

Derek French:

Having been arrested in Jerusalem and rescued just in time from the rowdy mob, we might be tempted to think Paul would remain silent and not tell the crowd that he served Jesus, but we would be completely wrong. Paul is in fact all the more eager to speak with them about his saviour.

We've reached Acts 22 verses 1-23, which Phillippa Chrispin will read for us, and this will be followed by Gerard Chrispin explaining them to us.

Phillippa Chrispin:

*“Brethren and fathers, hear my defence before you now.” And when they heard that he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, they kept all the more silent. Then he said: “I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers’ law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished.*

*“Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ So I answered, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’*

*“And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me. So I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do.’ And since I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of those who were with me, I came into Damascus.*

*“Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there, came to me; and he stood and said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that same hour I looked up at him. Then he said, ‘The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptised, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.’*

*“Now it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance and saw Him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.’ So I said, ‘Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’ Then He said to me, ‘Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.’”*

*‘And they listened to him until this word, and then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!” Then, as they cried out and tore off their clothes and threw dust into the air,’*

Gerard Chrispin:

Paul starts well. He relates to his fellow Jewish hearers by calling them, ‘Brethren and Fathers’. He realises that the crowd, already confused as to why they oppose him, wonder exactly who he is and what he is doing. So he tells them that he is indeed a Jew, and that he was born in Tarsus in Cilicia.

He quickly moves on to stress just how Jewish he is. The well-known and well-respected leading teacher among the Pharisees, Gamaliel, taught Paul in Jerusalem, ‘according to the strictness of our fathers’ law’. Paul humbly says he was as zealous as they are. The truth is that his zeal for Judaism was second to none. That is why he persecuted Christians to death. Women as well as men were his targets for chains, imprisonment and even the death sentence. Working closely with the high priest and the Sanhedrin elders, they commissioned him to go to Damascus to apprehend Christians who had fled there in order to chain them and bring them to be punished in Jerusalem. Letters to Jewish leaders in Damascus from the chief priest and the Sanhedrin confirm this.

Building on their attention to a fellow Jew, he now will stagger them with his account of how God spoke to him. While on a persecution mission to apprehend Christians in Damascus, at the time when the sun is normally the strongest, about noon, a great light from heaven suddenly surrounded him, making him fall

down. Then a voice called him twice by his then name, 'Saul! Saul!' A direct question was voiced to him, 'Why are you persecuting me?'

Paul knew this was the voice of God. He asks from the ground, 'Who are you, Lord?' The staggering answer comes back: 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.' In persecuting those who belong to Jesus, Paul had been also persecuting Jesus himself. That is how close the link is between the Saviour and his born-again child.

Paul perhaps expects someone to object that it was 'just one of those funny experiences you had' and that it was 'purely subjective', so he tells his listeners that his travelling companions also saw the brilliant light. This event really happened. But he honestly adds that 'they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me.' This does not contradict Acts 9:7 which says they heard a voice. They heard a sound but not the actual words of the voice of him who spoke to Paul. He heard the very words spoken to him by Jesus, God the son.

Paul's response was immediate submission to Jesus. He does not tell the crowd this in as many words, but he showed it was so by his language and his actions. He called Jesus, 'Lord'. Saul, the ruthless persecutor, up to a few moments before then, asked his new lord, 'What shall I do?' He was told to go to Damascus, not to apprehend Christians but to learn from them of God's plans for him.

Still blinded by the glorious brightness of the light, which was brighter than the sun, he was led by hand into Damascus, where the godly and devout converted Jew, Ananais, who had a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there, met him.

Ananais shared the words that made all the difference and must have cemented Paul's faith in Christ, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' Paul did. The first person he saw was his fellow brother in Christ, Ananais. Acts 9: 10-18 shows what an inner battle Ananais had before God's grace conquered and made him such a blessing to the man due to become a blessing to millions down through the ages.

Paul now tells the crowd what Ananais told him. Paul was chosen by the God of our fathers to know God's will and to see Jesus, the just one, and hear his voice. Through meeting with Jesus, and increasingly knowing God's will through God's word, Paul, like a witness in court, will be Christ's witness to all men of what he has seen and heard from God. Paul is a unique foundation apostle, used by God to write so much of the New Testament scripture as revealed to him through the Holy Spirit.

Ananais urged him to get up and be baptised, which pictured the washing away of his sins by calling on the name of the Lord. All who repent of sin and call on the living Jesus to save them through his death on the cross for their sins, and his risen life, which becomes their new spiritual life, still find today that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

The apostle goes on to tell his listeners how, when praying in a trance in the temple in Jerusalem, which again emphasises his pro-Jewish stance, Jesus, in a vision, told him to leave Jerusalem quickly because the people would reject his testimony about him. They will be the sad losers eternally. Paul strangely reminded Jesus that the Jews in Jerusalem knew of the details of his past cruel persecution of Christians, including consenting to godly Stephen's stoning, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him. Does Paul think this means that he is safe because people will remember his past record? If so, Jesus makes it very clear to him that he must depart! God's plan is to send him from Jerusalem to share the gospel with the Gentiles. Paul relays Jesus' words to the crowd, including that Paul's future emphasis is to reach the Gentiles.

So far, Paul's gripping message has kept the hostile listening mob silent, but now, just one word triggers these fiercely pro-Jewish listeners to renewed explosive violent opposition to him. That word is 'Gentiles'. Again they cry out, 'Away!' with Paul. They want him removed from the earth adding, 'For he is not fit to live!' They hate him because he trusts in Jesus and proclaims the gospel message.

The mob now cries out, tear off their clothes and throw dust into the air. Tearing off clothes is in preparation to stone Paul or in horror at his blasphemy, or in uncontrollable rage, or most likely for all three reasons. These are alternatives suggested by John MacArthur who adds, with Bible references, that throwing dust is a sign of intense emotion.

How sad to ignore someone teaching truth, especially when it comes from God, because of prejudiced hatred. Are you prejudiced against the message of God's word and against trusting Jesus alone as your saviour? Or are you willing to accept serious opposition from others as you stand for the gospel message of sins forgiven, peace with God, and a home in heaven? Are you ready to share it sensitively but straightforwardly, sometimes with those who need to hear but who just don't want to know?