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HOW THE JEALOUS, ANGRY MOB TRAPPED PAUL

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS
NUMBER 103
ACTS 21:26-29

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ACTS 21:26-29 "Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself with them entered into the temple, to signify the accomplishment of the days of purification, until that an offering should be offered for every one of them. And when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews which were of Asia, when they saw him in the temple, stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him, Crying out, Men of Israel, help, This is the man, that teacheth all men every where against the people, and the law, and this place: and further brought Greeks also into the temple, and hath polluted this holy place. (For they had seen before with him in the city Trophimus an Ephesian whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.)"

We have already studied verse 26 which told us of the scope of the great sin committed by Paul. Paul was out of the geographical, mental and operational will of God all at the same time. God had ordered Paul to go out to the Gentile world, and here he is back in Jerusalem with the Jews. In his great desire to witness to those Jews, whom Paul loved better than his own life, he has allowed himself momentarily to get away from his "game plan" and instead of sticking to his main work, he has allowed his sentimental attachment for Jerusalem to get him on a detour.

I want to emphasize again that here Paul has committed a monstrous sin. This turned out to be the worst act of legalism of Paul's whole life. Paul actually received purification from the hands of one of the Jewish priests. Now Paul knew that he was a priest himself, that he could go directly to God for himself, and Paul knew he didn't need any priest as a go-between.

Look for a moment at the spiritual state of the Jerusalem Christians. Thousands of them had been saved, they had believed in Jesus Christ. But once they were saved they reverted to their old Jewish ways and instead of continuing to live by grace they went back to living by ritual. They just couldn't resist the temptation of going into the Temple and making vows and doing all sorts of legalistic acts. You see, once you are a Christian, it is grace all the way. You are saved by grace, you live by grace and you go to heaven by grace. Their practices then were very similar to some of the things people do today in what they call "Lent". People give us certain things and thereby think they will impress God and get a special blessing from him by doing certain things. The Jew would go to the Temple and announce his intention to follow a certain course for thirty days, give up certain things, deprive himself of certain food or certain indulgence, and by so doing, he would impress others that he was a real dedicated Christian. At the end of the thirty-day period, he would pay a certain amount of money and the priest would pronounce him cleansed and back in fellowship.

When the priest would receive the money in payment of the vow, he would shave the hair off the one making the vow, would burn it on the altar and say, "I pronounce you clean" It was somewhat of a good luck thing, whereby the participant would buy the favor of God. It was somewhat of a trade out with God and thereby get God's special blessing. Religious people naturally think that way. They think they can buy favor with God and can get attention from God in this way. People get frustrated and have problems and they say, "I'll do so and so and in this way I'll impress God and he will just have to give me a special blessing". Remember that heathen people have followed this kind of practice for centuries. By depriving themselves of certain things, by doing certain things, they claim they can thereby get the attention of God. Now these Jerusalem priests were making a fortune out of this as these legalistic Jewish Christians made a path to the Temple and took all sorts of vows. This is not hard to understand, for religious people are the worst suckers in all the world. But such activity is blasphemous in the sight of God. God cannot bless us on the basis of what we do, but on the

basis of his character. God takes delight to bless us, but not on the basis of our acts of service. Once a person believes he is a recipient of the grace of God and once a person is saved he doesn't have to slip into some system of legalism and do all sorts of things in order to get the blessing of God. God is too wise to be trapped into blessing us just because we do certain little things for him. In other words, giving up things in a forty-day Lent period in order to get the favor of God is a blasphemous accusation against the very character of God. It is like someone saying, "God doesn't care for you really, but if you'll just kick in ten percent he will come up with some special blessing for you". Now that kind of thinking is stupid. You give ten percent and even more not because you are trying to get some favor from God, but because you love him and you believe in his great cause in the earth.

Now Paul knew better than to commit this act of legalism. He didn't need any purification at the hands of some Jerusalem priest. In fact, Paul was a far better Christian than any of those Jerusalem priests. He didn't need to compromise his great grace stand just in order to satisfy some of those critical, legalistic, misinformed Jews in Jerusalem. But Paul went into the Temple, took a vow, and announced that he was on one of those thirty-day jobs of purification. Paul didn't do anything like this in Athens, or Corinth, or Ephesus and he didn't need to do anything like this in Jerusalem. And as a result of this act, Paul never had any ministry in Jerusalem. Paul will later have a fantastic ministry in Caesarea and Rome, but not in Jerusalem.

ACTS 21:27 "And when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews which were of Asia, when they saw him in the temple, stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him" This is the beginning of Paul's discipline. When the seven days were ended doesn't mean that this was a seven-day vow. It was just the end of seven of the thirty days. They would enter the Temple each day, announce the number of the day of their vow and then they would publically announce that they had abstained from such and such, and the people would all know how they were progressing in their vow. This was contrary to everything Paul knew to be true of God's grace. Paul has had six days to repent, but he had not done so.

Notice who it was that brought on the trouble. It says, "The Jews which were from Asia". This is not Asia as we think of Asia today. Asia in that day was the territory which today is southern Turkey. This is the Roman Province of Asia and Ephesus was the capitol. These Jews from Ephesus would readily recognize Trophimus as being a Greek from Ephesus. When it says they "saw him" the word used here is "They got a glimpse of him". The word for "Stirred up" comes from "sugcheo" and means to pour something together. This word came to mean "to throw something into confusion". In other words, this is how a riot was started. This is the way you could arouse a mob. (Illustration: In Chicago the police allowed a rowdy group to stir up trouble but when one jerked down the flag and stomped on it, the police moved him. That's "sugcheo" and means exactly the same sort of thing.)

It says, "They laid hands on him". And that is about the weakest translation you could give those words. The Greek says, "Epi ballo". "Ballo" means to throw, and "Epi" means upon. So they threw themselves on Paul and in every way they knew how they tried to kill him right there on the spot. It means that they attacked him violently. So this is a riot scene and they were ready to do the same thing to him that some had done to Stephen a number of years before. In other words, Paul was violently attacked.

ACTS 21:28 "Crying out, Men of Israel, help: This is the man, that teacheth all men every where against the people, and the law, and this place: and further brought Greeks also into the temple, and hath polluted this holy place." Shouting is a present, active, participle and it means they just kept on shouting. "Help" is inadequate to explain the meaning of what they said. They kept on shouting for people to come and help them kill him. Notice how they kept shouting three things--

This is the man who teaches against the people.

This is a man who teaches against the Law of Moses.

This is a man who teaches against the Holy Temple.

Then they shout that Paul brought Greeks (Gentiles) into the Temple. Now this is a false charge against Paul.

What is the real reason behind this? Well, these people were guilty of all kinds of mental attitude sins. They were self-righteous and were filled with pride and guilty of bitterness and jealousy. They have been jealous of Paul ever since he had the great revival in the medical school at Ephesus. So when they saw him in the Temple in Jerusalem, they were mad enough to kill him. Hatred and bitterness is also the result of jealousy. JEALOUS PEOPLE ALWAYS CONDEMN YOU WITHOUT HAVING THE FACTS. People rationalize their conclusions. Jealous people are not interested in finding out the facts. They have already made up their minds. Jealousy is followed by judging and often it leads to some overt act of violence or hatred. There wasn't any reason for a mob like this.

ACTS 21:29 "(For they had seen before with him in the city Trophimus an Ephesian, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.)" They had been noticing Paul with Trophimus on a number of occasions and that made them mad. Trophimus was a Greek from Ephesus. It says they supposed--the word is "Nomidzo" and it really means "to assume". Since they had seen Paul out in the city with Trophimus, they assumed that Paul had brought him into the Temple with him. The fact was this--Paul did not take Trophimus into the Temple with him. But they were jealous, and facts didn't mean anything to them. They just wanted some excuse to kill Paul. They had never seen Trophimus in the Temple, they just assumed Paul had done this. Their charges were false. From the Jewish standpoint, these Jews were wrong. From the Christian standpoint, Paul was wrong for being in that Temple under a legalistic vow.

There is a bit of humor here if you can see it. I think God was saying to Paul something like this. "Look Paul, if you like religion so much, I'll just show you what religion is really like. I'll give you a real sample of jealous, self-righteous, religion. I'll let you see religion in the raw, and Paul, I'll give you a picture of religion you will never forget." So here is jealousy, hate, envy, self-righteousness all wrapped into one act. Here Paul gets a good look at religion and you may be sure he will never forget it. We will leave him there in the hands of that angry, jealous mob and next time we will see how he comes out.