

# PAUL'S LIFE AND TEACHINGS

## *Lesson 25*

### Paul's Arrest

As a trial lawyer, I spend a good bit of time in America's courtrooms. While most of my work is not criminal work (I generally prosecute civil wrongs), I have a good measure of exposure to criminal proceedings.

Every criminal situation is different, but there is one consistency that always seems present—the accused wants an acquittal. Most every person facing prosecution is looking for the way to find freedom. Most every time a defendant testifies in court, it is in an effort to be set free.

Today, we study Paul's arrest in Jerusalem that followed his third missionary journey. Reading the account, one thing that strikes me as a lawyer is that Paul never makes an effort to gain his freedom. Paul's speeches are geared toward converting people to Jesus rather than gaining his own release. The study of Paul's arrest and its immediate aftermath is our focus today. Most of this material comes from Luke's history recorded in Acts 21 through 23.

#### PRELUDE TO ARREST

We finished the last lesson with Paul, Luke and others in Caesarea on their way to Jerusalem with the Gentile contributions for the church there. After staying for a week with Philip the Evangelist, the team went up to Jerusalem, some 60 miles inland.

The reception in Jerusalem was warm. We do not know the time of arrival, but Paul and his team waited until the next day to meet with James and the elders. Before going further, we should pause and consider the scene for a moment. First, the James that Paul met was the brother of Jesus, the author of the Epistle of James and the head of the Jerusalem church. Scholars generally agree on these points although they differ on whether this James was of birth descent from Mary and Joseph. This is a different James than the apostle James, brother of John and son of Zebedee. Contemporaries also called the James that Paul met James the Just. He was subsequently martyred for his faith.

Along with James were the elders of the Jerusalem church. These elders and James were mentioned earlier in Acts 15 when the church wrote the letter to the Gentile converts about issues of fellowship and purity. The difference between the Acts 15 letter and Paul's visit is slight, but noteworthy. In Acts 15, we read,

The apostles and elders were gathered together (Acts 15:6).

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While here in Acts 21 Luke writes,

James, and all the elders were present (Acts 21:18).

Where were the apostles? Are we to believe Paul came in town and the apostles failed to show up for the fellowship and planning session? Of course not! As Bruce notes, “From the absence of all mention of the Twelve, it is safe to infer that none of them was in Jerusalem at this time.”<sup>1</sup>

Where were the Twelve? We find insight on this from other writings of church history. About 100-150 A.D., a work called the *Preaching of Peter* was written. While we do not have that work still today, we have a selection of it quoted by Clement of Alexandria<sup>2</sup> where he states:

Peter says that the Lord said to the apostles: “If anyone of Israel, then, wishes to repent, and by name to believe in God, his sins shall be forgiven him. And after twelve years, go forth into the world, that no one may say, ‘We have not heard.’”<sup>3</sup>

Whether this accurately conveys something Jesus told Peter, we do not know. But even if the statement is apocryphal, it is important as an indication that the twelve left Jerusalem to go to the mission field (Jesus *did* tell them to “go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” that “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” Mk 16:15-16). That the apostles should follow the Lord’s instruction is expected. History notes they did so after a twelve-year time establishing the church in Jerusalem and the surrounding area.

This tradition continued strong in church history as told us by Eusebius (c260 – c340).<sup>4</sup> Eusebius references an earlier Christian writer Apollonius of Ephesus (who wrote between 180 and 210) when writing:

He speaks, moreover, of a tradition that the Savior commanded his apostles not to depart from Jerusalem for twelve years.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Eerdmans 1951) at 391.

<sup>2</sup> We do not know Clement’s birth. He died around 205 A.D. For more on Clement see the Church History Literacy lesson 15 found at: [http://www.biblical-literacy.com/lessons/CHL/Handouts/CHL15-Alexandria\\_%20and\\_Early\\_Biblical\\_Understanding.pdf](http://www.biblical-literacy.com/lessons/CHL/Handouts/CHL15-Alexandria_%20and_Early_Biblical_Understanding.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Clement, *The Stromata*, Bk 6, Ch 5.

<sup>4</sup> See Church History Literacy lesson 20 at <http://www.biblical-literacy.com/lessons/CHL/Handouts/CHL20-Eusebius.pdf>.

Again, this is not a certainty, for it is not told us in scripture. Scripture does tell us that Jesus told his apostles, “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 1:4). The Eusebius statement may be nothing more than an apocryphal explanation behind an event. But the point is the event—the twelve evidently left Jerusalem after twelve years to evangelize in the world. This timing is consistent with Paul’s return here in Acts 21 and the absence of the apostles (We are over twenty years since Jesus’ ascension into heaven).

Paul meets with the elders and James and gives a full report on all that had happened in the mission field among the Gentiles. We can easily see Luke taking notes as he hears more details about what happened to Paul during those times that Luke was not there. As Paul recounted God’s hand among the Ephesians, the sons of Sceva trying to cast out demons in the name of Jesus, the stories of Priscilla and Aquila, the efforts of Apollos, the letter exchange with the Corinthians as Paul worked to bring holiness to their congregation, and more.

When James and the elders heard these stories, they glorified God, understanding that his hand was at work among the Gentiles. The focus of the meeting then turned to the thousands of “believing” or “Messianic” Jews in Jerusalem. These Jews were being told that Paul was teaching Jews outside Judea to forsake the Law of Moses, not to circumcise their sons, and not to follow the Jewish customs. Clearly that was not Paul’s work out in the mission field. In fact, Paul was perfectly content for Jews who believed in Jesus to continue otherwise as they were, so long as they remembered that Jesus had made the only sin-offering that counted and that salvation was by God’s grace through trusting in Jesus, not because of being a Jew or by keeping God’s laws well enough personally (Rom. 14:5-7; Gal. 1:6-9; 6:14-16). So the problem was not what Paul taught, but how to get the word out to the believing Jews in Jerusalem. The elders and James decided that Paul should join forces with four men who had taken a Nazarite vow in a way that showed Paul took his Jewish heritage seriously.

The Nazarite vow was based on the instructions in Numbers 6:2ff. There, God instructed Moses that those who took a Nazarite vow were to abstain from wine, strong drink, or even grape juice, grapes, or raisins. The hair was to remain uncut; and the person with the vow is to avoid contact with any dead person. Jewish tradition imposed these vows for a period of 30 days, unless the person taking the vow specified a different time period.<sup>6</sup> Once the time of the vow was over, the

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<sup>5</sup> Eusebius, *History of the Church*, Bk 5, Ch 18.

<sup>6</sup> “A Nazarite vow for an unspecified period of time is [to apply] for thirty days.” Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: a New Translation* (Yale University Press 1988) at 440 (*Nazir* 6:3).

person was to shave his heads and purify himself before the Jewish Temple authorities.

Paul was told to join efforts with these men in the rite including paying their expenses associated with it. Paul would thus show the community his own willingness to honor the historic laws of Moses. At this point, Paul (without the Gentile Luke, for the “we” verses have changed to “he” and “they”) proceeded as planned. The result, however, was not quite as planned!

### THE RIOT

While Paul was in the Temple, some Jews from Asia (Ephesus and the surrounding areas) recognized Paul and stirred up the Jews against him. They began telling as many as they could that Paul had gone all over teaching against the Temple and the Law of Moses. They also (falsely) stated that Paul had defiled the Temple by bringing Gentiles into the holy areas where they were not allowed.

The Temple had an outer court that allowed Gentiles, but Gentiles were not allowed into the inner court. The first century Jewish historian Josephus (born 37 A.D., died after 100) recorded that there was a notice at the foot of the stairs into the inner court expressing in Greek that no one but Jews could go further.<sup>7</sup> Josephus further recorded that even a Roman could be sentenced to death for violating this law.<sup>8</sup>

We can find a Greek inscribed warning uncovered by archaeologist C. S. Clermont-Ganneau in the Istanbul Archaeology Museum, a photo of which is below. The Greek reads:

“μηθένα ἄλλογενῶ ἐμπορεύεσθαι ἔντις τοῦ περὶ τῶ ἱερῶν τρυφάκτου  
καπεριβόλου ἃς δ’ ἄνληφθῶ ἑαυτῶ ἀπίος ἔσται διὰ τῶ ἀξακολουθεῖν  
θάνατον.

K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman translate the warning as follows:

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<sup>7</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War* Bk 6 Ch2:4 quotes the Roman Titus saying, “Have not you, vile wretches that you are, by our permission, put up this partition-wall before your sanctuary? Have not you been allowed...to engrave in Greek...this prohibition, that no foreigner should go beyond that wall?” Josephus continues, “Have we not given you leave to kill such as go beyond it, though he were a Roman?” Trans. William Whitson.

<sup>8</sup> See footnote 7.

“No outsider shall enter the protective enclosure around the sanctuary. And whoever is caught will only have himself to blame for the ensuing death.”<sup>9</sup>



The accusations against Paul quickly burned through the Jews in the city and a mob scene ensued. Paul was grabbed and pulled from the Temple. The Temple gates were shut and the people prepared to kill Paul.

### **PAUL'S ARREST**

Word of the riot reached the Roman tribune and he grabbed several hundred soldiers with their centurion leaders and intervened. The tribune had Paul seized and chained. The tribune tried to find out what Paul had done, but the crowd's roaring was such that he could never understand a clear answer. The tribune was sending Paul to the barracks and away from the crowd for further questioning when Paul spoke to the tribune in Greek.

The tribune was shocked to hear Paul speak in Greek. He thought Paul was Egyptian. The tribune asked Paul, “Do you know Greek? Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?”

Josephus wrote of this Egyptian as a man who came to Jerusalem claiming to be a prophet who led thousands to the Mount of Olives as part of a plan to capture the city of Jerusalem. While the Roman authorities killed many of the rebels, the

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<sup>9</sup> Hanson, K. C., and Douglas E. Oakman. Palestine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.

Egyptian instigator apparently escaped.<sup>10</sup> Josephus dates this around 54 A.D. which means it was near the time Paul was in Jerusalem.

Paul explained that he was not the wanted man. Paul was from Tarsus, the opposite direction of Egypt and was even a citizen of Tarsus. Paul requested permission from the tribune to address the mob that was still assembled. The tribune consented.

Paul hushed the crowd by extending his hand ready to speak. When Paul spoke, he did so in Aramaic, the local tongue of the Hebrew people. Paul gave the assembled people an account of his life, his conversion, and his ministry since that fateful day. The account is one of three that Luke gives us in Acts. Each of the three is consistent in its history, but we see Paul changing the emphasis in each to fit his audience. For example, here Paul emphasizes not the Greek origins in his life, but the Hebrew aspects. It is as if Paul's life were a two-sided coin. At times, he emphasized the description of the head's side; other times he emphasized the tail's side.

Paul begins his speech with the statement, "Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you" (Acts 22:1). It is no coincidence that Paul begins his speech with the exact same address and words that Stephen did in Acts 7:2. Here in Jerusalem, where Stephen had testified to the saving grace of Jesus before Paul and others several decades earlier stands Paul. Now, Paul is no longer a young man holding the coat of the accusers while they stone Stephen. Paul is the accused, holding the same testimony of the martyr Stephen. This must have echoed somewhere in Paul's mind because Paul puts into his speech the truth of his persecuting the church to the point of death as well as holding the garments of Stephen's killers.

Paul's "defense" is not even fairly called a defense. For Paul's purpose here was not to win his liberty; Paul's purpose was to win people to Christ. Paul might have thought himself the perfect preacher to the Jews. Paul was a Hebrew of Hebrews who had studied under Gamaliel, the most recognized rabbi in Jerusalem. Paul certainly gave it his all as he attempted to proclaim the truth of the gospel.

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<sup>10</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Bk 2 Ch 13:5, "But there was an Egyptian false prophet that did the Jews more mischief than the former; for he was a cheat, and pretended to be a prophet also, and got together 30,000 men that were deluded by him; these he led around from the wilderness to the mount which was called the Mount of Olives, and was ready to break into Jerusalem by force from that place...The Egyptian ran away, with a few others, while the greatest part of those that were with him were either destroyed or taken alive." Of interest, the tribune references the story as if the Egyptian led 4,000 men. Josephus has the count at 30,000. Most scholars agree the number must have been 4,000. The error by Josephus makes sense when we realize the Greek for 4,000 (Δ) is very similar to the Greek for 30,000 (dara Λ).

Once Paul mentioned that God had designed to send him to the Gentiles, the Jewish crowd got riled up again on the issue of Paul defiling the temple with Gentiles. They began shouting again emphasizing their point by throwing dust.

The tribune again intervened and ordered Paul flogged to determine what the story was (No doubt the tribune could not understand Paul's speech that was in Aramaic). Right before the flogging began, as Paul was stretched out, Paul asked a centurion nearby whether they could flog a Roman citizen. The centurion stopped the proceeding immediately and went straight way to the tribune. When the tribune was told Paul was a Roman citizen, the tribune came to Paul and questioned him on the issue.

We should note here, that this flogging was different than the lashes Paul had received in synagogues earlier. A Roman flogging was a torture technique. It was done with a *flagellum*, a leather whip that had bones and metal built into it. The process killed many and left others maimed.<sup>11</sup>

It was illegal for the tribune to have Paul flogged and so he stopped the torture before it started. The tribune discussed his citizenship with Paul as one that cost the tribune a tidy sum. Many scholars think that perhaps the tribune was sarcastically suggesting that times must have changed if someone like Paul was able to buy citizenship. No doubt Paul did look pathetic having been manhandled and abused for the last few hours. Paul responded to the tribune that rather than buy his citizenship, Paul was born into it. That was impressive to anyone in the day. The tribune was left in fear over what had already happened to Paul while in custody.

The following day, the tribune took another tack to figuring out Paul and his story. The tribune called a gathering of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, and took Paul. This would allow judgment of Paul in a way that did not violate Paul's rights as a Roman citizen. Paul was before the Sanhedrin, the chief priest, and the council. Looking at them intently, Paul began explaining his position.

Paul began by setting forth his own clear conscience for the way he had lived. At this, the High Priest Ananias ordered those near Paul to slap him across the face. Such an order, even from the High Priest, violated Jewish law, which prohibited punishment until one was proven guilty. Paul called out the High Priest (not

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<sup>11</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: Acts* (Eerdmans 1988) at 420.

knowing that he was in fact High Priest) exclaiming, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall!”<sup>12</sup>

Paul is reprimanded for speaking ill of the High Priest and he apologizes, explaining that he was unaware of who had spoken. Paul then shifted his appeal to the group. Paul realized that both Pharisees and Sadducees made up the Sanhedrin. Paul then appealed to his own beliefs as a Pharisee, adding that he was at least a second generation Pharisee. Paul pointed out that at the crux of his faith was the resurrection of the dead (Jesus as the first of many!) The issue of resurrection was a core difference between Sadducees and Pharisees and it was as if Paul lit a tinderbox.

The Pharisees came to Paul’s defense believing the Sadducees had no right to assume it impossible that a spirit or angel might speak to Paul. The ensuing ruckus frustrated any hope the tribune had of getting resolution. So, he pulled Paul away again by force and put Paul into the Roman barracks.

That night, as Paul was in Roman custody, God came to him in a special way. Luke writes, “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).

Next week, we will continue to consider Paul’s defense before the Roman authorities.

### **POINTS FOR HOME**

1. “They have been told that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses” (Acts 21:22).

Paul did not teach the Jews to forsake the Law, but neither did he teach them that following the law was a way to earn God’s approval and salvation. Paul understood and taught that man was “saved by grace through faith and not by works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). Yet, that was not to say that Paul taught full disregard of the law as an irrelevancy. On issues of morality (sexual purity, honesty, love of others), Paul taught Jew and Gentile alike to live holy and pure. On issues of culture (food, special days, etc.), Paul taught to live consistent with one’s conscience before God. This is our chore as well. We are to follow God’s

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<sup>12</sup> Paul was prophetic in this. Jews assassinated Ananias in the revolt of 66 because of pro-Roman policies. He was caught hiding under an aqueduct! (See Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Bk 2, Ch 18:9).

commands, knowing they are not lightly given. But we are not to find ourselves bound to the cultural codes that expressed the heart of God to a different day and age. Rather than offer absolutes here, we would urge everyone to study and take good counsel with prayer before God for wisdom.

2. “Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them” (Acts 21:26).

Here, we find Paul submitting to his church leadership as well as Jewish ceremonial law in an effort to better take care of his ministry and testimony. This is classic Paul practicing what he preached. Paul would not only write to others to be a Jew to Jews and a Greek to Greeks. Paul wanted nothing to stand in the way of his effective proclamation of the gospel. (1 Cor. 9:20-21). Do we set our own preferences and desires before the ministry we have to others? We face these issues especially in worship services where some want A and others B. Some have peculiar desires for certain songs or types of prayers. There is freedom in Christ, yet we have to always be most sensitive to our ministry to others.

3. “The Lord stood by him and said, ‘Take courage...you must testify also in Rome’” (Acts 23:11).

This needs to be two points for home! First, the Lord stood by Paul. That itself is a month of sermons! When we are beaten, worn out, hitting a brick wall, faced with troubles that are huge, we need to remember, whether we “see it” or not, the Lord will stand by us. That must be our confidence of faith. Knowing it, we must conscientiously decide we will not seek to go outside his will and find another place to stand!

Second, God gave Paul the message Paul needed to hear. Paul had hoped he would go to Rome; it was his hope for years! (Rom. 15:23-24). How wonderful when our hopes and plans line up with God’s call on our lives. Surely that is the reason Jesus taught his followers to pray for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Again though, as with the Lord standing by us in times of difficulty, our challenge is to align our hearts with the will of God!