Acts: “When Tradition Trumps Mission”  
Acts 21:36--22:22

As many of you know, I recently returned from my fourth trip to India where I was serving alongside our partners with the India Gospel League. I was accompanied by my friend and fellow church member Dave Ellis as well as several leaders from our partner churches here in Kansas City. Together we served, taught and encouraged close to 400 indigenous church leaders in the state of Orissa who are courageously spreading the Gospel in that region. I am happy to report that in the past four years, some 438 churches have been planted and established in the unreached villages of Orissa where we have been working. I can tell you that what we are witnessing in Orissa is nothing short of a supernatural movement of God…there is no other way to account for such a rapid spread of the gospel in a region that was once known as “the graveyard of Christianity.” On behalf of a very enthusiastic group of brothers and sisters in India, I bring you greetings and many expressions of love and gratitude for your generosity and your prayers on their behalf. For those of you who are interested in learning more about what is happening with our church-planting partnership in India, please mark April 17th on your calendar. On the evening of April 17th, Colonial will host a celebration for our Kansas City/India partnership. Dr. and Mrs. Sam Stephens will be there to bring us up to date on all that has taken place over the course of our five year partnership, and we will have the opportunity to tell stories and show pictures from our recent trip. I would love to tell you more about the trip, but we have a lot of ground to cover this morning in our journey through Acts, so I must move on. However, please know how much our team valued and felt blessed by the many prayers you prayed on our behalf. We literally felt blessed every step of the way, and we know God honored your prayers. Thank you for praying.

Alright…now, let us return to our journey through the book of Acts, and please allow me to remind you of where we are. Last Sunday Pastor Todd and Pastor Greg led us to Acts 21:36, and that is where we will once again find the Apostle Paul in the city of Jerusalem. He has just been beaten by an angry crowd due to their perception that Paul has somehow betrayed the traditions of their faith by his association with the Gentiles. Paul is then rescued by the Roman tribune, Claudius Lysias, who arrests Paul and has soldiers bind him with chains. Because Paul has been so weakened by the beating of the crowd, the Roman soldiers literally have to carry him up the stairs leading to the Roman barracks, even as the Jewish mob cries, “Away with him!” So that’s where we’ll pick up the story here in Acts 21:37. Now, due to the length of this text, I will ask you to remain seated and to quietly follow along as I read to you what follows in Acts 21:37--Acts 22:21.

I don’t know about you, but I find that reading the Bible is anything but boring! If you have even the tiniest bit of imagination, this scene has as much intensity as a John Grisham novel or one of
Tom Clancy’s cliffhangers. Let’s walk through the story, and I will point a few things that I think are significant.

First, note the interaction between Paul and the tribune, Claudius Lysias. Paul speaks to the tribune in the Greek language, and immediately the tribune makes an assumption that Paul is the infamous rebel from Egypt who had three years earlier led an attack against the Romans in Jerusalem. According to the first century Jewish historian Josephus, the Romans crushed the insurrection of the group called “The Assassins,” but the Egyptian leader was said to have escaped capture by fleeing into the wilderness with his men. So why did the tribune assume that Paul was this famous Egyptian rebel? It was because Paul spoke Greek. Remember that Greek was commonly spoken throughout much of the ancient Mediterranean world, including Egypt, but not so in Jerusalem, where everyone spoke Aramaic. That’s why the tribune is caught off guard when Paul speaks to him in Greek. So Paul clears up the mistaken identity issue in vs. 39, where he says to the Tribune, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city.” Paul makes clear that he is no threat to the Roman rule, and that he is, in fact, a citizen of one of Rome’s most famous and sophisticated cities. Paul is strategically relating with the tribune, and after doing so, he then asks permission to address the angry crowd; and for whatever reason, the tribune allows his request. Look at vs. 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: ‘Brothers and fathers hear the defense that I now make before you.’ And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet.”

Notice how Paul is a brilliant communicator, even when he is half-dead and barely able to stand up on his own. Paul switches his language to Hebrew, or most likely to a Hebrew dialect (which would be Aramaic), so as to connect with his intended audience, the Jews. He also uses terms of honor and respect when he calls them “Brothers and fathers.” His tactic works, because the crowd grows very silent and they are obviously listening carefully to what he will now say, which Paul describes as his “apologia”…his defense. In modern day terms we would simply call this, “Paul’s testimony.” I want to point out a few key features of Paul’s testimony, even though we have dealt with Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus in earlier messages.

First, notice how Paul connects and relates with his audience. In the first few verses, Paul very strategically emphasizes that he was once very much like the crowd he is now addressing. He knows that many of these people have believed all kinds of crazy rumors about him, and he also knows that there are people present who remember exactly who Paul used to be. So he begins his defense with these words in vs. 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.” Paul lays out his Jewish credentials, and he trumps many people in the crowd by pointing to his highly esteemed teacher, Gamaliel, one of
the most respected and honored Rabbi’s in Jerusalem’s history. Paul also relates personally with the crowd, referring to the faith of “our fathers” and relating to those in the crowd who are zealous for God. Paul goes even one step further in illustrating his zealoussness for the Jewish faith in vss. 4-5, “I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, 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 reminds me of several testimonies I’ve heard of those who were once militant Muslims who then became Jesus followers. They often emphasize how zealous they once were for the Muslim faith and customs, even to the degree that they persecuted Christians out of their great zealoussness for Allah. Such is what Paul is doing now…he’s not only saying, “I was once like you.” He’s now saying, “I was more zealous than all of you put together. I was not only a Jew, I was a militant Super Jew with the highest level of power and authority granted to me by the Chief Priests themselves.”

But then Paul tells his story of life change…this is the part of the story that he hopes will change minds and hearts if they are even a slight bit open to the gospel. Let’s pick up Paul’s testimony in vs. 6,

As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” And I answered, “Who are you Lord?” And he said to me, “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.”

Paul’s testimony is clear: Jesus is not dead. Jesus of Nazareth, who many in this crowd had crucified, is not only alive…He is now wrapped in the “shekinah glory” of God, as represented by the blinding light from heaven that outshined the noon day sun. Make no mistake…this description of the blinding light has the attention of every Jewish man there…they know who lives in that light. Paul continues in vs. 9, “Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me.”

The multiple accounts of Paul’s experience on the road to Damascus that we find in the book of Acts agree that those who were travelling with Paul did not see Jesus, though they saw the light…and they did not understand what was spoken to Paul, though they did hear something. That testimony is important because there were others there that day who could bear witness that something very dramatic did happen to Paul on the road to Damascus…it was not just his imagination or something he made up. However, no one else travelling in that party could say, “We saw Jesus” or “we heard the words that were said to Saul.” The Lord’s self-revelation to Paul was personal, but his travelling companions were very much aware that something supernatural and extremely powerful took place right in front of them. Paul continues in vs. 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 what to do.” 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. And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, 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. 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; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.”

Once again, notice how Paul is appealing to common knowledge among the Jews to make his defense. No one can look upon the shekinah glory of God and not be blinded…all the Jews got that. Notice also that Ananias was a Jew…devout according to the law…and he was the Jew used by God to restore Paul’s sight…which means God must be on Paul’s side, right? Ananias the Jew refers to Paul as “Brother Saul” and pronounces a prophetic word that Paul was chosen by God to see the “Righteous One” and to hear his voice. And who is the Righteous One? Paul is clearly appealing to the Messianic prophecies that all the Jews were aware of. And what did the Righteous One call Paul to do? He called him to bear witness to what he had seen and heard. And what is Paul doing right now at this very moment? He is bearing witness to what he has seen and heard.

Paul’s defense up to this point is brilliant. His testimony is rock solid. Paul’s experience combined with the prophetic word of Ananias makes for a compelling defense as to why Paul becomes a follower of Jesus. Paul’s faith in Jesus leads him to “Call upon the name of the Lord” for the forgiveness of sins, and undergo water baptism as a sign that his sins have been “washed away” through the authority of the Righteous One.

Now…at this point we must imagine that the Jews in Jerusalem are spell-bound by Paul’s testimony. Rest assured they have never heard anything like this story before, and I suspect that many in the crowd are finding their hearts strangely warmed by this man’s story. So Paul presses on further beginning with vs. 17

When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him saying to me, “Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.” And I said, “Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. 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.”

Paul is telling of his time in prayer many years earlier following his conversion, but notice that he is almost perfectly describing the situation he is now in…a situation that the Lord predicted would come about many years earlier. The Jews will not believe Paul’s testimony, even though they all know how zealous he was as a persecutor of the Way. Such is why the Lord will give Paul specific instructions…and those instructions are the last words of Paul’s testimony that we find in vs. 21, “And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”
Now watch what happens. In vs. 22 Luke reports, “Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.’ And they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air…”

Whatever ground Paul had gained up to his last sentence was completely lost when that last word came out of his mouth, “Gentiles.”

As far as the Jews were concerned, everything about Paul’s story was fascinating and even worthy of consideration…until he got to that last part. For this crowd, there is NO WAY that the risen Jewish Messiah would send His servant AWAY from Jerusalem in order to somehow bless and include the Gentiles. That part of Paul’s story is so offensive that the crowd goes ballistic. They want Paul dead. They throw off their cloaks as those who are ready to stone a person. They fling dust into the air to indicate that they have heard blasphemy. Once again, Paul has caused a riot. We’ll stop here for now and pick up the story in a few weeks.

So…what happened here, and what can we learn from this story in Acts 21 and 22?

First, Paul models for all Christians what God has called all of us to do: we have all been called to be His witnesses. We have all been called to bear witness to what we have seen and heard. Sometimes that goes well, sometimes it doesn’t…but make no mistake: Those who have been saved by the blood of Christ have been charged to bear witness to the world. As Jesus said in no uncertain terms in Acts 1:8, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses.” Paul models perfect obedience to the Lord, bearing witness at an opportune moment, even though the outcome might lead to further suffering and persecution.

Second, Paul doesn’t waste a teachable moment. He has been falsely accused, he has been dragged and beaten by a crowd, and now Paul has been unjustly arrested. But instead of curling up into a ball and feeling sorry for himself, Paul sees an opportunity to bear witness to those who are persecuting him…to preach the Gospel out of a place of weakness rather than a place of strength. Listen: the great irony of the Christian life is that God is often most powerful in the midst of our weakness. His glory often shines through the circumstances of our darkest hours. God is not waiting for us to feel strong enough in our faith, to become confident enough in our convictions, to become healthy enough to go do great things in His name. Not at all. God will take you just as you are…as weak as you are…as small as your faith feels…as difficult as your circumstances are…and He will bring glory to Himself through your testimony RIGHT NOW! Right now is exactly the time that God wants you to tell your story…not when everything has resolved and everyone lives happily ever after! The darker our circumstances, the more powerful our testimony…so let the light of Christ shine right now! Amen?
Finally, this story reveals a very real and always dangerous tendency that is commonly found among religious people: it is the tendency to value tradition more than the mission.

Because of their deeply entrenched commitment to their traditions, the Jews in Jerusalem cannot hear what God is doing now in Jesus Christ, the risen Messiah. They do not have the eyes to see what the Holy Spirit is doing now, even though many witnessed the miracles that occurred on the day of Pentecost. They cannot comprehend the power of the Gospel and how that is changing lives all throughout the ancient world, because the revelation of God through Jesus and His Holy Spirit do not fit within their prescribed tradition.

And let’s be fair: we would have likely behaved in the same way. After all, the Jews in Jerusalem didn’t have the New Testament, and as far as they could understand their scriptures, the Gentiles were left out of all the promises and covenants of God. The Jews were God’s people, not the Gentiles. The Messiah was sent for the Jews, not the Gentiles. So Paul’s work among the Gentiles makes no sense to them. Even the Jewish Christians in the Jerusalem Church were uncomfortable with Paul’s work and teaching among the Gentiles. And yet who could argue the fresh revelation that came through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit? Was it not clear that everything Jesus did was actually the fulfillment of the law and prophets? Jesus raised the dead, healed the sick, made the lame to walk and had the authority to forgive sins. Jesus was raised from the dead! The Holy Spirit had come upon the disciples of Jesus with unprecedented power, right there in their city! And now Saul…the greatest persecutor of the Way…is standing before them as a follower of Jesus with one of the most powerful, dramatic testimonies that has ever been told, and he is even willing to suffer and die to be a witness for Jesus of Nazareth! The evidence of God’s work through the Holy Spirit was obvious…the evidence that God had come to save not only the Jews, but all sinners through the sacrifice of his only Son was increasingly clear. And it was well known that the Messiah of God would also be a “light to the Gentiles” as foretold by the prophets.

But when push came to shove…the traditions of the Jews won the day, regardless of the clear revelation of the new thing God was doing. Tradition trumped mission.

A thoughtful friend of mine said that for the ancient Jews to accept the Gentiles would be like listening to a pastor proclaim that those belonging to ISIS have now been brought into church. Imagine that…imagine if God suddenly revealed that those we have been conditioned to fear and to hate were those He chose to save and bring into OUR church! Sure it’s our mission to win the world to Christ, but ISIS?

Listen: don’t think for a minute that we are somehow immune to the power of tradition…we’re not. All of us can very easily become more committed to our religious traditions than we are to
the soul-saving mission of Jesus Christ. We have seen that happen over and over again throughout church history, and if we’re not careful, that same tendency will happen right here in this church. Every generation of believers must examine if their allegiance to religious tradition is somehow standing in the way of God’s mission to save the world through Christ. We must ask ourselves, “Do we have the eyes to see what God is doing right now? Or are we unwilling to see what God is doing now out of fear of what that might mean to our religious preferences and sacred traditions?”

I know these are uncomfortable questions, but they are necessary questions. God does not pour out new wine into old wineskins. Every generation of believers is challenged to see and discern what God is doing now, where God is moving now, how God is calling the world to Himself. And when we see that…when we see where and how God is moving…our job is to get on board and to join Him there. That often means that we have to leave some of our preferred traditions behind in order to open up our hearts and minds to what God is doing now, and that is particularly important when it comes to reaching the next generation with the Gospel.

I will tell you that as leaders here at Colonial, we are in the process of really seeking God as to what He’s doing now in the world…what He’s doing now in Kansas City…how God is moving to reach the next generation and those who are far from Christ. And we are committed to do what it takes to join our Lord where He is at work, whatever the cost. I hope when the time comes, we will be a congregation that loves the mission more than tradition. Amen?

Let’s pray.