into custody, and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He asked who he was and what he had done.

Now, wait a minute! The guy being beaten without mercy, *that's* the guy you arrest? While we appreciate and are indebted to the justice system around us, at the same time we can't expect any

worldly order to always do what is fair and right. This is important for us to keep in mind right now as we watch these court cases. The god of this world is our adversary and he perverts justice. In the end, he's going to be cast into the Lake of Fire. But, for now, we don't hang our hopes on the decision of 5 SCOTUS members or some appeals court. If courts rule in our favor, great, but either way we don't rejoice in the words of men, but in the promises of God, knowing that one day we will be ruling and reigning with Him in His perfect Kingdom.

Now before we move on, notice this: Paul was bound with 2 chains. This is a fulfillment of Agabus' prophecy, delivered in Caesarea up in verse 11. It was a *literal* fulfillment. Agabus said he would be bound *and then he was bound*. We have no reason to expect end times prophecies to be fulfilled in some allegorical way. A careful critic would say, "Ah, but we've got you! Agabus said *the Jews* will bind Paul and deliver him to the Gentiles!" Our answer is that it was their actions which led to his binding and their charges against him in the Gentile court of law would *keep* him bound for years. So, what does that tell us? It tells us, first, that Biblical prophecy is a literal business. Paul wasn't *emotionally* bound or *financially* bound. He was shackled. But, as the fulfillment unfolded, there were elements that came into play that weren't specifically outlined by the prophet.

So, when we look at end times prophecies, there are *gaps* in our understanding. The Antichrist is one example. We don't know *who* he is. And there are a lot of opinions about his heritage. How can that be when there are so many prophecies about him? Well, God gives us an outline of future events, but there are gaps in coverage. We can't exactly see how every element is going to fit together. And that's ok. Gaps don't indicate prophecy isn't to be taken literally. Bible prophecy, when fulfilled *in the Bible*, always happens *literally and actually*.

Acts 21:34 - ³⁴Some in the crowd were shouting one thing and some another. Since he was not able to get reliable information because of the uproar, he ordered him to be taken into the barracks.

Unsaved people really are held captive by the devil to do his will. Look at what we're seeing here. We had a wild, concentrated effort to murder a man. Countless numbers of these people immediately involved themselves in that effort. And then, when asked what was going on, they didn't even *know* what was happening. There is a satanic conspiracy to resist God and His people and His work on the earth. And many unbelievers around us have no idea that they are part of the injustice. They think they're just living their lives, doing no harm to anyone, but it isn't true. This is one reason why it does no good to become angry or spiteful toward the unbelieving world. We can have a righteous anger or frustration at injustice, but it does no good to let unbelievers around you know that you're enemies with them. The truth is, you're *not* their enemy. You're the first responder sent by God into the war zone of Hanford or Lemoore to go and *save* those people from the clutches of Satan.

Every now and then a movie will be made that focuses or touches on the topic of child soldiers in African wars. And we see how horrifying and wrong that is and we recognize that those poor children have been taken advantage of. They need to be *saved* out of that life, not just cut down where they stand. We want to develop the same softness toward unbelievers around us.

Now, I *will* ask this question: When it comes to verse 34, where are the Christians? So far there has been *no one* there to defend Paul, or to try to tell the commander what's really going on. No prayer vigils for him. If we see injustice and can stand for what's right, we are called to do so, in love. It's true that the situation was chaotic, but Paul seems to be completely alone, without support. If we see a brother in need, stand in support. Offer assistance. Cross the line to be by their side.

Acts 21:35-36 - ³⁵When Paul got to the steps, he had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, ³⁶for the mass of people followed, yelling, “Get rid of him!”

We’ve seen providence working its way through this scene, but we also see the devil fighting back. He’s rallying his forces to get hold of Paul again. The shock and awe of hundreds of Roman soldiers had completely worn off and the mob turns violent again, despite the fact that they are unarmed civilians. Look at what the devil does to people. If a full blown assault breaks out against these soldiers, the only result is going to be widespread bloodshed. But the devil doesn’t care.

Acts 21:37a - ³⁷As he was about to be brought into the barracks, Paul said to the commander, “Am I allowed to say something to you?”

In contrast to the satanic hatred on display, we’re about to see some of Paul’s famous love. For now, we notice a couple things that were happening during this drama of injustice. First, Paul kept his spiritual wits about him. I can’t imagine the pain he was feeling, but, by the power of the Holy Spirit, he stayed in control and stayed in a position of trust in the Lord. Second, even though he’s at a physical breaking point and is being unfairly treated by this government official, Paul speaks graciously and respectfully.

We *do not* have to agree with ungodly leaders. But we *are* called to treat them with grace and respect. That protocol is the same for Commander Lysius or High Priest Caiaphas or Caesar Nero or Governor Newsom. Being wronged doesn’t void our Christian code of conduct or make the fruit of the Spirit inapplicable. “But the bad people are so *bad!*” I know. It’s true. But they’re also dearly loved by God, whose desire is to save them just as much as it was to save us. Now, Paul had previously been a man completely consumed by hate. Hate for outsiders. Hate for dissenters. Hate for those who didn’t go his way. How did he overcome that propensity for hatred? It was the transforming work of God in his heart. He explained in Romans 5 that God poured out love into his heart through the Holy Spirit and that love was the source of his endurance, his character, his hope. It was Godly love that changed him from a killer to a man of compassion. Always ready to lay down his rights and his life. Always ready to face the mob. Always ready to offer all upon heaven’s altar. And he did so with grace toward those who were wronging him, even those who were killing him. That same love is shed abroad in our hearts by the same Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Acts 21:37b-38 - He replied, “You know how to speak Greek? ³⁸Aren’t you the Egyptian who started a revolt some time ago and led four thousand men of the Assassins into the wilderness?”

Throughout the proceedings here we notice that the unbelieving world, represented by the commander, keeps making assumptions about Paul. And that’s going to often be our experience, too. They *assumed* he was the guilty one. They *assumed* he was some uneducated rabble-rouser. None of it was true, but they assumed it all the same and it changed the way they acted toward Paul. People are going to *assume* things about you as a Christian today. They’re often going to be unfair, negative things. Let’s surprise them with grace and compassion.

Now, Josephus records that there had been this Egyptian Jew who led a revolt in Jerusalem and, at one point, took a bunch of his followers out onto the Mount of Olives and said, “I’m going to cause

the walls of the city to crumble!” At which point, Felix sent in soldiers and wiped them out. But the Egyptian escaped.² This commander thought Paul was that guy.

The comparison is interesting, though. Because we often *do* think of ourselves as part of a revolution. But, unlike this other terrorist, our revolution is *not* based on division, brutality, or force. We’re not dagger-carriers. We carry good news. Our revolution is based off of truth, kindness and selflessness. Our mission isn’t to tear down, but to build up. Let’s remember our marching orders.

Acts 21:39 - ³⁹Paul said, “I am a Jewish man from Tarsus of Cilicia, a citizen of an important city. Now I ask you, let me speak to the people.”

Paul isn’t interested in preaching to the soldiers, yet. He’ll get there, but for now we see him prioritizing. And we see him playing an advantage card, not to toot his own horn or to make himself seem important. Simply as a way to get in front of this audience before it’s too late and they disperse. The soldiers will still be in the barracks an hour from now. This crowd of Jewish pilgrims? He’s got one shot.

So, as opposition comes hard against Paul we see him enduring, we see him loving, we see him keeping his wits about himself, but we also see something else. One commentator calls it “daring.”³ Paul was *daring*. His main goal wasn’t to just get through the situation or even to win his own freedom. His *main* goal was to win souls for heaven. And, toward that end, he actually put off his own safety in hopes that some might be saved. Warren Wiersbe has a set of commentaries called the “Be” series. Each volume distills a book of the Bible into an imperative for us to apply. Like, “Be confident” (for Hebrews), or “Be hopeful” (for 1 Peter). For Acts 13-28 the book is “Be daring.” Paul was heroic in his willingness to take leaps of faith. We want God to give us faith like that.

Acts 21:40 - ⁴⁰After he had given permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned with his hand to the people. When there was a great hush, he addressed them in Aramaic:

Your translation may say “Hebrew” there at the end. Scholars say that the text says, “he addressed them in the Hebrew dialect,” which would’ve been Aramaic at the time.

We see one more does of providence here. God gave Paul inexplicable favor with the commander and then supernaturally drew the attention of a multitude onto one man. A *great* hush fell over the crowd. Even during injustice and persecution God was fighting on behalf of His servant. Sudden deliverance wasn’t going to arrive, sudden revival wasn’t going to break out. But God had not failed. And Paul was not disheartened. The work continued.

The world may come against us, blame us, misunderstand us, accuse us of things that aren’t true, assume the worst of us. That’s to be expected. And it’s ok, because we can *show* them the truth by our love and our grace. And, whether we “win” in court or not, we can be sure that God is still on our side, He’s still on the move and He’s still sending us out in power to do what we can to rescue those trapped by the devil. One day, all injustices will be righted. Until then, we proceed as we always do, in rain or shine.

² Josephus Antiquities of the Jews, 20.167-172

³ Robertson <https://www.preceptaustin.org/acts-21-commentary#21:39>