

# THE ACTS

## OF THE APOSTLES

### *Chapter 21:17 – 22:29* The Riot in Jerusalem

\*Why did Paul perform a Jewish purification ritual?

\*How did Paul defend himself before the rioting Jews?

\*What obstacles keep us from obeying God?

#### **Acts 21:17-26**

#### **Paul arrives in Jerusalem**

When Paul finally made it to Jerusalem, he received a warm welcome from the brethren. In a gathering with the leaders in the church, he told them all about how God had blessed his work among the Gentiles. The men glorified God at the news; they themselves understood that this was part of God's plan. Recall that, in Acts 15, the Holy Spirit confirmed through the apostles and elders in Jerusalem that the Gentiles could enter the kingdom, free from responsibility to keep the commandments of the Law of Moses.

However, the leaders also knew that that not all Jewish Christians around Jerusalem had yet come to that same understanding. Even now, more than 20 years after the death of Christ, many weaker Christians would interpret Paul's ministry among the Gentiles as anti-Judaic. They would think that Paul was teaching that no one should keep the Law (see verse 21), and that Jews should give up their culture. But Paul only insisted that no one should be *forced* to keep the Law of Moses, and that no one could find justification in the eyes of God because of their diligence in keeping its commandments. In fact, Paul himself still participated in many customs (see Acts 18:18), and even encouraged others to participate as well (see Acts 16:3).

So, when the leaders in Jerusalem suggested that Paul publicly participate in a Jewish purification ritual with some other men, Paul had no objection. Like James and the elders, he wanted to demonstrate once and for all to the Jewish Christians that he was not hostile to their culture or their Law — that he was actually one of them! When it was possible, Paul was always eager to become like the people he was teaching the gospel to (1 Corinthians 9:19-20), so that he could reach them better. Here was an opportunity for Paul could show the Jews his good intentions without violating the decision from Acts 15 (see verse 25). So, as was suggested, Paul completed the purification ritual with the men.

#### **Acts 21:27-36**

#### **The riot in Jerusalem**

Everything might have gone well if Paul only had to worry about the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. However, there was another problem: the Jewish unbelievers. Just like in Lystra (14:19) and Berea (17:13), Jews from out of town began to stir up trouble. They accused Paul of two things: teaching against the Jewish culture, Law, and temple (an untrue accusation; he had just participated in all three!), and violating the law about bringing Gentiles into the temple (also untrue – they only assumed that Paul brought his Greek companion into the temple with him).

But Paul didn't even get a chance to correct the misinformation! An impassioned mob soon formed, and would have killed Paul if the Roman commander from the nearby garrison had not come to the rescue. The Roman soldiers bound Paul, and the commander tried asking what the uproar was all about. But the scene was so tumultuous that he couldn't figure anything out! The soldiers were finally forced to carry Paul away from the violent crowd to the Roman fort.

**Note: Jews in the book of Acts**

*Have we seen anything like this riot before? Yes — the story is told in a way very similar to the riot in Ephesus in Acts 19. The Jews here were upset that a Gentile, an Ephesian, would even be near their temple (verses 28-29). Yet their actions were almost exactly the same as the idolatrous Ephesians!*

*The picture that the book of Acts paints of the Jews is not very favorable. They were generally hostile to Christianity, reacting unjustly and usually violently. Only a few, like the Bereans (Acts 17:11) were reasonable. Those who were once God's chosen people had become the persecutors of those who were now God's chosen people: Christians.*

**Acts 21:37-22:21 Paul's defense**

Just before the soldiers brought Paul inside the barracks, Paul requested the opportunity to speak to the crowd. The commander was surprised when he heard Paul speak in Greek; he had gotten the idea that Paul was a notorious Egyptian who had already led a rebellion. This was enough to get Paul permission to address the crowd, and so he began a defense to the Jews.

Paul told the crowd about his conversion. We've seen this story once already (chapter 9) and will hear it once more (chapter 26). But each time it is told, different aspects of the events are emphasized, because each telling has a different purpose in its context. Here, Paul is trying to make the Jews understand that he is not their enemy. So, his first goal is to establish his credibility to them. He did this in several ways (verses 1-3):

- He spoke in the Hebrew dialect, Aramaic.
- He stated, "I am a Jew." Furthermore, he noted that he had been "brought up in this city" and "educated under Gamaliel," a well-known and respected Jewish rabbi (see Acts 5:34).
- He was raised "strictly according to the Law of our fathers" and he himself was "zealous for God" (see Galatians 1:14).
- He finished off his introduction by confirming his connection to the Jewish listeners: "just as you all are today."

Then, Paul told the crowd that he understood why they were hostile to the gospel (verse 4-5); he himself had "persecuted this way to the death." The high priest and the Jewish council themselves could verify his fierce opposition to Christianity.

But Paul changed radically – and beginning in verse 6 he told the Jews why. He had not changed on a whim, just because he felt like it. Quite to the contrary – a piercing light from heaven blinded him, and a voice from heaven commanded him. This is Paul's main point: he is a preacher of Jesus simply because he is obeying heavenly commands!

Paul would have another test of his obedience shortly. While in Jerusalem, another vision came to him, telling him to leave the city. Paul, after his conversion, was immediately excited to tell others about his Lord, especially his fellow countrymen (see 9:20-22). He naturally assumed that the Jews would listen to one of their own who had drastically changed, and accept his testimony. So he disagreed with the Lord, thinking that he should stay in Jerusalem and preach to the Jews. But this not the plan Christ had for Paul, and He sent him to people who would receive the gospel: the Gentiles.

**Note: Obstacles to obedience to God**

*Paul refused to allow any obstacle to keep him from obeying the heavenly commands. We shouldn't allow anything to stop us from obeying the Bible, either. However, three things often get in our way: ourselves, suffering, and our preconceived beliefs.*

*Paul was a “Hebrew of Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5), the ideal, zealous Jew. Judaism was his life, his culture, and his passion. But after he heard the Lord say, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting,” he let none of that impede him from serving Him (see Philippians 3:7-8). Do our culture, families, character, traditions, or hobbies keep us from fully obeying God?*

*Paul’s experiences in Jerusalem bear striking similarities to Jesus’ final entrance into that city. Both knew beforehand that they would suffer; both were seized and accused falsely of speaking and acting against the temple; both were bound and put into Roman custody while Jewish mobs shouted for their death. Paul was following in his Master’s footsteps. Indeed, every true disciple of Christ follows Him; we today can expect persecution as well (see 2 Timothy 3:12), and we can’t let that stop us from obeying Him.*

*Finally, Paul did not let his preconceived ideas keep him from fully obeying the heavenly command. Paul thought he should stay in Jerusalem and testify about Christ to the Jews. But Christ wanted him to go far away to the Gentiles. Paul obeyed, despite his opinion. So often today, we think we know better than God teaches us in His word. But we still need to obey even if we do not understand the “why” of Christ’s commands! In this same text, we can find a common example of a command that many do not obey today simply because they already have preconceived ideas. Ananias said to Paul in verse 16, “Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.” Many today already have the belief that we are saved by faith alone, and because of that, baptism can mean nothing more than a “public testimony” that a person has already had their sins washed away. But this verse tells us that a person’s sins are washed away in the moment in which they are baptized! We cannot let our preconceived beliefs or our opinions stop us from taking the Bible at its word and obeying it. Paul didn’t!*

#### **Acts 22:22-29                      Reactions to Paul’s speech**

The Jews were willing to listen to Paul’s speech — until he declared that the Lord had sent him to the Gentiles. The thought that the God of the Jews would send someone to preach salvation to the unclean Gentiles was absolutely abhorrent to them, and they didn’t think anyone that suggested it should be allowed to live.

The Roman reaction was only slightly better. The commander was now so intent on discovering why the Jews hated Paul so much that he ordered that Paul be scourged until he revealed the reason. But just before the whip was raised, Paul decided to reveal something else: that he was a Roman citizen. Roman citizenship guaranteed a right to a trial, exemption from being bound or flogged, and the opportunity to appeal one’s case to the emperor. Some, like the commander had bought this citizenship – but Paul had inherited it from his parents. Paul used this advantage when it was helpful in spreading the gospel. Here, it turned the tables on the Roman officials, so that they were actually afraid of Paul!

But we’ll have to leave Paul, here in Roman custody, and continue his story in Acts 23...

#### **Choose the right answer:**

\_\_\_ 1. What did James and the other leaders in the Jerusalem church suggest that Paul should do in order to show that he did not oppose the Law of Moses? a) attack the Roman garrison, b) teach a lesson in the synagogue on the next Sabbath, c) perform a purification ritual from the Law, or d) stop preaching to the Gentiles.

\_\_\_ 2. What did the Jews accuse Paul of? a) speaking against the Law, b) not completing the purification ritual correctly, c) defiling the temple by bringing in a Gentile, or d) both a) and c).

\_\_\_ 3. Who prevented the rioting Jews from killing Paul? a) James and the elders of the church, b) an angel, c) the Roman commander, or d) they stopped beating him so that

Paul would have a chance to defend himself.

\_\_\_ 4. What obstacle does NOT often get in the way of obedience to God? a) ourselves, b) suffering, c) our preconceived beliefs, or d) zeal for God.

\_\_\_ 5. How did Paul avoid being flogged by the Romans? a) an angel delivered him, b) he appealed to Caesar, c) he revealed that he was a Roman citizen, or d) he fought back against the soldiers.

**True or false:**

\_\_\_ 1. The brethren in Jerusalem refused to welcome Paul, since he had been teaching false doctrine among the Gentiles.

\_\_\_ 2. Paul was willing to live according to Gentile customs when he was teaching Gentiles, and according to Jewish customs when he was teaching Jews.

\_\_\_ 3. Paul's participation in the purification ceremony violated the principle that Acts 15 taught.

\_\_\_ 4. Paul's goal in his speech was to make the Jews understand that he was not their enemy.

\_\_\_ 5. The only reason Paul changed from being just like those rioting Jews was because he was obeying God.

\_\_\_ 6. Paul, following his conversion, had a different opinion than Jesus about who he should teach.

\_\_\_ 7. A person's sins are washed away when they are baptized.

\_\_\_ 8. The Jews thought that Paul should die for saying that the Lord had sent him to preach to the Gentiles.

*The person who sent this lesson to you will be happy to correct your answers and discuss any questions you have with you. Send your responses and your contact information to:*

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