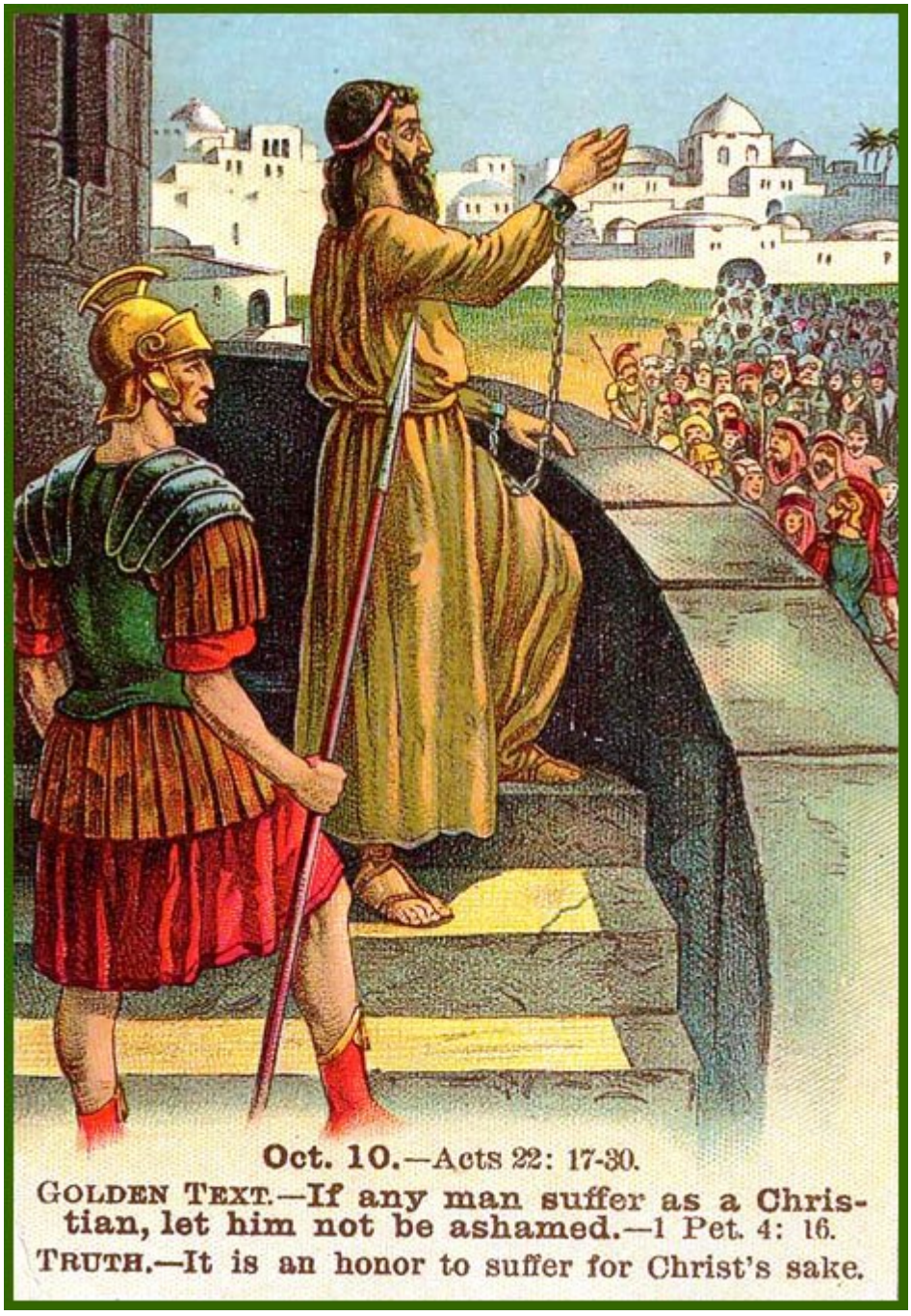
Mob Scorns Paul and the Gentiles

V 1 “Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now.”

“Hear my defense.” **After this Paul defended his beliefs four more times in the Book of Acts.**



V 2 And when they heard that he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, they kept all the more silent. Then he said:

"In the Hebrew language." **Aramaic actually (or the Chaldean language). This was the language of Syria and Babylon and quite similar to Hebrew; it was in common use at the time in those Mideast countries. (Hebrew originated in Ur of the Chaldees, the birthplace of Abraham.)**

V 3 "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.

To answer the charge (in Acts 21:21) that he opposed the law, Paul states some important credentials to prove otherwise: 1) *"I am indeed a Jew"* 2) though *"born in Tarsus"* outside Judah, he was *"brought up in this city"* (of Jerusalem) and 3) taught *"at the feet of Gamaliel"*, the most celebrated rabbi of that day by whom he was 4) *"taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law."*

"Zealous toward God, as you all are today." **It was helpful to warm up to his Jewish audience by finding common ground with and complimenting them.**

V 4-5 "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.

"I persecuted this Way." **Paul's former zeal for the law was actually more fanatical than that of the crowd he was talking to.**

"The high priest bears me witness." **Bringing this point out helped to authenticate the startling truth of Paul's testimony that he once fought against the followers of Christ. *"The council of the elders."* The Sanhedrin, the Jews' national ruling body and supreme court, consisted of 71 members, including the High Priest.**

V 6-16 “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 baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.’

Paul’s testimony appears here and also in Acts 9:1-9, 26:12-18. In any kind of witnessing there is hardly anything more convincing than one’s own life story and experience.

***“About noon.”* The time of day here emphasizes how bright must have been the *“great light from heaven”* that *“shone round about”* Paul.**

***“Annanias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews.”* The mention of *“Annanias”*, a respected member of the Damascus Jewish community, would have carried some weight with the hostile Jewish audience.**

V 17-21 “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.'"

In these verses we get a glimpse of an event in Paul's life that had not been mentioned earlier in the Book of Acts. *"When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple… in a trance and saw Him saying to me."* After his dramatic conversion on the Damascus road, this experience in the temple three years later was the next major turning point in Paul's life.

Paul was rather insistent then that he needed to convince the Jews in Jerusalem, feeling that he was very qualified to do so because of having once been a persecutor of Christians. But the Lord appeared before Paul – as He had done on the Damascus road – and told him very clearly, *"Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me."*

Then the Lord, after laying down this "no" to Paul's desire to reach his Jewish brethren there, gave him the "yes": *"I will send you… to the Gentiles."* And that was the nudge that Paul needed to devote his life from then on to reaching the Gentiles.

V 22 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!"

***"They listened to him until this word."* Up until this point the crowd had, under the Roman soldiers' watchful eyes, been willing to listen. The people at large were grudgingly tolerant, it seems, to the name of Jesus and Paul's testimony of his conversion. However, unlike the believers in the Jerusalem church headed by James, they were completely intolerant when it came to the idea that the Gentiles could be saved without first becoming Jewish converts.**

It meant they would have to accept the fact that the Gentiles, their sworn enemies whom they were so prejudiced against, were just as much favored in the eyes of God. (In fact, maybe they were more favored now since the Gentiles were more receptive to the Gospel message than the Jews. That seems to be the gist anyway of the Lord's message to Paul in the temple many years before.)

Paul's repeating of that message to the crowd probably ruffled some feathers, especially when he said that the Lord had told him, *"they will not receive your testimony concerning Me"*. (Paul may have been hoping – wishful thinking – that this part of his message would sway the new generation and needle them into being more open-minded than their parents 20 years ago.) But nothing had changed; they still had the same small, closed-minded outlook as before, and when Paul testified that the Lord had directed him to sidestep the Jews and send him *"far from here to the Gentiles"*, that was the last straw.

What Paul said was true enough, but the crowd could not endure this blow to their national pride and religious self-righteousness. So at that point, when Paul got to *"this word"* – the word "*Gentiles*" that is – the crowd went into a frenzy, yelling *"Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live."*

About 25 years earlier and also during the time of Pentecost, Peter the apostle had delivered two strong messages to the Jerusalem crowd. He succeeded in winning their hearts and getting them to repent over their crucifixion of the Messiah. (Acts 2-3) But those messages were done in God's will, they were accompanied by some outstanding miracles, and no mention was made about the Gentiles.

But on this occasion, none of those conditions were present. So it was nothing but a losing battle for the poor apostle. Nevertheless, God's "damage control" had gone into effect: Paul was saved from certain death by the intervention of the Romans.

Paul's message to the Jewish people, if nothing else, did accomplish the purpose of showing how incorrigible the nation had become. They had virtually become God's enemies by working against His plans of spreading the Gospel in the earth, and thus, He could no longer protect them from

their enemies whom they were now supposed to try to love. (Matthew 5:44)

Because of their hatred of the Gentiles (the Romans in particular), the Jews rose up in rebellion and managed to kick the Romans out of much of their territory in the Jewish Wars of 66 A.D. But the only result was that in 70 A.D. the Romans returned with a vengeance and completely dismantled the nation of Israel: they destroyed the temple, slaughtered her citizens, and scattered the rest into other nations.

V 23-24 Then, as they cried out and tore off their clothes and threw dust into the air,
the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him.

***"Tore off their clothes."* Usually done in preparation for stoning, also a sign of horror at (what they considered to be) blasphemy, and just a sign of uncontrollable rage. *"Threw dust."* Another sign of intense emotion. (Revelation 18:19)**

***"The commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks."* Lysias realized he would have to interrogate Paul privately away from the mob. Because of the crowd's hostile reaction and his inability to understand what Paul had said (*"in the Hebrew tongue"*), Lysias may have thought Paul had tried to incite a riot or at least was guilty of something serious enough to require his being *"examined under scourging"*. This was a brutal Roman interrogation method; prisoners often died after being flogged with the "flagellum" (metal-tipped leather thongs attached to a wooden handle).**

V 25 And as they bound him with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?

***"As they bound him with thongs."* In preparation for scourging. Apparently, this was a method of stretching a person so that the effects of scourging would be magnified.**

"Is it lawful… to scourge… a Roman." **Roman citizens were exempted from such brutal methods of interrogation. Paul's claim was not questioned because the penalty for making a false declaration of Roman citizenship was death. (That rule would have eliminated the need to carry ID papers.)**

V 26 When the centurion heard that, he went and told the commander, saying, "Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman."

"Take care… this man is a Roman." **The centurion warned the chief captain about taking action on something that could cost him his job, or even his life.**

V 27-29 Then the commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" He said, "Yes."
The commander answered, "With a large sum I obtained this citizenship." And Paul said, "But I was born a citizen."
Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him.

"With a large sum." **Roman citizenship was not officially for sale but, as Lysias must have done, it could be obtained by bribing corrupt officials. Paul had one up on the commander since he had the more prestigious status of having been born a Roman citizen. Having realized Paul was a Roman, *"the commander was also afraid",* not just because of the threatened scourging, but also *"because he had bound him"*.**

V 30 The next day, because he wanted to know for certain why he was accused by the Jews, he released him from his bonds, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear, and brought Paul down and set him before them.

"He wanted to know for certain why he was accused." **The chief captain, not understanding much about the Jewish religion, must have felt quite bewildered about this whole uproar. He hoped to clear up the confusion by having Paul appear before *"the chief priests and all their council".* That was a fairly large group – 71 people.**

(Continue to ACTS, chapter 23)