

Acts 21:37-22:22: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 21 verse 37 to chapter 22 verse 22. As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, May I say something to you?

And he said, Do you know Greek? Are you not the Egyptian then who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the assassins out into the wilderness? Paul replied, I am a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city.

I beg you, permit me to speak to the people. 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 defence that I now make before you.

And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said, 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.

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 barns to Jerusalem to be punished.

[1 : 2 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. Now those who were with me saw the light, but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me.

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 all that is appointed for you 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.

[2 : 3 6] 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.

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.

And he said to me, Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles. 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.

In Acts chapter 22, Paul gives the first of his speeches in his defense, in which he speaks of his Jewish upbringing and his former persecution of the church. He recounts his conversion event on the road to Damascus, his calling and Christ's sending of him to the Gentiles.

[3 : 51] This is the beginning of Paul's time as a prisoner. Luke gives extended attention to defense speeches in the book of Acts. Daryl Bach notes that there are 97 verses of defense speech, representing 39% of the prison defense section, but only 47 verses of missionary speech, representing only 21% of the missionary verses.

Perhaps most surprising is the fact that there are 239 verses narrating Paul's imprisonment and defenses, but only 226 verses narrating his missionary work.

Bach suggests that this is because, for Luke, Paul the defender of the faith is as important as, if not more important than, Paul the preacher of the faith. Paul's defense of the faith involves distinguishing it from violent revolutionary or political movements, while showing its continuity with and fulfillment of Jewish faith.

Such defense of the faith would be particularly important in the earlier years of the church, as it was an unknown quantity, with lots of rumors circulating about it, and its status relative to the state and to Judaism still unclear.

Paul has just been taken by the Roman Tribune after the crowd was stirred up by the Jews from the province of Asia. They seized Paul in the temple and sought to kill him. Coming on the scene after Paul was seized, the Roman Tribune is under the misapprehension that Paul is an Egyptian insurrectionist, a character who is also mentioned in the writings of Josephus.

[5 : 22] When Paul makes clear that he is not, but speaks Greek because he is a diaspora Jew of Cilicia, the Greek speaking was likely a factor in the Tribune's misidentification of Paul, he also asked to address the people.

That the Tribune allows Paul to address the people is very surprising. A number of scholars have argued that this is proof that the speech is inauthentic. However, it makes more sense when we consider that the Tribune might believe that the crowd are under the same misapprehension as he was.

He is giving Paul this opportunity because it would potentially calm the crowd down by clarifying his true identity. Paul addresses the people in what Luke calls the Hebrew language, by which he probably means Aramaic, which was the language that most of the people would have spoken.

Hearing him speak Aramaic, the people quieten down even more. The fact that he addresses them clearly in Aramaic would itself have been a mark in his favour with the audience. The diaspora Jews from the province of Asia that were accusing him would likely not have been able to speak good Aramaic, but would probably have spoken Greek.

Paul's Aramaic was the Aramaic of someone who had lived many years in Jerusalem, which would have inclined the audience to listen more favourably to him than they might otherwise have done. Elsewhere, Paul seems to be able confidently to describe himself as a Hebrew of the Hebrews.

[6 : 43] His speech itself would reveal that he is not just an outsider. Paul gives a potted autobiography, an autobiography in which he mentions certain details that are unique to this speech.

He was born in Tarsus in Cilicia, a highly cultured city, towards the east of the Mediterranean coast of modern-day Turkey. However, he was brought up in Jerusalem, where it later seems that Paul's sister still lives.

He studied under the great rabbi, Gamaliel. He was trained as a strict Pharisee and was zealous for God and his law. In Galatians chapter 1 verse 14, he writes of himself, Paul was an outstanding student of the scriptures, who seems to have had advanced training beyond the typical Jewish student, likely receiving both secondary and tertiary education in Jerusalem.

In this opening part of his speech, Paul identifies with the hearers of his defence. He was once where they are. He knows where they are coming from. Indeed, with the support of the high priest and the council, he once persecuted the people of the way, a fact to which the Jewish leaders can testify.

So zealous was he in his persecution that he persecuted some of them to the death. Paul's Damascus road experience is narrated three times in the book of Acts, once by the narrator himself and then twice by Paul in his defence speeches.

[8 : 12] The accounts all differ from each other. While they can be harmonised as faithful accounts of the actual events, they each emphasise different details. Paul was addressed from heaven, the voice from heaven asking why Paul was persecuting him.

Upon requesting the identity of the speaker, the speaker revealed himself to be Jesus. From this account, we learn that the dazzling light from heaven shining around him came around noon and that the light was seen by Paul's companions, even though they did not see anyone.

Chapter 9 verse 7 says that the companions heard the voice, which Paul's account here might be seen to contradict, although Paul probably means that they did not understand the voice. A similar hearing of the sound of a voice from heaven, but failure to understand it, is described in John chapter 12 verses 28 to 29.

Where some of those present think that the voice from heaven was thunder. The fact that Paul's companions see the light around him and seemingly hear the sound of the voice, even if they don't understand it, makes apparent that this is not merely a vision or a dream, and would serve to confirm Paul's testimony.

These are real-world phenomena, albeit ones that might need the opening of people's spiritual perception fully to perceive. Blind because of the dazzling light, presumably the light of the Shekinah glory, Paul is led by the hand into Damascus.

[9 : 35] While chapter 9 mentions the Lord's direction to Ananias, here that is not recounted, but Paul begins with Ananias' coming to him. Ananias was a man with a good reputation among the Jews of Damascus, who observed the law.

As with his reference to his studies under Gamaliel earlier, Paul is underlining the fact that he and the Christian movement that he represents have respect for the law. Paul receives his sight again through Ananias, who delivers God's call to him.

This is further information from that which we received in chapter 9. Paul has been privileged to know God's will, to see the righteous one, and to hear a voice from his mouth.

The blessing of knowing God's will grounds Paul's confidence that he has been given the revelation of a mystery hidden from before the foundation of the world, something that he speaks of on a number of occasions in his epistles.

He also sees the righteous one, the risen Christ, becoming an apostle as one born out of due time. He is, by this vision, made one of the witnesses of the resurrection.

[10 : 40] He also hears Christ speaking to him, establishing him as one who both hears and sees Christ as a witness and as one called. Ananias then instructs him to rise, to be baptized, and to wash away his sins, calling on the name of the Lord.

The washing away of sins is connected with baptism, not because there is something magical about the waters themselves, but because the faithful performance of the ritual of baptism receives the promise that God gives in it.

Paul has been accused of teaching against the people, the law, and the temple. He has shown his connection to the people in various ways, from his use of Aramaic to his description of his upbringing in Jerusalem.

He has indicated his respect for the law at a couple of different points as well, in his description of his upbringing, and also in his description of Ananias. Now we see the Christian Paul praying in the temple and receiving a vision there.

This is not the sort of thing that we might expect from one opposed to the temple. The vision is not recorded back in Acts chapter 9. Within the vision, the Lord directs Paul to leave Jerusalem quickly, as his message will be rejected, and his life is apparently in danger.

[11 : 51] In Acts chapter 9, it is the Jerusalem Christians who discover the plot against him and send him away. It seems that Paul had a confirmatory vision from the Lord about this danger.

The moment that Paul mentions that Jesus instructed him to go to the Gentiles, though, the mood of the crowd completely turns. They raise their voices in anger, and they call for him to be killed.

This is not the first time in the book of Acts where someone was cut short before they had finished a speech. For differing reasons, Stephen's speech, Peter's message at Cornelius' house, and Paul's Areopagus speech were all cut short.

A question to consider. In what other places in the New Testament do we have accounts of Paul's pre-conversion life? What were some of the things that might have made Paul rather unusual, or especially prepared him for God's later purpose for him?