

## Who's Afraid of the Christian Faith?

1 Kings 18:1–15, Acts 21:26–40

The apostle Paul had returned to Jerusalem after being away eleven years, since the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. He was bringing with him a diaconal contribution for the saints, that had been generously donated by the churches in Asia Minor. He had planned to arrive in Jerusalem by the Day of Pentecost. When he and his fellow travelers arrived in the city he had met with James and the elders of the Jerusalem church. He told in detail the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. He apparently also delivered the gift sent from the churches of Asia Minor. The elders rejoiced upon hearing Paul's report of his ministry. But they informed him of an ominous development: that the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were under the mistaken impression that Paul had been teaching Jewish converts to forsake Moses altogether. So the elders of the Jerusalem church advised Paul to go to the temple with four Jewish converts who had taken a vow, pay their expenses and take their vow along with them. This involved the presenting of an offering, as described in Numbers 6: "He shall present his offering to the LORD: one male lamb in its first year without blemish as a burnt offering, one ewe lamb in its first year without blemish as a sin offering, one ram without blemish as a peace offering, a basket of unleavened bread, cakes of fine flour mixed with oil, unleavened wafers anointed with oil, and their grain offering with their drink offerings" (vv. 14–15). Though on the cross Christ had shed his blood once for all at the end of the age, to *put away* sin,<sup>1</sup> such offerings were still allowed during the transitional time prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD 70.<sup>2</sup> Paul's participation in this vow would prove to the Jewish Christians that what they had heard about him was not true at all: he was not rejecting Moses but simply showing that Moses was pointing to Christ.

So picture the scene. Paul had come to the temple peacefully. He was not there to stir up the crowds or cause a disturbance. He came peacefully to offer sacrifices and participate in the temple worship. He did this purposefully. As he wrote to the Corinthians, "And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law" (1 Cor. 9:20).

Paul apparently went to the temple twice: the first time to announce the expiration of the days of purification, and then once again after seven more days. The Geneva Bible helpfully observes that "the priests were to be advertised of the accomplishment of the days of the purification, because there were sacrifices to be

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<sup>1</sup> Heb. 9:26

<sup>2</sup> "In that he saith, A new covenant, he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away" (Heb. 8:13).

offered the same day that their vow was ended.” The priests needed advance notice. They ought to be offered that courtesy.

But on Paul’s second trip to the temple to offer the required sacrifices he was suddenly accosted by a violent crowd: “the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him.” Here was a crowd that was out for blood! Luke the historian specifically says that they were “seeking to *kill him*.” That was their purpose. We read that “the people *ran together*.” The original Greek literally says that “there was a running together of the people.” The word for *running together* refers to the forming of a mob<sup>3</sup>—an explosive and volatile situation. Paul was dragged out of the temple, and the temple doors were promptly shut, preventing Paul from running back inside to take refuge at the horns of the altar.<sup>4</sup> From this moment on, his fate would be at the mercy of a violent mob that was out for blood and would stop at nothing to accomplish their evil end.

We might ask, *why was Paul so hated?* Since his conversion to Christ on the road to Damascus, he had never used violence. Why did the Jews in Jerusalem hate him so much? I submit to you that it was because of his *message*. Wherever he went he had a singular message, and that was Christ: “We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:23–24). The Jews hated Paul’s message, and they could not refute it. They could not prove that he was misusing the Hebrew Scriptures or imposing his own point of view upon the Bible. Their own consciences condemned them: what Paul was teaching was the teaching of Scripture—nothing more, nothing less. Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the long-promised Messiah, the seed of the woman, the eternal Son, the Savior of the world, and the glory of Israel. He had come the first time and offered himself upon a cruel Roman cross, and he would return at the end of time to judge the nations and take his people unto himself forever. The Jews did not like that teaching, because it threatened their comfortable way of life, it threatened their unique status before God as the chosen people. So they appealed to their ethnic pride: “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.” The Jews understood in their heart of hearts that if Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah, their duty is to love him and submit themselves to him. They must become followers of Christ. This they were unwilling to do. Furthermore, if Jesus were the chosen Messiah who would bring God’s salvation to the nations, then the Jews would lose their uniqueness. They wouldn’t be able to take pride in their Jewish ancestry any longer. They didn’t like Paul’s message, so they attacked

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<sup>3</sup> Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich lexicon, συνδρομή (Logos Bible Software)

<sup>4</sup> John Gill, Commentary, Acts 21:30 (e-Sword)

him. Our text tells us that “all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut.” If they could not refute Paul’s message, then they simply would have to eliminate Paul.

But as the Jews were seeking to kill him, news came to the commander of the Roman garrison that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. At this point in history Judea was under Roman occupation. In his mercy God used a Roman to counteract the plot of the Jews. The Geneva Bible observes that “God findeth some even amongst the wicked and profane . . . to hinder the endeavors of the rest.” The Lord God Almighty is never at a loss for means to accomplish all his holy will. Here, he uses unregenerate Romans to foil the wicked intent of the unregenerate Jews.

Christian, if you are in desperate straits and see no possibility of escape, do not lose heart! Rather, cry out to God who is amply able to come to your aid. Remember Paul’s words: “There hath no temptation [testing] taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you [allow you] to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13). When our Lord brings you through, you will understand that “It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes” (Ps. 119:71).

The commander of the Roman garrison arrested Paul and bound him with two chains. This indicated that he was now in Roman custody, and if the Jews wanted to pursue a case against him it would have to be with the permission of the Romans. The Jews hated Paul, but for now he was out of their reach. The Lord delivered him out of the hands of his would-be murderers.

In our Old Testament reading this morning we read that “Jezebel *massacred* the prophets of the LORD. . . . Was it not reported to my lord what I did when Jezebel *killed* the prophets of the LORD” (1 Kgs. 18:4, 13). But this was not the only reference to killing true prophets of the Lord in the Old Testament. In 2 Chronicles 24 we read that “the Spirit of God came upon Zechariah the son of Jehoiada the priest, which stood above the people, and said unto them, Thus saith God, Why transgress ye the commandments of the Lord, that ye cannot prosper? because ye have forsaken the Lord, he hath also forsaken you. And *they conspired against him, and stoned him with stones* at the commandment of the king in the court of the house of the Lord” (2 Chron. 24:20–21). The prophet Zechariah, the human author of the second-to-last book of the Old Testament, was stoned to death for faithfully delivering the Lord’s message.<sup>5</sup> In heaven today, he awaits the final judgment where he will hear, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been

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<sup>5</sup> Matt. 23:35

faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord.”<sup>6</sup>

Another instance is in Nehemiah 9, where under the leadership of Ezra the scribe the people confessed their sins and testified that their forefathers “were disobedient, and rebelled against thee, and cast thy law behind their backs, and *slew thy prophets* which testified against them to turn them to thee, and they wrought great provocations” (Neh. 9:26). The Jews recognized that their spiritual forebears had slain the prophets of the Lord—a grave sin for which they now repented.

Then consider the words of Christ himself, who said, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, *thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee*, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!” (Matt. 23:37). How poignant that the Lord Jesus would hold out offers of his grace to the rebellious city Jerusalem! “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!”<sup>7</sup>

The apostle Paul was a prophet of the Lord. The Lord himself—the Lord Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, who had come to earth in his incarnation, and had now returned to heaven—had called Paul to preach his gospel. As Paul will summarize it later in chapter 26, the Lord Jesus had appeared to him on the Damascus Road and had told him, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. . . . rise and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you . . . to make you a minister and a witness.”<sup>8</sup> As a prophet of the Lord, the apostle Paul came under attack by the Jews. The mob was out for blood. They took the law into their own hands. They beat him without a trial—mob “justice.” They had him arrested. Why did they stop beating Paul when the Roman commander came into view? They experienced a pang of conscience! The sight of the Roman commander coming onto the scene reminded them that they had no authority to order a beating, that it was a purely lawless act. God has ordained the rule of law. Without it there is only tyranny. His desire is that his people lead quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and honesty—something that is only attainable under the rule of law.<sup>9</sup>

We read in verse 32 that “Some cried one thing, some another, among the multitude.” The facts of the case against Paul had not been established upon the testimony of two or three witnesses, as God’s word requires.<sup>10</sup> This statute is for

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<sup>6</sup> Matt. 25:21

<sup>7</sup> Rom. 11:33

<sup>8</sup> Acts 26:15–16

<sup>9</sup> 1 Tim. 2:2

<sup>10</sup> Matt. 18:16

the people's protection. See how much our loving heavenly Father cares for us, not only in the next life, but in this life also! He wants us to live under the rule of law.

We read that “news came to *the commander of the garrison* that all Jerusalem was in an uproar.” In other translations he is called the “chief captain” or “the tribune of the cohort.” In all, “the commander,” “soldiers,” “centurions”—the highest ranks of the Roman occupying army got involved. What was in this for Rome? Its motive was to keep the peace: the *pax Romana*. The commander intuitively sensed the danger of things getting out of hand. This was a flash fire that threatened to turn into an out-of-control conflagration. If this were to happen, it could have negative career implications for him! So the chief captain came near and “took him”—protective custody.

Why was Paul so hated? Why was he considered such a threat? Ultimately, the hatred directed against Paul was hatred of Christ. In Isaiah 53 we read that Christ is “*despised* and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was *despised*, and we esteemed him not” (Isa. 53:3). Christ is despised by proud men and women who want to live in their sins without consequences. The Bible teaches that we are all sinners, and that our only hope of eternal life is to embrace Jesus as our Lord and Savior. The law of God requires that we love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. This we are unable to do until we are born again, for “they that are in the flesh *cannot* please God.”<sup>11</sup> But when our sovereign God sends his Holy Spirit to renew our mind and heart, we voluntarily come to Christ—and would have it no other way. We are enabled to take up our cross and follow him. We become his enthusiastic followers and confess him before men.

Jesus tells us, “*Blessed* are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake” (Matt. 5:11). The word for “revile” means *reproach, heap insults upon, subject to verbal abuse*. Why would people do that to a servant of Christ? Out of intense hatred! This is why they did it to the apostle Paul. But Jesus warned his disciples: “Ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake” (Matt. 10:22). This may not have been something that we were told to expect when we first committed our life to Christ, but it's true. “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. *In the world ye shall have tribulation*: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

And so it is today: people who cannot disprove the Christian faith hate faithful preachers who lift up Christ. In many Muslim countries today, churches and ministers are targets. A report in the January issue of *Voice of the Martyrs* tells of the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In the town of Oicha a

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<sup>11</sup> Rom. 8:8

group of twelve pastors gathered to speak of the violent persecution that Christians in their area have experienced at the hands of Islamic extremists. One pastor personally witnessed the murder of another pastor at the entrance to his church. Another pastor reported that only eleven churches remain of the 54 in his denomination that existed in the area prior to the conflict. Many of the church buildings were completely destroyed. A pastor from a different denomination said that their churches had been reduced from 25 a few years ago to just eight today, and that six pastors from those churches had been killed. The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) have specifically targeted Christians, and they are saying that if we want the war to end, everyone should become Muslim: “If you want the killings to stop, everyone should confess Islam.”<sup>12</sup> This, the Christian cannot do.

For the Christian, God has called us to peace. Jesus is the prince of peace.<sup>13</sup> He said, “*Peace* I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”<sup>14</sup> Christians do not persecute Muslims; it’s always the other way around. If radical Muslims do not like the message of Christ, then they are free to reject it. But why do they attack peaceful people who *do* receive it? Because Christianity stands as a testimony to the bankruptcy of their false religion. Christians show the love of Christ. They love one another as brothers, and they love their enemies. Christ taught, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”<sup>15</sup> Again he taught, “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.”<sup>16</sup>

The Christian faith has been around for over 2,000 years. Many people have tried to disprove it, but no one has succeeded. Jesus said, “Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be delivered unto the chief priests, and unto the scribes; and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles: and they shall mock him, and shall scourge him, and shall spit upon him, and shall kill him: and the third day he shall rise again.”<sup>17</sup> He said that if he really were the promised Messiah he would be delivered over to the Gentiles, be killed, and rise again the third day. He said this on multiple occasions. Did he deliver on his promise? Did he rise again the third day? The writers of the four gospels say that he did. They were eyewitnesses. According to the Bible, every matter is confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses. For the resurrection of Christ, there are four inspired witnesses. Lots of skeptics would like to disprove the

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<sup>12</sup> *The Voice of the Martyrs*, Jan. 2023, pp. 4–5

<sup>13</sup> Isa. 9:6

<sup>14</sup> John 14:27

<sup>15</sup> John 15:13

<sup>16</sup> Matt. 5:44

<sup>17</sup> Mark 10:33–34

resurrection of Christ, but no one ever has. Jesus said, “Because I live, ye shall live also.”<sup>18</sup> Millions of Christians the world over have experienced the resurrection life of Jesus Christ. They have been granted the grace to humble themselves, confess their sins, and confess Christ before men. They have received the promise that at the final day their Savior will in turn confess them before his Father in heaven. They proclaim this truth to the world, but they force no one to accept this against their will. Rather, they teach that only those who love God from the heart—voluntarily—are accepted by the Father.

Who’s afraid of the Christian faith? The enemies of God, who refuse to bow the knee to worship his Christ. They will find out at the final day how wrong they were. Have you surrendered your life to Jesus Christ? Have you called upon his name? Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. Amen.

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<sup>18</sup> John 14:19