

'TAKING UP THE SHIELD OF FAITH...'

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST CHRIST

By Ron Ritchie

During my youth and into my early twenties, the most wonderful person in the world to me was my maternal grandmother. She was born into a Roman Catholic home in Florence, Italy. In the early part of this century, together with my grandfather, she came to America. Along with thousands of other Italians immigrants they entered this country through Ellis Island, settling in Philadelphia and raising four children. Both of my grandparents died in the city of brotherly love in the late '50's. A practicing Catholic all her life, my grandmother came to faith in Jesus Christ as her personal Lord and Savior in her seventieth year.

Shortly after she had made her decision, we sat down together and she shared with me her fears about certain aspects of her decision. As a born again Christian, she wondered if she now had to leave the Catholic church. The church had always been fundamental to her spiritual, emotional, and social life and she feared being rejected by her Catholic friends. She felt she would be isolated in the market place where she shopped every day. Further, she was afraid that her priest would accuse her of heresy. Up to this point, the Catholic faith had been her whole life. She did not know any other way to live.

The born again Jews of the apostle Paul's day in the first century A.D. had similar questions. They wondered whether converted Jews should forsake the Temple, nullify the Law of Moses, cease circumcising their sons, and drop the various religious feasts from their calendar. Similarly, converted Gentiles in the early church experienced times of spiritual confusion. Occasionally, emotional outbursts from the Jews led to persecution and even execution of Christians whom they felt were to blame for the religious confusion which was evident on all sides. The apostle felt the brunt of this confusion on more than one occasion. Early in his Christian life, therefore, he learned to walk by faith in Jesus Christ lest the enemy destroy him either spiritually, emotionally, or physically.

In our studies in the life of Paul we have reached the point where the apostle at last has arrived in Jerusalem following the completion of his third missionary journey. He had set his heart on arriving in the city before the Feast of Pentecost, bringing with him the monies which had been collected from the Greek churches for the famine relief effort in the city. He hoped that this collection would serve to help unite the Jewish and Gentile factions in the early church. As he headed toward Jerusalem from Asia Minor, however, he was given several warnings from the Holy Spirit through the mouths of fellow-believers and disciples to abandon his journey or he would face Imprisonment. But Paul would have none of it. He had made up his mind, and he would not be persuaded otherwise. The disciples in Caesarea uttered these key words following the apostle's refusal to heed their warning, recorded in Acts 21:14, "And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, 'The will of the Lord be done!'"

We have also seen in our studies that during his missionary journeys the apostle was constantly confronted with spiritual warfare. This is a fact that Christians in all ages must be aware of. Spiritual warfare is just as prevalent today as it was in the first century. Paul spoke to this issue in his Ephesian letter, written some four years later from his prison cell, in these oft-quoted words,

....be strong in the Lord and the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rules, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places...Stand firm, therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the

flaming missiles of the evil one...

A Roman soldier carried his shield with him when he entered battle. The shield, which was about the size of a door, protected the soldier's body from head to foot from the lighted arrows which were fired at him by the enemy. Here Paul counsels believers that they too should take up their shield in the spiritual battle which they had to face daily. But their defense was the "shield of faith." Faith, according to Hebrews is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Jesus said, "in this world you have tribulation, but take courage, I have overcome the world." These are the words which the Christian may take comfort in as he battles to ward off the "flaming darts of the evil one." In reality, of course, these are attacks against the character of Christ, the truth of the word of God, and the fact of the Christian's salvation. If these darts get through to us they can cause fear, anxiety, depression, and doubt.

The enemy had gone before Paul and placed a lie into the mouths of the Judaizers, i.e. the Jews who had accepted Christ as their Messiah but who still remained under the Law. Thus when Paul arrived in Jerusalem the spiritual battle against him and against the gospel of grace was already raging

I. Faith in the midst of confusion, 21:17-26

And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. And now the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. And after he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it they began glorifying God; and they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. What, then, is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses in order that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law. But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication." Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself along with them, went into the temple, giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each of them.

This is the apostle's fifth visit, and his first in five years, with James and the elders in Jerusalem.

Paul and his disciples were received gladly and the next day, taking the offering with them, he and his companions went into see James and all the elders. At the meeting Paul began to "relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry," the period covering the five years since his last visit.

He shared about his revisiting the Galatian churches; the three-year ministry in Ephesus; the visit to Corinth; the writing of the letters to the Corinthians, Galatians and Romans; his second visit to the Corinthians; the collection from the Greek churches; the death and resurrection of Eutychus in Troas; his visit with the elders of Ephesus at Miletus; and his visit with the disciples in Tyre, Ptolemais and Caesarea. The reaction of James and the elders to Paul's good news was very favorable: "And when they heard it they began glorifying God," says the text.

James then shared the good news about the church in Jerusalem, telling Paul that since his last visit some 10,000 Jews had come to know Jesus Christ as their Messiah, Lord and Savior, and that all of them were "zealous for the Law." Not only had the Jews accepted Jesus as Messiah, they wanted to continue going to

temple worship and keeping the Law, the traditions and feasts ordained in the Book of Deuteronomy.

While it was true that at the Jerusalem Council Paul had demonstrated that Gentile Christians were not under the Law--and the Council had agreed with that argument--nevertheless, the Council decreed, Paul should keep in mind the traditions handed down by the fathers. Thus they requested that the Gentiles not do anything to offend their Jewish brothers. They could accomplish this by abstaining from things sacrificed to idols and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication (Acts 15: 29). Thus the Council never did begin to deal with the question of the Jewish customs but rather sought to stop the Judaizers from forcing Gentile Christians to be circumcised and making them keep the Law of Moses.

So here in Jerusalem, although thousands of Jews had accepted Jesus as Messiah, their leaders had not asked them to cease from participating in the Jewish traditions.

Then James went on to give Paul the bad news. The new Jewish converts had been told by the Judaizers that Paul was "teaching all the Jews among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come."

The Judaizers were actually charging Paul with apostasy. But Paul never taught any Jewish convert to forsake the traditions of Moses. That was not part of his gospel of grace to the Jews. Rather he was trying to show from the Old Testament that Jesus was the Messiah. The apostle's mission to the Jews involved their salvation, not their forsaking of the Law at this time; while his mission with the Gentiles was their salvation. His aim at the Jerusalem Council, as we have seen, was to stop the Judaizers from bringing Gentiles under the Law.

The apostle's principles of ministry among both Jews and Gentiles are clearly set out in the following verses from his first letter to the Corinthians:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the Law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some (1 Cor. 9:19-22).

Talking about "becoming all things to all men," reminds me of being invited to a Passover dinner by some Jewish friends a few years ago. During the evening, the mother of the family invited a couple of the family members to share the Passover story. But their attempts at doing so were way off the mark. In fact, they did not know even the fundamentals. I said I would be glad to share what I knew about the feast, and I proceeded to trace from the Old Testament the events of the Passover, concluding the story with events from Christ's life and ministry. When I finished, the mother brought a smile to all present when she said to me, "Why aren't you our rabbi?"

These verses from 1 Corinthians, then, reveal Paul's principles and motives for ministry among both Jews and Gentiles.

James comes up with a solution to Paul's problem which had arisen due to the lies of the Judaizers. Apparently there were four men among the fellowship in Jerusalem who had contracted some ceremonial defilement and they had to undergo a purification rite in the temple. Seven days had to elapse before a Nazirite could be purified. He would shave his head on the seventh day and on the eighth day bring his offering to the temple. So Paul, at James' suggestion, joined these four men in the purification rite, hoping that his actions would counteract the lie that he was teaching the Jews to forsake the Law of Moses, cease circumcising their children and not walking according to the customs. James was pointing out that actions speak louder than words. "All will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you," said James, "but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law." What would the Gentile believers think about Paul's joining in

this ceremonial rite? James answered by saying that this issue had been solved at the Jerusalem Council eight years earlier, when Gentiles were asked to abstain from practices that would have greatly offended the Jewish Christians at that time.

In his response, Paul accepted the advice of James in order to keep the door open to preach and teach the gospel of the grace of Jesus Christ to the Jews at the Feast of Pentecost. As he wrote in his letter to the Romans, "For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen ..." (Rom.9:3).

Some think that Paul by his actions gave in to James and compromised the gospel of grace. But in reality neither the risen Lord nor his apostles ever taught the Jews to forsake the temple rites in these early days of the Age of the Spirit. The Lord himself arranged all that in 70 A.D. when the Romans destroyed the temple and took the Jews into captivity. But before that event, the Lord through the Holy Spirit gave to the church the book of Hebrews, which was written in 69 A.D. I remember hearing Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse saying of this book, which was to become so relevant to the first century Jewish Christians, "Hebrews was written by a Hebrew to tell the Hebrews to stop acting like Hebrews!"

The spiritual principle here is that Paul well knew that the Law was good, for he had written earlier to the Galatians, "Before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later revealed. Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor, for you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus." (3:23f) .

The rites of the Law, the feasts and the sacrifices all pointed to Christ Jesus. Paul therefore could attend the feasts and use them as teachable moments to the unbelieving Jews to declare that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Passover Lamb, as John the Baptist stated when he saw Jesus coming toward him, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:28).

In her new book *Jesus For Jews*, Ruth Rosen tells the story of the conversion of a Jewish friend of mine named Jerry. She quotes Jerry as saying, "We celebrated the Jewish holidays in great style. At Passover, my grandmother would have the house thoroughly scrubbed from top to bottom. We'd bring in separate sets of pots and pans for those eight days. There was no such thing as Kosher for Passover milk products back then, so we ate only meat dishes ... My kosher upbringing and holiday celebrations are clearly etched memories..." Through certain relationships and friendships initiated by his wife, who had become a Christian, one evening Jerry attended a concert with the Jews for Jesus group, the Liberated Wailing Wall, and he came to faith in Christ under the teaching of Tuvya Zaretsky. The book goes on to say, again quoting Jerry, "It is true that Jews who believe in Jesus are often misunderstood and misjudged by our closest family and friends...My mother has also come to faith in Jesus. She, too, worried about how the family would respond. Maybe it was a little easier for her, knowing that I believed and had not turned my back on my Jewish identity. But to us the final question was not whether it would be easy or hard to face people as a Jew who believes in Jesus. Eventually, we had to ask, is it right to believe? It is!" was his response.

Paul was carrying his "shield of faith" when he entered Jerusalem that day with the collection for the Jewish famine relief fund. The evil one had thrown the dart that Paul was teaching the Jewish Christians to forsake the Law of Moses, to not circumcise their children and walk according to the customs. But the apostle trusted the Lord to be with him as he went into the temple and participated with the four Jewish men in the purification rite so as to eliminate any confusion. By doing so he would hopefully gain an opportunity to preach the gospel of the grace of Jesus Christ.

But now he would need to once more lift up his shield of faith in the midst of persecution.

II. The shield of faith in the midst of persecution, 21:27-36

And when the seven days were almost over, the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, began to stir up all the multitude and laid hands on him, crying out, "Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who

preaches to all men everywhere against our people, and the Law, and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled the holy place." For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. And all the city was aroused, and the people rushed together; and taking hold of Paul, they dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut. And while they were seeking to kill him, a report came up to the commander of the Roman cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. And at once he took along some soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them; and when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. The commander came up and took hold of him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains; and he began asking who he was and what he had done. But among the crowd some were shouting one thing and some another, and when he could not find out the facts on account of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. And when he got to the stairs, it so happened that he was carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob; for the multitude of the people kept following behind, crying out, "Away with him!"

As Paul was in the temple, near the end of the seven days of purification rites, a group of Jews from Asia, pilgrims for the Feast of Pentecost, spotted him. It is possible that these Jews had heard the apostle preach earlier in the city of Ephesus and they had rejected his message. Perhaps they were among those who had even sought to kill him back then. In any event, these men stirred up the crowd in the temple, calling out, "Men of Israel, come to our aid!" And here was the charge they leveled against Paul, the flaming dart they fired at him, lie #2: "This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people, and the Law, and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place."

The charge against Paul was four-fold. First, the Jews accused him of "preaching to all men everywhere against our people." But what the apostle actually had preached along these lines is found in Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Second, they charged that Paul was preaching against the Law of Moses. But what Paul was actually preaching was the words of Romans 9:31: "...but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why, because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works." He was not preaching against the law, but against the efforts of the Jews to achieve righteousness through works, and not by faith." Third, they charged that Paul was preaching against the temple. But what the apostle had declared was that the Christian's body was the temple of the Holy Spirit.

But the most serious charge leveled against Paul was contained in the words, "he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." While God-fearing Gentiles were allowed into the temple area, within the Courts of the Gentiles, between that court and the Court of the Women, there was a wall upon which was written the words, "No man of alien race is to enter within the balustrade and the fence that goes round the Temple, and if anyone is taken in the act, let him know that he has himself to blame for the penalty of death that follows." Even the Romans took this so seriously they allowed the Jews to carry out the death penalty if this provision was violated.

The result of these charges against Paul was that "all the city was aroused." The mob took hold of Paul and dragged him out of the temple. As they were planning to kill him, the Roman cohort heard about it and he took some soldiers, ran to the temple and stopped the mob from beating Paul. He ordered the apostle to be bound in chains, thus fulfilling the prophecy which Agabus had uttered in Caesarea, "In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles" (Acts 21:11). As Paul was carried away by the Romans he heard ringing in his ears the cry from his own countrymen, "Away with him!"

We remember Paul's words to the elders at Ephesus while he was making his return to Jerusalem: "...I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me" (Acts 20:22,23). He was aware that he would face spiritual warfare everywhere he went, for, as he wrote in Ephesians, "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph.6:12). Christians in all generations must face the same powers.

Yesterday a young woman who was led by the Lord to lovingly confront her parents with spiritual truth

telephoned me to share with me what had been their response. Unfortunately they completely misunderstood her motives and they became angry and hurt. They told her that she was too young and did not have the right to speak like that to them, and then asked her to leave. "I need to keep my faith in the Lord," she told me. She resolved to lift her shield of faith against this flaming dart of the evil one lest she be devastated.

In the midst of the confusion and persecution to which he was exposed, the apostle Paul recognized that he was experiencing spiritual warfare, for the issue really was theological--the Law of Moses versus the gospel of the grace of Jesus Christ; salvation by works or by grace. But Paul had already girded his loins with truth; put on the breastplate of righteousness; shod his feet with gospel of peace; and taken up the shield of faith with which he would be able to extinguish all the darts of the evil one. The enemy planned to kill him, using an inflamed Jewish mob, but the risen Lord and Shield protected him from the darts of death as he placed his faith in Christ.

On this occasion Paul dramatically experienced spiritual warfare on a physical level. Our battles may be just as dramatic on an emotional or spiritual level, resulting in confusion and possible persecution. But the key to the battle is to put on the full armor of God, the risen Christ, and when the enemy attacks with his flaming darts, pick up your shield of faith and stand in the strength of the Lord and his might.

When my grandmother shared with me that day long ago the pressures she was facing now that she had come to faith in Christ, I told her to pray to her new Lord who knew about the pressure she was under and he would instruct her by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Meanwhile I told her I thought she should stay put in her church and use the opportunity to share with her Catholic friends about the peace and joy that had come to her heart since she had invited Jesus to become her personal Lord and Savior.

Our heavenly Father, we know that without faith it is impossible to please you, and we truly desire to be a people of faith. We pray that we might be faithful to trust you, that we might put up the shield of faith this week so that the flaming darts of the evil one might not penetrate our hearts. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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