

Acts 21:15-19 and 27-40; 22; 23:1-11

Aim of lesson

To show that Paul was prepared, if necessary, to face suffering and death for his Lord, and that he used every opportunity to witness to the truth.

Background study

Deuteronomy 16:9-12; 1 Corinthians 9:20; 1 Peter 3:14-17.

Suggested outline of lesson

Attempt to convey to the children the enthusiastic welcome of the believers who awaited Paul in Jerusalem. How pleased they were to see him safely returned and how eager they were to hear about his mission. Paul recounted in detail all that had been accomplished. With God's blessing, many Gentiles had learned and believed about Jesus Christ, and communities of believers had been established in many cities. However, Paul had also to relate that he had experienced many dangers, not the least from the hand of his fellow Jews, who had persecuted him, as he had once persecuted the Christians. Paul, for his part, was overjoyed to have reached Jerusalem in time for the feast of Pentecost and to be able to participate in the temple worship. The city and the temple were crowded because Jews from many cities near and far had travelled there for the feast. Among the crowd were many of the Jewish zealots who had bitterly opposed Paul in his campaign to offer the gospel of salvation to all.

Having described the religious occasion and the acts of worship in the magnificent temple, contrast this with the eruption of aggression and anger caused by these fanatics. They influenced the other worshippers against Paul, with their wild accusations about Paul undermining the Jewish law and defiling the temple, and the clamour which resulted brought others running to swell the hysterical crowd. Try to get the children to imagine how frightening it must have been for Paul to be caught up in this tumult and to be dragged out by this violent mob who intended to kill him.

The riot quickly came to the notice of the officer in charge of the Roman guard, who was responsible for maintaining the peace. Soldiers came running and pushed their way through the crowd, upon which those beating Paul immediately stopped, being reminded that they had no right to take the law into their own hands. The officer recognized that the disturbance had something to do with Paul and assumed, therefore, that he was a trouble-maker. He failed to discover from Paul's accusers the truth of the matter, for everyone shouted at once and there was danger of further rioting. He saw fit, therefore, to have Paul removed to a place of safety, where proper enquiries could be made. Even so, the soldiers had to lift Paul shoulder high for his own protection. How many people after an ordeal such as this would be able to control themselves sufficiently to speak as Paul did? First he spoke in Greek to the officer, seeking permission to speak to the crowd,

and then in Hebrew so that the Jews would be able to understand him. No wonder the crowd fell silent.

Paul's ability to identify with his accusers comes out strongly here. He spoke of things they would know and understand. He was a Jew himself, he said, brought up in Jerusalem and educated in the law by Gamaliel, one of the leading rabbis. He, too, had hated the Christians and, with the support of the Sanhedrin and the high priest, had set out to destroy them. He went on to describe in detail what had happened to him on that journey to Damascus. Perhaps the children may be able to recall, by way of revision, what Paul would have recounted. He told how Ananias had been sent to tell him that he had been chosen by God to be a witness for Christ. He spoke of his conversion, his baptism, and of his immediate enthusiasm to preach Christ in Jerusalem and of the vision he had of Jesus telling him to go instead and preach to the Gentiles.

Until that point the crowd had listened intently, but the word "Gentiles" inflamed them and drove them into a frenzy of anger. There was such confusion that the officer had Paul taken inside the garrison to be examined by flogging. Emphasize here the courage of Paul. Already bruised and bleeding from the vicious attack by his fellow countrymen, he was now tied up ready for flogging. Quietly he asked the centurion if it were lawful for a Roman citizen to be flogged without a trial. Imagine the consternation of the centurion on duty when he learned that Paul was a Roman citizen! Hurriedly he reported the matter to his superior, released Paul and put him safely in a cell for the night.

Relevance to the children's lives

What led the crowd to become angry with Paul? What did they believe about Paul? Was what they believed true? They had simply jumped to the wrong conclusions, and with serious results. Do we sometimes accept too easily what somebody tells us about another person, instead of finding out for ourselves and being sure about the truth of the matter? Can you think of examples?

Worksheets

These should be self-explanatory.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, help us to be fair in our attitude towards other people and not to listen to things which may be unkind or untrue. Amen.

Memory verse

The Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome." (Acts 23:11).