Chapter 16

PAUL'S FIFTH VISIT TO JERUSALEM

Paul Meets the Elders of the Church and Tries to Conciliate the Jewish Christians.—The day following Paul's arrival in Jerusalem (his fifth visit following his conversion), he and his party called on James, the Lord's brother, who seems to have been the authority in charge, all of the original Apostles being absent. Moreover, all of the Elders of the Church came. After exchanging greetings, Paul proceeded to tell in some detail all that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry during the past four years of his Third Missionary Journey. After hearing Paul's thrilling recital of what had been accomplished, all glorified the Lord. (Acts 21:18-20) But with this part of the meeting finished, Paul was now to be presented by the presiding brethren with a very grave problem that his presence in the city brought to their attention. The brethren seem to have been much concerned with the suspicions and bitterness with which so many Jewish Christians, upholders of the Law of Moses, regarded the Apostle. Here are the words of explanation and advice given by the brethren to Paul:

Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law: and they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs. What is it therefore? the multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that thou art come. Do therefore this that we say to thee: We have four men which have a vow on them; them take, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads: and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and
keepest the law. As touching the Gentiles which believe, we have written and concluded that they observe no such thing, save only that they keep themselves from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from strangled, and from fornication. (Acts 21:20-25)

This is an amazing statement. As we have earlier pointed out, here in the year A.D. 58 we find thousands of Jewish Christians still adhering to the Law of Moses! Twenty-five years after the death of our Lord, the early Church Authorities still have not made it clear to a large portion of the Church membership that the Law of Moses was done away with upon the Advent of the Master. Those of us in the Church today have had little conception of the difficulties that faced the Authorities of the Early Church with respect to this problem. It is obvious from what Paul was told that he had been grievously and even mischievously misrepresented by the Judaizers in Palestine. Actually the Apostle contended that circumcision mattered nothing. Salvation came only through faith in Christ and not by the rites of the Law of Moses, and Paul would not impose circumcision on Gentile converts; nevertheless he never forbade the Jews to practice it. They could practice it and conform to any Mosaic rites they pleased so long as they knew that salvation came to them through Christ and Christ alone. It is a curious fact that the brethren, knowing Paul’s attitude toward the Law, should ask him to give the appearance that he himself obeyed the Law. But the Apostle, realizing the gravity of the problem and knowing that it was important to hold the Jewish and Gentile groups of the Church together, readily agreed to assume the role of peacemaker. Paul had previously assumed a Nazirite vow (p. 107), had even now come up to Pentecost, and probably felt that he would not compromise his principles in any serious respect. The Temple rituals would occupy seven days of purification and sacrifice. Paul would pay for the four lambs and eight pigeons used for sacrifice and would
attend the four men in their Temple appearances and rituals, which would end in having their heads shaved and their hair burned on the altar. In so doing the Apostle would be obliged to cross the Court of the Gentiles and the Court of the Women, enter the Court of Israel, and finally approach the altar on which burnt offerings were made. He was bound to be in full view of either friend or foe in these Temple areas.

Paul is Seized by a Jewish Mob.—And, indeed, when the seven days were nearly over, certain Jews from Asia who had come to the Feast of Pentecost suddenly recognized Paul in the Temple. They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the streets of the city (Acts 21:29), and now they imagined that the Apostle had brought his Gentile companion into the Temple, an offense worthy of death, as large signs written in Greek and placed at all the entrances to the Court of the Women made clear. So these Asian Jews, hardened against the Gospel preached by Paul, raised a great cry against him, laid hands on him and cried out,

Men of Israel, help! This is the man, that teacheth all men everywhere against the people, and the law, and this place: and further brought Greeks also into the temple, and hath polluted this holy place. (Acts 21:28)

We are told that “all the city” (Acts 21:30) was moved against Paul by the fanatical Jewish mobocrats. It mattered little to them that Trophimus was not actually with the Apostle in the Temple. Now was an opportunity to get rid of this troublesome Christian once and for all. Paul was hustled out of the Temple, the doors were shut behind him, and the Jews went about to kill him. (Acts 21:31)

Paul is Rescued by Roman Soldiers Under Claudius Lysias.—Fortunately the Roman soldiers in Jerusalem were alert to the mob, and in a short time Claudius Lysias, the Tribune in command, was on the scene with a few soldiers
and their officers. At sight of the troops the mob ceased beating Paul, and the tribune arrested him as the obvious cause of the disturbance. The Apostle was chained to two soldiers, one on each side, while the commander asked men nearby who he was and what he had been doing. Only conflicting answers were forthcoming, so the tribune ordered Paul to be brought into the barracks. (Acts 21:31-34) When they got to the steps of the building, Paul had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob which pressed on in the rear, shouting, “Away with him!” (Acts 21:35-36) At this point the harried Apostle got the attention of the tribune and asked whether he might speak to him. The surprised officer said, “Canst thou speak Greek? Art thou not that Egyptian, which before these days madest an uproar, and leddest out into the wilderness four thousand men that were murderers?” (Acts 21:37-38)

To this Paul replied that he was a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no unimportant city. Then he requested the privilege of speaking to the mob. (Acts 21:39) The startled tribune seems to have been impressed with Paul’s evident culture and quiet demeanor and gave his consent. Anything to quiet the Jewish fanatics.

The Apostle Tells the Mob the Story of His Conversion.—Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the people to be quiet. When they had quieted down, he began speaking to them in Hebrew,—so the text says—but in reality in their native Aramaic. Addressed in the common vernacular, they kept all the more quiet. Paul then gave his defense by telling his persecutors the simple but eloquent story of his early life and conversion. (Acts 21:40-22:20) All went well until he reached the story of his return to Jerusalem and the Lord’s injunction to him, “Depart: for I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles.” (Acts 22:21) The mention of his commission to preach the gospel to the heathen was more than the narrow-minded mobocrats could stomp.
ach, and with a roar of hate and disapproval they cried, "Away with such a fellow from the earth: for it is not fit that he should live." (Acts 22:22) They continued their demonstration by casting off their clothing and throwing dust into the air. (Acts 22:23) The tribune gave orders that Paul was to be brought into the barracks and examined by being scourged, so that the truth of what the uproar was about could be learned.

Paul Discloses His Roman Citizenship and Prevents the Scourging.—While they were binding Paul and making him ready for the cruel scourging, he turned to the centurion standing by and asked, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man that is a Roman, and uncondemned?" Roman law being what it was, the centurion immediately took notice and warned the tribune that Paul had Roman citizenship. The officer immediately returned and verified the words of the centurion. Turning to the simply-dressed Paul, who looked anything but rich, he said, "With a great sum obtained I this freedom." (Acts 22:28) The tribune had doubtless paid a large sum of money during the reign of the last emperor, Claudius, when citizenship was sold readily to well-to-do people. The officer's praenomen, "Claudius," does indeed suggest that his citizenship was obtained under that emperor.¹ But to the tribune's words Paul could proudly answer, "But I was born free." (Acts 22:28) Those who were to examine Paul straightway departed, and the embarrassed and frightened tribune—frightened because he had bound a Roman citizen without trial—had to determine what was to be done with him. (Acts 22:29)

Paul's Address Before the Sanhedrin.—The next day the tribune, who wanted to know why Paul was accused by the Jews, loosed his bonds and gave command for the chief priests and all their council to confront the Apostle.

¹See E. J. Goodspeed, Paul, p. 171.
(Acts 22:30) When they were assembled, Paul spoke up and declared that the course pursued by him had been “in all good conscience before God until this day.” (Acts 23:1) At these words, presumptuous at least to his Jewish audience, the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood near Paul to strike him on the mouth. If the reader wonders why the tribune did not interfere at this point, let it be remembered that since Paul was a Jew, he was under the jurisdiction of the Sanhedrin. On being struck, Paul replied with righteous indignation:

God shall smite thee, thou whited wall: for sittest thou to judge me after the Law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the Law? (Acts 23:3)

The men close to Paul rebuked him for saying these words. “Revilest thou God’s High Priest?” they demanded of him.

Paul’s apology was immediately forthcoming: “I wist not, brethren, that he was the High Priest: for it is written, Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people.” (Acts 23:5)

The Apostle was quick to realize that he would receive no justice in the Sanhedrin. Perceiving from variations in manner of dress that part of the Council were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cleverly decided to play upon their differences respecting the doctrine of the resurrection from the dead.

“Men and brethren,” he cried out, “I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee: of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question.” (Acts 23:6)

Paul’s ruse succeeded, as Luke makes clear:

And when he had so said, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and the Sadducees: and the multitude was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, neither angel, nor spirit: but the Pharisees confess both. And there arose a great cry: and the scribes that were of the Pharisees’ part arose,
and strove, saying, We find no evil in this man: but if a spirit or an angel hath spoken to him, let us not fight against God. (Acts 23:7-9)

Paul is Rescued—The Lord Speaks to Him.—So fierce became the quarrel that arose because of his stratagem in dividing the Council that Paul was in danger of being pulled apart limb from limb. Again Claudius Lysias saved his life by commanding his soldiers to take him by force from the Jews and bring him into the barracks again. This was done, and the following night the courageous Paul was encouraged by his Lord and Master, who stood by his side and said, “Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of Me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.” (Acts 23:11)

A Jewish Conspiracy to Kill Paul.—Paul’s escape did not sit well with his implacable enemies, particularly those of the Sadducee persuasion. More than forty of them, therefore, banded themselves together with an oath neither to eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. These men conspired with the chief priests and elders to have Paul brought before the Sanhedrin again on some pretext that would make it possible for them to come near enough to the Apostle to slay him. (Acts 23:12-15)

Fortunately, however, Paul’s nephew, the son of his sister who lived in Jerusalem, was in a position to discover the plot. Loyal to Paul, he hastened to the barracks and told him about it. Paul called one of the military officers and told him to take the young man to the tribune, because he had information to give him. Out of hearing of others, Paul’s nephew disclosed to Lysias the details of the evil plot. The tribune then sent the young fellow home, cautioning him not to let anyone know what he had done. (Acts 23:16-22)
PAUL'S LIFE
AND
LETTERS

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BOOKCRAFT
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1955