

A Study of the Acts of the Apostles
Week Twenty-Seven
Acts 21:20-22:9

Day One

20 When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. 21 They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. 22 What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, 23 so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow.

v. 20 – The leaders who heard about what God had done through Paul in the Gentile world praised God, but then they turned their attention to more practical matters. It seemed that Paul was quite controversial in Jerusalem among the many believing Jews who were also zealous for the Law. This presented a problem for the leaders there, and I believe they were cowards where Paul and God’s work among the Gentiles were concerned. I hope I am not too hard on these wonderful men, but the lack of leadership they exhibited here is appalling. Let me explain as we look at the next few verses.

v. 21 – The statement that the leaders made in this verse was true as far as I call tell. Paul did indeed teach Gentiles that they didn’t have to follow the Law of Moses. The Jerusalem Council had “signed off” on this teaching in Acts 15, which meant that these leaders had endorsed what Paul was doing among the Gentiles. Yet it has been my premise throughout this study that the Jerusalem leaders didn’t like Paul or what he was doing and perhaps with good reason. Paul wasn’t the easiest man to get along with.

But why didn’t the Jerusalem leaders work to refute this false interpretation of what Paul was doing and explain what he was doing? We know from Paul’s writings that he was very hard on anyone who thought that they could gain any righteous standing before God by obeying the Law. So I ask: Why didn’t the Jerusalem leaders work harder to refute and explain why Paul taught what he taught? Why didn’t they say, “Now we know this isn’t true and we are standing with you, brother”? Or “We know this is a hard teaching for even believing Jews to accept, but we are working to explain this every opportunity we get.” Paul was indeed teaching the Gentiles *not* to circumcise their children and *not* to live according to the customs of Jews.

The Jerusalem leaders had become like the Sanhedrin leadership. They were afraid of the people and thus lost their ability to lead the people. This is why, in my opinion, you don’t hear much about the Jerusalem leaders after Acts 12. From then on, the focus shifts to the Gentile world and when it does, the Jerusalem leaders aren’t there. They preferred working among the Jews while God moved from Jerusalem to Antioch and the rest of the world.

vs. 22&23 – Instead of taking some Gentile believers and allowing them to give testimony to God’s work in their lives, the leaders came up with a lame plan to make it seem that Paul was still friendly and open to the customs of the Jews. Instead of confronting the bias of the Jewish believers, they sought to appease that bias with a plan to show that Paul was still Jewish. How silly! And how futile for their plan failed and a riot almost broke out as it was.

Are you trying to make peace with a person, group or situation with which there can be no peace? Are you bending over backwards to avoid a confrontation or controversy? Has this caused you in any way to compromise what you truly believe? What you stand for? Then I urge you to have the courage to stand up and say what you believe to whomever needs to hear it, regardless of the cost to you. Doing that is the only way to maintain your integrity in most situations.

Day Two

24 Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. 25 As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality." 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.

v. 24 – It seems that the leaders advised Paul to finance the purification rites for some men who were finishing a Nazirite vow (see Numbers 6:1-7). It seemed that Paul himself had undertaken such a vow (see Acts 18:18), but this vow had not been for “public relations.” Now the leaders were trying to bolster Paul’s image among the Jewish believers by having him publicly identify with men who were taking such a vow.

I just don’t understand this procedure at all. Paul was adamantly opposed to the Law as a source of grace or right standing with God. I’m sure Paul still maintained many of the Jewish customs since that was part of his heritage and lifestyle. But Paul did not live in “obedience to the law” as the leaders wanted the people to believe. In my opinion, this is why the Jerusalem church had become insignificant by the time that Paul arrived there for this meeting. They were more concerned with pleasing the Jewish believers than they were in spreading the gospel beyond Israel, or so it seems to me. **What do you think? Am I being too hard on these men?**

And where was Paul in all this? What was he thinking? I’m guessing that he wanted to work with the elders and agreed to their plan out of deference. Yet he had to have reservations. Or perhaps this taught Paul a lesson and helped formulate his very strong denunciations of the Law as a source of righteousness that we find in some of his letters written after this incident. Yet, his denunciations were strong even before this flawed

plan. We know that Paul had much love for his people and was willing to do almost anything to see them come to Christ, but not to preserve their Jewish customs.

v. 25 – Here the council of leaders affirmed their decision to send a letter to the Gentiles, which we discussed in the study that covered Acts 15. So the Council acknowledged that the Gentiles did not have to follow the Law, but then advised Paul to appear friendly toward the Law for the sake of the church in Jerusalem. **Are you confused? I know I am at this point. I simply don't know what the leaders were trying to accomplish.**

But leadership is a tough job and I have the benefit of looking back and bringing judgment against these men. They all gave their lives for the sake of the gospel and were undoubtedly under tremendous pressure in Jerusalem, which to this day still has a difficult spiritual atmosphere in which to work or minister.

v. 26 – So Paul did follow the plan. He went to the Temple, gave notice of the duration for their Nazirite vow and publicly identified with their attempts to be purified through the rituals at the Temple. So Paul was willing to pay money into a Temple system that he knew was a bankrupt system. Again, I just don't understand this story at all. But as I said, Paul was operating in a very charged atmosphere and it must have been difficult to sort out all the issues and think correctly.

What lessons can you take from this story? Have you compromised what you believed for the sake of "public relations"? Have you tried to placate a critic who will not be placated? If so, you may know by now that these attempts don't work! You must stand up for what you believe, no matter how intense the pressure. But I also know that this is easier said than done. So do the best you can and if you fail, learn from it and move on.

Day Three

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, "Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple area 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 area.) 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.

vs. 27&28 – Don't ever underestimate how cruel and mean a religious spirit can be. Here we see some Jews from Asia, who perhaps recognized Paul from his ministry in Ephesus, stirring up the crowd with false statements concerning Paul. Also don't underestimate the propensity of a religious spirit to lie! We see here that the Jews were more concerned for their building and property than they were for people—another characteristic of religious people. God would show them in just a few years what He thought of their Temple when He sent the Romans to dismantle it and the entire city. But for now, the

Temple was the holy place and these Jews were determined to preserve the honor of their sanctuary against the likes of Paul. What was Paul's crime? Having fellowship with Gentiles! You can see why this spirit angered Jesus when He encountered it and it should anger you as well:

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations ' ? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching (Mark 11:15-18).

The mob killed Jesus and now they were intent on killing Paul. That is one more trait of the religious person: their anger is so great that they can easily kill and feel like they are doing God a favor.

Is there such a thing as a holy place that people can defile? Is there such a thing as a holy building or piece of ground that is worth killing over for? The Jews say yes as do the Muslims. The Christian must say no, however. Do you agree with me? There are some who believe that we need the holy place to remind us of God's awe and holiness. Do you agree? I won't disagree with you if you said yes. But for me, having been raised a Catholic, it's hard to get reverent over any building that can be destroyed or piece of ground where some special act took place at some point in time.

v. 29 – One of the accusations against Paul was based on an assumption that the accusers made. They assumed that Paul had brought his associated from Asia with him into the Temple area, which of course he had not. But what if he had. Wasn't there a court of the Gentiles in the Temple where Gentiles were supposed to have some access to God's house? But I have been guilty of doing the same thing as Paul's accusers. I have jumped to erroneous conclusions and influenced people by sharing them with others. I have made a conscious effort over the years to stop jumping to conclusions, especially negative ones. But I have a long way to go in this area.

Just now I was checking in at the Johannesburg airport and my baggage was weighed at the airport entrance and found to be overweight. I was *convinced* they were going to say something to me and try to charge me for excess weight. I fretted all the while I was in line, only to get up to the counter and have the man check them through, no questions asked or comments made. **I had jumped to the wrong conclusion based on a wrong assumption. Have you done this? Are you doing it right now, fretting over something that may be based on a wrong assumption?**

v. 30 – The rabble rousers succeeded in creating a mob scene and near riot. What zeal they showed! What commitment! But commitment to what? A lost cause! A doomed

building. It is good to be zealous, but it is important to be zealous for something that matters. I know many zealots for American football, and have acted like on at times myself. **For what are you zealous? What upsets you? What will cause you to stop what you're doing and "run in every direction"?** Jesus said,

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Luke 12:34).

Where is your treasure? In things that will pass away or in the things of God that will never pass away? It's a good question to ask yourself on a regular basis.

Day Four

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.

v. 31 – The mob didn't want to just arrest Paul; they truly wanted him dead and were willing to do the job themselves. But Rome had a guard house right next to the Temple for just such occasions. Rome never wanted their territory to have unrest, which would have been bad for the Empire. So they stationed their troops where the people tended to congregate and for Jerusalem, that place was the Temple. So the commander of the Roman troops got word of the riot quickly and moved immediately to quell the disturbance.

v. 32 – Poor Paul. The crowd had seized him and was beating him to death. When the crowd saw the soldiers, they stopped. Why did they stop? Because they knew they were doing something wrong. So much for the Law they supposedly followed! They were willing to kill Paul who was telling people not to follow the Law, yet they followed the Law in form only. But this is what it is to be a religious person as Paul wrote:

Having a form of godliness but denying its power . Have nothing to do with them (2 Timothy 3:5).

Don't brag about your commitment to the Lord or His ways unless you are willing to live out that commitment on a daily basis. Otherwise, you should walk humbly and carefully, looking to yourself and not judging others.

vs. 33&34 – The commander came up to Paul and arrested him, asking him what he had done. But the crowd was so confused that he had to order Paul back to the barracks, where he could question him in quiet. So even though the crowd was breaking the law, Paul was the one who was arrested. But God used this to save Paul's life, otherwise the

crowd would have killed him. You have to be impressed by the speed with which they responded to this riot. And that was Rome in Paul's day—relaxed and tolerant in some ways; rigid and inflexible in others. And Rome had no tolerance for any disturbance of any kind, as was depicted here.

It is interesting to note how many significant people have been arrested for doing what was right. It causes me to question whether I would be willing to serve time for my beliefs. Jail isn't the end of the world, I suppose, especially if it's a place you go for doing something right and not something wrong. **Would you be willing to go to jail for what you believe? For Jesus? Don't answer too quickly.**

Day Five

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, "Away with 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 desert 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."

v. 35 – We see here the power of religion to stir people. This reminds me of some of the scenes we see from the modern Muslim world. And for some Muslims, their violence reaches such levels that they become terrorists. (We will see this same tendency later when some go under a vow not to eat until Paul is dead.) If this is the zeal of those who are in error, how much greater should my zeal be for the truth!

v. 36 – Part of the crowd followed the soldiers with Paul to chant their murderous intent. They had already judged him unworthy to remain alive. And they were in error. That is how convinced someone can be that they are right—and still be wrong! Sincerity isn't the issue, for these people were sincere—but they were sincerely wrong! I hope you don't hold onto wrong beliefs and thinking only to feel that you aren't really wrong because this what you *truly* believe. Keep in mind that you may be truly wrong. Sincerity is worthless where truth and falsehood are concerned.

vs. 37&38 – Paul engaged the commander before he was taken into the barracks and asked permission to speak. And we see that the commander had come to his own wrong conclusion, just as the crowd had done. He assumed that Paul was an Egyptian rebel who had recently misbehaved. It takes time to determine the truth. It is easier to come to a quick, wrong conclusion, so that is why so many of us do just that. Even this commander, who had done his job well up to this point, was guilty of being rash and sincere, but sincerely wrong!

v. 39 – Do you remember when the Ephesians rioted and demonstrated in support of their goddess Diana in Acts 19:28? There were thousands assembled and Paul wanted to go address them. Paul was confident in God's abilities to help him as he addressed his

opponents. Here he displayed the same courage. This crowd had just tried to kill him and was following the soldiers, insisting that Paul die. So what does Paul do? He asks permission to say a few words!

And of course Paul let the commander know that he was a citizen. This meant that the commander had to afford Paul certain rights that he didn't have to extend to non-citizens. Paul was getting used to this kind of treatment and knew what his rights were. It is never wrong to take advantage of whatever privileges you have as a citizen of your nation. Just remember that you are in the hands of God and those privileges may not be honored if God wants to have something else happen. Eventually this same Roman government who was protecting Paul would eventually execute him. That is why we always must put our trust not in man or his institutions, but in God.

Day Six

40 Having received 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: 22:1 "Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense." 2 When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet. Then Paul said: 3 "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. 4 I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison,

v. 40 – It is amazing to me that the crowd became silent when Paul motioned for quiet. They were in a frenzied mode, and I'm not sure why the sudden change from murderous mob to submissive audience. Perhaps this reveals that the mob thought Paul to be a Gentile and were unfamiliar with who he truly was. Then Paul spoke to them in Aramaic, their local dialect. This proved that he was no foreigner but rather one of their own. It is also surprising that the commander gave Paul this permission to speak, but Paul must have appeared to be anything but a rabble-rouser as he first addressed the commander and then the crowd.

Paul took this opportunity to deliver a message to the crowd. I suppose Paul never missed a chance to plant the seed of the gospel, even in a hostile crowd. You have to admire this man Paul. **Do you take advantage of every opportunity to fulfill your purpose? Paul certainly did. What more can you do to further the cause for which you were born? After all, God is with you and wants you to fulfill your purpose more than you do. Consider this dynamic that is evident in these words from Isaiah:**

"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6).

Notice how the Lord expanded the role of His servant mentioned in this verse. God wants to do the same thing for you. Will you allow Him to do so? Staying small when God wants to increase your influence isn't humility, it's disobedience!

v. 1 – Paul addressed the crowd with his argument for becoming a follower of Jesus. I can sense from his speech that he had told this story on many previous occasions. **Do you have your story down pat? Can you tell it even in the midst of a riotous situation like Paul was about to do? Can you describe to others what God has done in your life?**

vs. 2&3 – Paul connected quickly with his audience. By his own admission, Paul wasn't a gifted orator, but he knew how to address an audience, which began by knowing who they were. Here he appealed to their "Jewishness" and acknowledged their zeal for God—which included killing anyone who profaned God's holy places!

v. 4 – Paul bore witness to his own zealous past, which included persecuting those who were following The Way. Paul seemed to make it clear that he arrested both men and women, probably a sign of his enthusiasm since he did not spare women from being arrested. I supposed it isn't so hard to understand why Paul would want to address this crowd. He himself had been a part of a mob that killed Stephen (see Acts 8) and God had spared and saved him. Now Paul was hoping that God would do the same from among the mob that was trying to kill him.

It is a great skill to move on in life but to still be able to identify with people who still are where you were. Where have you come from in your journey with the Lord? Can you still have grace for those who are doing what you once did? Can you allow God to work compassion and grace for them? After all, if God saved you, He can save anybody! Do you have that attitude when you deal with other people?

Day Seven

5 as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished. 6 "About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. 7 I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?' 8 "Who are you, Lord?' I asked. "I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. 9 My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me."

v. 5 – Paul told his story of how he was commissioned to go to Damascus. His objective was to bring believers back to Jerusalem, the holy city and capital of Judaism, to stand trial as heretics. So Paul could identify with this crowd, for he too had been a religious zealot and bigot. It is interesting to me that he was going to bring the believers back to Jerusalem and not try them in their own city. This is how important every Jew considered Jerusalem to be. It's hard for me to imagine today how anyone could be so attached to a city or locale. But I watch the Muslims exercise the same attitude toward

Mecca and Jerusalem itself. Thank you, Jesus, that I have been set free to worship God “in spirit and in truth.” (see John 4 to study this attitude of how special a place of worship can be, even in the heart of a woman who had been married five times!)

v. 6 – It had to be a bright light to outshine the noonday sun in the Middle East. But that is the kind of light God can shed on your situation. **No matter what you think you can see, God can show you more. Ask Him to shed His light on you, your family or life situation. But be ready for what may happen, for you will then see what can't be seen by the human eye or reason!**

vs. 7&8 – Paul successfully delivered his testimony to the angry mob, so they were all without excuse from this point forward. He faithfully conveyed his Damascus Road experience, and told them that Jesus was alive and had spoken to him. God had planned this event for just such a message! **The persecutors were foiled in their plot to silence Paul, for God was still glorified and Jesus was magnified. Our God is awesome! Our God reigns! Are you acting like He reigns?**

v. 9 – I have often wondered what became of Paul's companions on that Damascus Road. They saw the light and knew something had happened. Did they make further inquiry into Jesus? Did they come back and give testimony that they saw something but heard nothing? These men could have corroborated Paul's story, which could have led the investigation to determine that Paul did indeed have an experience with God that day.

Or did these men return and say nothing? Did they leave Paul to take all the heat while they played it safe? Indeed even the crowd that was listening to Paul encountered the same thing that day. They saw the light of Jesus in Paul, heard the words of Jesus, yet did not understand what was being said, for they ended Paul's speech by demanding his death.

I sometimes think that the things of God can be grasped through common sense because it is so obvious. But they cannot. Only God can open someone's eyes to see what He is doing, and anything I have seen has been the result of God's grace in my life. I must do my best to bear witness to that grace and be diligent. But only God can open someone's eyes to see their need for salvation.

Am I doing all I can do to tell my story—the story of Jesus in my life? Am I telling everyone I can and allowing God to work in their lives? I'm not sure I would be as willing to address a hostile crowd as Paul was in this instance. But Paul knew that the stakes were high and that his life was of no consequence where the gospel was concerned.

Lord, give me the same perspective that Paul had. Give me the courage and enthusiasm to share your message no matter where, no matter what. Open doors for me to share and then pour out your grace on the listeners, just like you did on me 32 years ago. Amen.