

The Book of Acts Study Guide

Chapters 21-22

21:1-16

Paul and Luke and the other traveling companions continued on their way toward Jerusalem. They traveled by ship, taking trips lasting a day from city to city, southeast along the coast of Asia. Then they boarded a larger ship that was headed across the Mediterranean Sea, passing Cyprus and then reached the city of Tyre in Phoenicia. They stayed there for seven days, spending time with disciples who lived there. In verse 4 Paul was warned by them, under the leading of the Spirit, not to go to Jerusalem. And then they departed again, traveling south along the coast from modern-day Lebanon. They repeated the process when they reached Ptolemais, briefly visiting believers who lived there.

vv. 8-14 – Then they stopped at Caesarea, and specifically went to the home of Philip the evangelist (not the Apostle of the same name). He was one of the seven men appointed to take care of the needs of the Hellenistic Jewish women back in Acts 6:5. Another prophet named Agabus came there from Judea. His prophecy, under the leading of the Holy Spirit, foretold Paul’s arrest and being handed over to the Gentiles, which would specifically be the Romans. And just like in v. 4 when they were in Tyre, Paul was advised not to go to Jerusalem. But Paul was determined to finish his mission as he felt led, and expressed his willingness to die if necessary. So his companions acquiesced, and even accepted it as the will of God.

In this passage, on two occasions, the Holy Spirit revealed to people that Paul faced problems in Jerusalem. Both times godly people responded by warning him not to go there. And both times Paul ignored their warning and kept pressing on. It is reasonable to ask if this was an act of disobedience on Paul’s part or if it was a misunderstanding by the other believers of the Spirit’s message. It is clear that the Spirit never declared, “Do not go to Jerusalem.” It was just a factual disclosure of what was going to happen. But the natural reaction of human beings is to avoid unnecessary conflict or problems. Avoidance is not always God’s will for our lives, however. Sometimes He has a specific purpose in mind, and it may necessitate enduring a trial, even to the point of death. So the challenge we face is knowing how to respond to the truth we are given. It is easy to be well-intended counseling others, but we can miss entirely what God desires in a particular situation. These believers could have recognized the true will of God in Paul’s life without Paul having to rebuff them. He had always completed his previous missionary journeys as planned. Back in chapter 9 after he met Yeshua on the road to Damascus, God declared that He would reveal to Paul the extent to which he would suffer (9:16). And we also know that Yeshua completed His journey, even though it led to the cross. So just as Yeshua finished His calling in the great plan of God, Paul needed to finish his personal calling.

21:17-30

When they arrived in Jerusalem, Paul reported to the leadership of the believing community in Jerusalem, including James, the one with the highest authority. He told them about the way that Gentiles were becoming believers.

v. 20 – The leaders responded by describing the work that God had done locally among Jews,

saying that thousands of Jews had believed and were zealous for the Torah. Two important points are evident in that declaration:

- The response of Jews to the life and ministry of Yeshua, was not a complete national rejection. Yes, the leadership of the Pharisees and Sadducees rejected Him, and so did the mob that called for Yeshua's crucifixion. But a great number of Jews did believe. In fact, the Greek reads, *posai muriaades* – lit. “many tens of thousands.” And that number would refer to the region in and around Jerusalem, so it would not take into account the Jews who had become believers in the surrounding lands of the diaspora, including those who became believers as a result of Paul's ministry. The point is that the extent of Jewish believers in Yeshua was far more than what is acknowledged within Judaism today, with some estimates reaching one million Jews throughout the First Century.
 - These numerous believers did not forsake their heritage as Jews. Observing God's commandments in the Torah remained a vital part of their lives. They weren't ex-Jews who became Christians as some people claim today. They did not betray their heritage or stop being Jewish in any way. They kept on living their lives in a culturally and biblically faithful way as Jews, while believing in the true Messiah of Israel. So once again, the historical facts reveal a different way of life for believers than what is typically claimed today.
- vv 21-24 – Unfortunately it is clear that rumors had spread within the Messianic believing community in Jerusalem and Judea that Paul had been telling Jews to forsake Torah, including circumcision and keeping the commandments and customs. But there was no truth to those rumors. In fact he had supported circumcision in the case of Timothy. The Messianic leaders recognized that the rumors were false. But they suggested that he participate in a Nazirite vow because that would help to alleviate any doubts that others might have. Nazirite vows were made in order to demonstrate complete dedication to God, so that part of the Torah, in particular, would show Paul's faithfulness to God's commandments, and that is what Paul agreed to do.
- vv 25-27 – James reaffirmed the earlier decision at the Jerusalem Council in chapter 15 that Gentiles were not obligated to the full Torah, but only to the universal prohibitions in the Torah found in Leviticus 17-18 given to both native-born Jews and believing Gentiles who aligned with them and believed in Adonai, the God of Israel. Paul then carried out the requirements of the Nazirite vow, including ritual sacrifice. In so doing, he was spotted by Jews from Asia. They were in Jerusalem for *Shavuot*/Pentecost, just as Paul had indicated his desire to go to Jerusalem for the feast, which apparently he had successfully done. Those men must have recognized Paul from his interactions with the Jewish communities of Asia on his journeys.
- v. 28 – The charges they made against him were without merit:
- He preaches against the Jewish people. But in Romans 9:3 his heart for them is clear: “For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.”
 - He preaches against the Law and the temple. But there was no evidence to that claim.
 - He defiled the temple by bringing Greeks into it, which was a violation of the Law. The charge was based on seeing Paul in Jerusalem with a Greek believer named Trophimus, and assuming that meant Paul brought him into the Temple. But it is foolish to assume

that Paul would ever put someone at risk for that particular violation that would result in capital punishment.

The irony about these charges was that he was completing the Nazirite vow in order to demonstrate his faithfulness to Torah to the Messianic community, but he was charged with rejecting and violating the Torah by non-believing Jews.

- v. 30 – Paul was taken violently by a mob of people who should have been focused on worshipping Adonai at Shavuot. But the depth of their sinfulness is reflected in their intent of killing him. That serves as another reminder that you can be religious and at the same time filled with sinful unrighteousness.

21:31-40

A report about the riot reached the commander of the Roman cohort (a thousand soldiers). The Romans then had to ascertain what was happening. They determined that Paul was somehow involved and, as a precaution, they had him bound with chains. That act was the fulfillment of the prophecy of Agabus in verse 11. And the similarities to the arrest of Yeshua are also great. But unlike Yeshua, Paul sought permission to speak in defense to the Jewish crowd at the temple, and that was granted by the commander.

22:1-21

Paul's message to the Jewish audience was his personal testimony:

- vv 2-3 – He showed how his background was fully Jewish in terms of speaking Hebrew, his physical heritage, education and dedication to the Law. He revealed that he had been taught by Gamaliel about the Torah. As we learned from chapter 5, Gamaliel was called a “teacher of the Torah.” That means he was someone who was so highly learned in the Torah, that he could give expert opinion on theological matters, and his opinion would carry much weight in decisions. Gamaliel had the respect of the Sanhedrin and he advised them not to punish the Messianic believers, and they listened. But in this case, Paul, who had the same perspective on the Torah, admitted he took a different approach. He was so zealous for the Torah that he acted without grace and sought to impose his position on everyone who disagreed. Paul phrased it as being “strictly according to the Law of our fathers.” That phrase is an indicator that the Torah had become institutionalized and codified according to the traditions of men. Yeshua used a similar term—“the tradition of the elders” (Mat 15:2). So Paul was emphasizing the dysfunctional transformation of the Torah (lit. “instruction”) of Moses into the Law of the fathers.
- vv 4-5 – Then he showed how his zeal for the Law of our fathers led to him persecuting the people of the Way. He said in v. 3 that his audience shared that same zeal, and by implication, the same inclination toward persecution as they were doing to him. This illustrates how zealousness can lead people to do harmful things to others. You can be so convinced of your rightness and the need to defend it, that you will resort to violent and damaging means to purify a community from perceived deviants.
- vv 6-16 – He recounted his transformation into a believer and disciple of Yeshua, and it parallels the text of chapter 9.
- vv 17-21 – Here we are given information that was not previously disclosed. After Paul's Damascus road experience, when he returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, he fell

into a trance. The Greek word is *ekstasis*, which literally means “an amazement of the mind.” It is the same word used to describe Peter’s experience with the vision of unclean animals in chapter 10 when God showed him that Gentiles should not be considered unclean. In this case, God showed Paul that he was being called to take the message of salvation to the Gentiles. These are the only two times in the New Testament that individuals were sent into a trance by God. These callings were so outside the way of thinking that was prevalent in the Jewish culture of that day, that it was necessary to communicate God’s message in a dramatic way. Merely searching the Scriptures or hearing someone else tell them would not shake them from their abhorrence of Gentiles and the inability to perceive God ever loving them. Both Peter and Paul needed an experience that would totally “amaze their minds.”

22:22-30

- v. 22 – But the Jewish crowd that was mired in the widespread state of intolerance of Gentiles, and had not received divine intervention, reacted in an understandable way. They called for Paul’s death.
- v. 23 – They began to riot, and that was never something the Romans would tolerate.
- v. 24 – But the simple, solution, in the Roman manner, was to compel people to give the information they desired through physical violence. So they prepared to scourge or to flog Paul, meaning they would strike him with whips that had pieces of metal and bone tied to the end of leather straps. The blows would tear away pieces of skin and cause much bleeding. This form of punishment could readily produce the desired confession. But it could also cripple or kill the person, so it was only used on non-citizens of Rome. And the Roman officers assumed that Paul was a common Jew without Roman citizenship.
- v. 25 – That is why Paul brought his citizenship to the attention of the centurion who was about to supervise the scourging.
- v. 28 – There were three ways a person became a citizen in the Roman empire:
 - By birth in a city of the original Roman Republic centered around modern-day Italy, or in free cities in surrounding lands that aligned with Rome during various civil wars and were rewarded for their loyalty with the right to enact their own laws and the privileges of Roman citizenship. Since Paul’ was born in one of those free cities—Tarsus in the province of Cilicia in modern-day Turkey—he had the rights of citizenship.
 - Starting in the mid-forties of the first century A.D., under the reign of the emperor Claudius, some people born outside of free cities could purchase citizenship. Here in this passage, we see that was the case for the commander of the cohort.
 - A lifetime of service (minimum of 25 years) in the Roman army could also lead to citizenship.

But the commander still had to resolve the social problem in the city of Jerusalem because the anger among the Jews still persisted. So the next day he ordered a formal hearing regarding the issue.