

SPEAK UP WHEN CIRCUMSTANCES TRY TO SHUT YOU DOWN

Today we are in the final week of **Spirit and Truth** and over these last 9 Weeks we have been looking at God's greatest vehicle for taking the Gospel to the world - the CHURCH! As we said in **Week 1** the church is more than just a place we go to on Sunday to sing songs and listen to someone preach God's word. The Church is a living organism made up of followers of Jesus who have been filled with the Holy Spirit and have been given a directive not to just sit in buildings having weekly gatherings but who have been charged with the responsibility of taking the message of salvation to the world!! And no one personifies that better than the Apostle Paul. After his radical conversion to Christ in **Acts 9** on his way to persecute Christians, Paul becomes one of the greatest church planters the world has ever known. Literally, because of Paul's faithfulness to live out the GREAT COMMISSION (To GO and MAKE DISCIPLES) you and I have had an opportunity to hear the Gospel. If we could all trace our spiritual tree back to the beginning all roads would eventually lead back to the ministry and legacy that Paul passed on to his disciples.

So as we close out this series and prepare to enter our last section of our Through the Bible Journey **I want us to understand what we can expect as disciples of Christ and hopefully inspire you to use the opposition and difficulties you will face in life as a platform from which to share the Gospel.** So as you are finding **Acts 21** let me PRAY for us as we prepare to jump in.

As we come to **Acts 21** Paul is returning to Jerusalem for what will be his last time as he concludes his 3rd Missionary Journey. All total Paul conducted 4 missionary journeys with his journey to Rome making up his final missionary endeavor.

ACTS 21:26-29 (NIV)

26 The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them. Since Paul had just arrived from spending time in Gentile lands and because he was traveling with Gentiles who had come to faith in Christ, Paul was considered ceremonially unclean and had to undergo 7 days of ritual purification before he was allowed to enter into the temple **27** When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia Most likely these were Jews who had come from Ephesus where Paul had been ministering previously and they were in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost (the celebration of the beginning of the harvest that took place 50 days after the Passover). **27** When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, **28** shouting, "Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place." **29** (They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple.)

As was the case with the majority of Paul's ministry he faced constant opposition and persecution as he tried to be faithful to what God had charged him with (**Go therefore into all the world and make disciples**) The Gentiles who were with Paul were disciples who were the fruit of his ministry while in Ephesus. But because these Jews were opposed to the message that Paul preached and because they were trying to hinder his ministry, they made up allegations against Paul in hopes of having him arrested and put to death just as Paul had done to believers before he came to Christ. Paul faced persecution and difficulty everywhere he went. And as followers of Christ we can expect the same thing! **A disciple of Christ will be PERSECUTED for their FAITH.** Sometimes that persecution will be the result of people who are trying to silence you or who do not like your message. And sometimes that persecution may come from difficult circumstances and situations designed to discourage or distract you from your mission. But rest assured when you say you want to follow Jesus you will meet with adversity of all shapes and sizes.

And you know what? The very ministry of the Gospel itself is difficult by design! What do you expect when our adversary Satan is trying to do everything he can to hinder its work. He wants us to be enslaved by our sin. He doesn't want us to find freedom in Christ. His full-time job is devoted to making it as difficult as absolutely possible for anyone to find salvation. Satan will use anything and everything to keep people from a relationship with Jesus. Think about it:

- 1) The very birth of Jesus was an incredible struggle that faced opposition and difficulty at every turn:
 - It started with a young unmarried teenage mother facing the rejection of her soon to be fiance and even her own community with a scandalous pregnancy outside of wedlock.
 - When it came time for Mary to give birth to Jesus Mary and Joseph were away from home in Bethlehem because of the census declared by the government with no appropriate place to birth the child while they were there.
 - If that were not enough. They had to flee to Egypt to get away from Herod's death squad as they were rounding up children from birth to 2 years of age in search for the newborn King so they could put Him to death before anyone could realize who he was.

- 2) Jesus Himself even said we would face opposition and difficulty if we became His disciples **John 15:18-21 (NIV)**

18 "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. The world has rejected Jesus since his birth. **19** If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. **20** Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. **21** But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.

3) Listen to this incredible list of some of what Paul had to endure just because he said yes to Jesus. **2 Corinth. 11:24-28 (NIV)**

24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. **25** Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; **26** on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; **27** in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. **28** And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Paul didn't blame God for what he went through, but he saw it as a pathway to build the kingdom. Although he went through, he seized it as an opportunity to advance the Gospel and to build the church.

Remember our opposition is not people or circumstances or even God for that matter. Our opposition comes from principalities and powers of darkness in the heavenly realm **Ephesians 6:10-12 (NIV)** **10** Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. **11** Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. **12** For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Even though we have a target on our back once we say yes to Jesus, God equips us and gives us what we need to stand against all that Satan throws at us.

Notice what happens to Paul while in Jerusalem and I want you to pay particularly close attention to how he responds to his situation!

ACTS 21:30-40 (NIV) **30** The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. **31** While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. **32** He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. **33** The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done. **34** Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. **35** When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. **36** The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Get rid of him!" **37** As the soldiers were about to take Paul into the barracks, he asked the commander, "May I say something to you?" "Do you speak Greek?" he replied. **38** "Aren't you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the wilderness some time ago?" **39** Paul answered, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people." **40** After receiving the commander's permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic:

What did Paul do? He is being falsely accused of something he isn't guilty of and he doesn't whine or complain but instead uses the opportunity to summon people together and then proceeds to share his testimony of how Jesus has transformed his life. Not only will a disciple of Christ be **PERSECUTED** for their **FAITH**, but **a disciple of Christ uses their situation to share their FAITH**

In **Acts 22** Paul is basically going to give his personal testimony as to what led to His conversion to Christ as a defense against the accusations being made about him. He is going to use his persecution and wrongful arrest (which is basically a sham fabricated to get rid of him and to hinder his ministry with the hopes that if they can silence Paul they can put an end to this Gospel nonsense), he is going to use his persecution and wrongful arrest as a platform from which to share the Gospel and continue to do ministry. And boy is he ever going to share Jesus and have an impact! First of all, because Paul is a Roman citizen the Jews cannot punish him for the accusations being charged against him because he is under Roman authority, not Jewish authority. Paul is going to play his Roman citizenship card and as he does he is going to be passed from one government official to the next as they try to figure out what to do with him ultimately deciding to send him to Rome after Paul makes a plea to be sent to Caesar rather than be tried by Jewish authorities. And every step of the way Paul is going to share the story of how he came to Christ and invite others to do the same. Here is a list of the Gospel opportunities Paul had because of his circumstances:

He was able to share with the **Sanhedrin Council** (the same Jewish council who had years before been responsible for Christ's arrest and death by crucifixion. The same council that Paul served as a hit man seeking to persecute the church prior to his conversion)

He was able to share with two different Roman governors **Felix and Festus** (both of which served as governors of Judea during Paul's custody by Roman officials)

He was also able to share with **King Herod Agrippa** who was the son of King Herod who had been responsible for the death of the Apostle James and who had also had Peter arrested. In fact, listen to the impact Paul's testimony had on Agrippa as recorded for us in Acts 26.

Acts 26:24-32 (NIV) 24 At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane." Could you imagine the only push back is that "you are too smart"? Haha!

25 "I am not insane, most excellent Festus," Paul replied. "What I am saying is true and reasonable. **26** The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. **27** King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do." Agrippa was a Jew and he would have been aware of what was foretold by the prophets concerning a coming Messiah and Paul is pointing that out to him.

28 Then Agrippa said to Paul, "Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?" **29** Paul replied, "Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who

are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.” Paul wanted them to know Jesus just as he did except he wanted them to know Him as free men not as one being persecuted and in chains as he was.

30 The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. **31** After they left the room, they began saying to one another, “This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment.” **32** Agrippa said to Festus, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.” Because Paul appealed to Caesar he would now be taken to Rome where he would share the Gospel along the journey there and he would have an opportunity to share and minister to believers in Rome.

Acts 28:16-20 (NIV) 16 When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him. **17** Three days later he called together the local Jewish leaders. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: “My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. **18** They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. **19** The Jews objected, so I was compelled to make an appeal to Caesar. I certainly did not intend to bring any charge against my own people. **20** For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.”

Acts 28:30-31 (NIV) For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. **31** He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance! While Paul was bound, he was not hindered in sharing the gospel in any way. How often do we use inconveniences as an excuse that we are hindered from sharing the gospel?

Paul uses his persecution and difficulty as a platform to draw attention to the Gospel! **What do you use your difficulty for?** To wallow in self pity? To draw sympathy from others? As motivation and an excuse to become bitter and hardhearted? Or **do you use it as a platform as Paul did to share the Good News of hope that we have in Christ Jesus?** A hope that so many desperately, desperately need!! Not only that, but **do you use your difficulty as Paul used it as an opportunity to really get to know Christ by becoming familiar with His suffering?**

Philippians 3:7-14 (NIV) 7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. **8** Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ **9** and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— **10** that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, **11** that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. **12** Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. **13** Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and

straining forward to what lies ahead, **14** I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

I get it! This sounds like only something a sadist would be willing to sign up for. But we know that in Christ whatever we suffer on this earth is only for a short season and what awaits us in glory is so much more than the best life here on this earth could ever offer us. Not only that but look at the unbelievable platform Paul was given for introducing people to Jesus!

Worship to come back up

Invitation:

Will you start seeing your struggles and difficulties as opportunities to share the GOSPEL?

Will you live on purpose and look for opportunities where you can share your TESTIMONY with others?

Remember we make up the church and the church is God's plan for taking the Gospel to the world!