

14. Acts 21:15 - 23:35



Acts 21:15-20

After these days **we** got ready and started to go up to Jerusalem. Some of the disciples from Caesarea also came along and brought us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we were to stay. When we arrived in Jerusalem, the brothers welcomed us warmly.

The next day Paul went with us **to visit James**; and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. When they heard it, they praised God.

James is the leading presbyter of the Jerusalem community (see Acts 12:17; 15:13).

Acts 21:20-22

Then they said to him, ‘You see, brother, how many thousands of believers there are among the Jews, and they are all zealous for the law. They have been told about you that you teach all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, and that you tell them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear you have come.

The elders praise God for the success of Paul’s mission among the Gentiles, but they and the community for which they are responsible have to live with their Jewish brothers and sisters in a tense situation. Moreover, like Paul himself, as we have seen, they see the importance as Jews of being completely faithful to their traditions. They want Paul to demonstrate in a public way that the rumours about his being unfaithful to the law are false.

Acts 21:23-26

So do what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow. Join these men, go through the rite of purification with them, and pay for the shaving of their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself observe and guard the law. [Numbers 6:13-16]

But as for the Gentiles who have become believers, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication.’ [see Acts 15:23, 28-30]

Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having purified himself [see his vow, Acts 18:18], he entered the temple with them, making public the completion of the days of purification when the sacrifice would be made for each of them.

Luke's focus is on Paul's personal fidelity to the law of Moses as an observant Jew and a pharisee. Paul no longer looks to such fidelity for salvation; for that he entrusts himself to the love of the risen Jesus. His faithful observance of the law, however, is part of his faith in Jesus who has commissioned him to take to the Gentiles the blessings promised to Israel and intended for the world.

‘Though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings’ (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

Acts 21:27-30

When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, who had seen him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd. They seized him, shouting, ‘Fellow Israelites, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against our people, our law, and this place [Jesus, Luke 23:10,14; Stephen, Acts 6:9-14]; more than that, he has actually brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.’ For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. Then all the city was aroused, and the people rushed together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut.

Paul is being accused of being against ‘**our people**’ yet it is he who, against much opposition, is carrying out faithfully the vocation of a Jew in carrying the word of God to the nations and in inviting them to enjoy the blessings promised to Abraham and his descendants.

As we hear the Jews crying out for help, we remember the cry for help from Macedonia – a cry which Paul answered so generously (see Acts 16:9).

He has the door of the temple closed against him, yet it is he who has answered the call of God to take God’s revelation to the world by ‘opening a door of faith to the Gentiles’ (Acts 14:27).

Acts 21:31-36

While they were trying to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. Immediately he took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. When they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.

Then the **tribune** came, arrested him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains; he inquired who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd shouted one thing, some another; and as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. [one-fourth of Acts is devoted to Paul in custody]

When Paul came to the steps, the violence of the mob was so great that he had to be carried by the soldiers. The crowd that followed kept shouting, “Away with him!” (compare Luke 23:18)

Acts 21:37-40

Just as Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, “May I say something to you?” The tribune replied, “Do you know Greek? Then you are not the Egyptian who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness?”

We know from the Jewish historian Flavian Josephus that the Roman governor ordered a wholesale massacre of those involved in the uprising, but that their leader escaped [see *Jewish Wars* 2.254-263; *Antiquities* 20.161-171].

Paul replied, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia (Acts 9:11), a citizen (πολίτης) of an important city; I beg you, let me speak to the people.” When he had given him permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the people for silence; and when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language.

Acts 22:1-3

“Gentlemen, brothers and fathers (see 7:2), listen to the defence (ἀπολογία) that I now make before you.” When they heard him addressing them in Hebrew, they became even more quiet. Then he said: “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today.

The violence which is stirring the crowd comes from their zeal for God. Paul reminds them that he knows what such zeal is like. We are reminded of his words to the Galatians: ‘I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors’ (Galatians 1:14). Though native of a city in Cilicia, he declares that he was educated in Jerusalem under one of the leading Pharisees of the day: Gamaliel, the nephew of Hillel (see Acts 5:38).

Acts 22:4-5

I persecuted this **Way** up to the point of death by binding both men and women and putting them in prison, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can testify about me. From them I also received letters to the brothers in Damascus, and I went there in order to bind those who were there and to bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment.

He was so zealous for God that he persecuted the followers of Jesus (see 8:3). ‘I was circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless’ (Philippians 3:5-6).

Paul tells the crowd that in his zeal, and to stamp out what appeared to him as a form of idolatry (see Deuteronomy 13), he responded to a request from the Jews in Damascus and went there to round up the Christians and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment.

Acts 22:6-9

While I was on my way and approaching Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' Then he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.' Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice (φωνῇ) of the one who was speaking to me. [The call was for Paul alone!]

Compare: 'the men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice (φωνῇ - 'sound') but saw no one' (Acts 9:7)

Acts 22:10-11

I asked, 'What am I to do, Lord?' The Lord said to me, 'Get up and go to Damascus; there you will be told everything that has been assigned to you to do.' Since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, those who were with me took my hand and led me to Damascus.

Bathed in the light of the divine glory, Paul realises that whatever it is that has been guiding him to this point can guide him no longer. For him it can be only the new light of a new creation. He continues on his way to Damascus, a humbler man, ready to be led. The light that will guide him now is the light seen by Stephen, when, just before he was stoned (and with Paul's approval): filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' (Acts 7:55-56).

Acts 22:12-16

A certain **Ananias**, who was a devout man according to the law and well spoken of by all the Jews living there, came to me; and standing beside me, he said, 'Brother Saul, regain your sight!' In that very hour I regained my sight and saw him. Then he said, 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the **Righteous One** and to hear his own voice; for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you delay?

Ananias describes Jesus as '**the Righteous One**' – the same terms used by Peter (see Acts 3:14) and by Stephen (see Acts 7:52). Jesus is the one who was totally committed to carrying out the will of God: to being perfectly obedient to the law.

'Get up, be **baptised**, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name.'

'Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:38).

Acts 22:17-20

‘After I had returned to Jerusalem [37AD, Acts 9:26-30] and while I was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw Jesus saying to me, “Hurry and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.” And I said, “Lord, they themselves know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. And while the blood of your witness Stephen was shed, I myself was standing by, approving and keeping the coats of those who killed him.”

Acts 22:21

Then he said to me, “Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.” [see Acts 9:15; 13:2]

The mission to the Gentiles, far from being something against the temple, is a mission from the temple. He has been carrying out the will of God as their delegate, and on their behalf. Did not God say through Isaiah: ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified. ... It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth’ (Isaiah 49:3,6).

Acts 22:22-27

Up to this point they listened to him, but then they shouted, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.” And while they were shouting, throwing off their cloaks, and tossing dust into the air, the tribune directed that he was to be brought into the barracks, and ordered him to be examined by flogging, to find out the reason for this outcry against him. But when they had tied him up for whipping, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, “Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?” (compare Acts 16:37-38) When the centurion heard that, he went to the tribune (Claudius, Acts 23:36) and said to him, “What are you about to do? This man is a Roman citizen.” The tribune came and asked Paul, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?” And he said, “Yes.”

Acts 22:28-30

The tribune answered, “It cost me a large sum of money to get my citizenship.” Paul said, “But I was born a citizen.” Immediately those who were about to examine him drew back from him; and the tribune also was afraid, for he realised that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him. Since he wanted to find out what Paul was being accused of by the Jews, the next day he released him and ordered the chief priests and the entire council to meet. He brought Paul down and had him stand before them.

Acts 23:1-3

While Paul was looking intently at the council he said, “Brothers, up to this day I have lived my life as a citizen [politeuomai; also Philippians 1:27] with a clear conscience before God.”

Then the high priest Ananias (47-59AD) ordered those standing near him to strike him on the mouth. At this Paul warned him, “God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting there to judge me according to the law, and yet in violation of the law you order me to be struck?”

‘You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbour’ (Leviticus 19:15).

Acts 23:4-5

Those standing nearby said, “Do you dare to insult God’s high priest?” And Paul said, “I did not realise, brothers, that he was high priest; for it is written, ‘You shall not speak evil of a leader of your people’” (Exodus 22:27).

Paul’s response is loaded with irony. By his position and dress it would have been obvious that Ananias was high priest. Paul is in effect commenting on Ananias’s behaviour which was so unbecoming of his position that anyone could be excused for failing to recognise him. Ananias was a cruel and avaricious man, known as a collaborator with the occupying forces.

Acts 23:6-10

When Paul noticed that some were Sadducees and others were Pharisees, he called out in the council, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead.” When he said this, a dissension began between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection (already Acts 4:2; and see Luke 20:27-40), or angel, or spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge all three.) Then a great clamour arose, and certain scribes of the Pharisees’ group stood up and contended, “We find nothing wrong with this man (compare Luke 23:4, 14, 22). What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?” When the dissension became violent, the tribune, fearing that they would tear Paul to pieces, ordered the soldiers to go down, take him by force, and bring him into the barracks.

Acts 23:11

That night the Lord stood near him and said, “Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome.”

Paul has testified to Jesus in Jerusalem (see Acts 21:13).

He must now bear witness in Rome (see Acts 19:21).

Acts 23:12-15

In the morning the Jews joined in a conspiracy and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. There were more than forty who joined in this conspiracy. They went to the chief priests and elders and said, “We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food until we have killed Paul. Now then, you and the council must notify the tribune to bring him down to you, on the pretext that you want to make a more thorough examination of his case. And we are ready to do away with him before he arrives.”

Acts 23:16-22

Now the son of Paul's sister heard about the ambush; so he went and gained entrance to the barracks and told Paul. Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to report to him." So he took him, brought him to the tribune, and said, "The prisoner Paul called me and asked me to bring this young man to you; he has something to tell you." The tribune took him by the hand, drew him aside privately, and asked, "What is it that you have to report to me?" He answered, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more thoroughly into his case. But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in ambush for him. They have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink until they kill him. They are ready now and are waiting for your consent." So the tribune dismissed the young man, ordering him, "Tell no one that you have informed me of this."

Acts 23:23-30

Then the tribune summoned two of the centurions and said, “Get ready to leave by nine o’clock tonight for Caesarea with two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen. Also provide mounts for Paul to ride, and take him safely to Felix the governor.” He wrote a letter to this effect:

“**Claudius Lysias** to his Excellency the **governor Felix** (52-58AD), greetings. This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them, but when I had learned that he was a Roman citizen, I came with the guard and rescued him. Since I wanted to know the charge for which they accused him, I had him brought to their council. I found that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but was charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. When I was informed that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him.”

Acts 23:31-35

So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him during the night to Antipatris (A Roman fortress some 40s short of Caesarea). The next day they let the horsemen go on with him, while they returned to the barracks. When they came to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul also before him. On reading the letter, he asked what province he belonged to, and when he learned that he was from Cilicia, he said, “I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive.” Then he ordered that he be kept under guard in Herod’s headquarters.