

The Conversion of St. Paul

GOSPEL WITNESS VERSUS RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

Luke 21:10-19

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Analysis by Norbert E. Kabelitz

10Then he said to them, 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; 11there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

12 'But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. 13This will give you an opportunity to testify. 14So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; 15for I will give you words* and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. 16You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. 17You will be hated by all because of my name. 18But not a hair of your head will perish. 19By your endurance you will gain your souls.

NB. Re Luke 21:10-19. This lection will be repeated on the 24th Sunday after Pentecost as Luke 21:5-19 where signs of the end time are prominent. We are looking at Luke 21:10-19 with a Pauline template. Applied to this day of Paul's conversion, it seems appropriate to focus Lukan data on Paul's story as persecutor, persecuted, and advocate of the Gospel.

DIAGNOSIS: When “Religion” as Law Gets Judged by “The Judge”

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *The Way of Persecution (vv.12-17)*

Richard L. Thulin, 1980 Professor of Preaching at Gettysburg asserts regarding this Lukan reading, “the early persecution came about because the preached Gospel (in Paul’s case, justification by faith) attacked the precise stronghold of enmity (in Paul’s environment, justification by Law).” If we ask why will they arrest, persecute, hand you over, bring you before Governor and King, why else if not threatened by “the Name.” “We have a law.” “He speaks against Moses” (or Islam’s Shariah). Religion as Law, Torah commandments, canon law, gets antagonized when “words and a wisdom” (v. 15) see the Law as enemy, not as asset when used as a “Jacob’s ladder” to claim godliness. Law in such forms as legalism and moralism mutate into indictments by religious police and repression, a litany of arrest, persecution and enmity. “Zealous for the Law” (Gal. 1:14, second lesson) leads to something like Jack Nelson Pallymeyer’s “Is Religion Killing Us?” or Charles Kimball’s “When Religion Becomes Evil.”

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *It’s in Us All!*

Religion as Law makes the case that it expresses the will of God in commandments. Good try, but when its proponents suggest we have within ourselves the spiritual capacity to conform and fulfill its legislation, doesn’t that suggest that our trust is in our ability to do them? “All these I have done from my youth,” said the rich young ruler, but he is and we are, exposed by such misplaced trust, a misplaced love, yea, a misplaced fear, unable to “let go and let God.” So we use religion as Law to define and defend our efforts at godliness and then are bewildered when bad things happen to good people. (Is it any wonder that later Paul would see that his efforts to establish a “lawful” righteousness of self gets degraded into “dung?”

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *“We All Have It Coming” (Clint Eastwood in “Unforgiven”)*

Are apocalyptic signs (vv. 10-11) and worldwide catastrophes (which seem to be with us in every generation) signals of some sort that we are all under judgment and unless we repent we shall all perish? What shall we do with the Judge’s (God’s) decree that holds “the whole world accountable” (Rom. 3:19) and consigns us all to disobedience that God might have mercy on all” (Rom. 11:32)? Fleming Rutledge used that text to title a sermon “God-damned Christians.” The rug of righteousness of self, whether supported by synagogue or Governors or Kings, has been pulled out from under us. The Pharisee heresy puts us at odds with God. Expecting to be justified by law, God judges us as faithless and, indeed, hateful (see v. 17). The appeal to religion as Law puts us all under its curse. It prosecutes and damns us all even when we appeal to it for credit.

PROGNOSIS: Why Good Things Happen to Bad People

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *My Name (v. 12) Is Our Advocate and Defender (vv. 12-13)*

“Because of my name” seems to be the centerpiece of “why good things happen to bad people.” The “words he gives and a wisdom which cannot be contradicted” tell of him as the agent of God’s power to save, a salvation anchored in the “word” of the Cross (1 Cor. 1:18), the heartbeat of Paul’s conversion for this day. In him we “Face the Judge and Greet the Savior.” Jesus has assumed God’s judgment on all (Gentile, Pagan, Jew, Muslim) that he might have mercy on all. He assumed the curse to become a blessing. He became the persecuted and the accused and the one judged in order that “in Christ Jesus we might experience the blessing of Abraham receiving the Promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal. 3:14), an expansion of Paul’s conversion for this day! It is uniquely good news that Christ died for the ungodly, disobedient, irreligious, misinformed. IN Jesus, God crosses our

minus signs to become a plus sign.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Better! Given the Power to Endure

No need to be defensive, anxious. How about bold, confident, assured, in the “inward parts.” We trust the outcome of the Christ story and Name. Our life story connected, crossed, in trust with him will not leave us “‘bald or soulless” (vv. 18-19). Travail becomes birthing time, even joy! Fleming Rutledge, in “The Bible and the New York Times” quotes Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa in the fight against apartheid for decades, “Don’t give up! Don’t get discouraged! I’ve read the end of the book! We win!” (Because Christ won!) Can it be so? Persecution a cause for rejoicing in his name?

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Best! Persecution a Time for Witness!

Dr. Ed [Shroeder] might suggest digging out the story of Balinese artist Ketui Lasia and how he coped with painful consequences of becoming a Christian (Easter 2000 quarterly Crossings). “In the face of opposition and rejection I am always friendly for as Christians we are freed to love” (even enemies). Is that why we can say, “When life gives lemons, make lemonade”? See the catalog of Paul’s own sufferings in 2 Cor. 11:23-29 and 30. “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness,” and God’s strength. While pluralism in religious beliefs (rather than persecution) is our context for witness, how will we answer the question, “Why Jesus?” Good witness and luck, I say.