

The Beginning of the End

Acts 21:18-36

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We have covered a lot of ground as we've gone through the book of Acts so far. It began with Jesus instructing His disciples to wait in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit came upon them. Once the Holy Spirit came, the church began to grow by leaps and bounds. It started in Jerusalem, then expanded into the neighboring areas. Eventually, God even caused Gentiles to come to faith in Christ through Peter, which marked an entirely new chapter of the church.

After Paul was converted on the road to Damascus, the church continued to grow and spread, even in Gentile areas. Eventually, Paul and Barnabas set out on the first missionary journey, bringing the message to people who had never heard the name of Jesus before. We've been tracing Paul's travels throughout his three missionary journeys, and the last couple of weeks have seen Paul preparing for the next challenge he would face. The remainder of the book of Acts focuses on the conclusion of this arc of Paul's story, beginning with his arrest in Jerusalem (which we will see today) and putting him before several leaders in high places, ultimately bringing him to Rome to stand trial before Caesar himself.

Now, before you get too excited thinking that we're almost done with the book of Acts, I should warn you, Paul's journey takes many twists and turns along the way. The next several chapters of Acts take place over the course of several years, so there's a lot of ground to cover. Needless to say, we're going to be studying Acts for a few more months. But today, we start the final chapter of Paul's story in Acts.

The Jerusalem Church

Last week, we looked at the prophecies given to Paul about being arrested in Jerusalem. None of this was new information to Paul. The Holy Spirit had been telling him the same thing for quite some time. I also believe the Holy Spirit had told him that despite the trials that lay ahead, Paul should continue to Jerusalem. So, even though it made no sense to his friends, Paul marched resolutely toward the city, knowing that at some point, he would end up in prison.

When he and his traveling companions from the Gentile churches, accompanied by a contingent of believers from the church in Caesarea, arrived in Jerusalem, they were initially greeted warmly. The next day, the real work began.

¹⁸ The next day Paul went with us to meet with James, and all the elders of the Jerusalem church were present. ¹⁹ After greeting them, Paul gave a detailed account of the things God had accomplished among the Gentiles through his ministry.

²⁰ After hearing this, they praised God. And then they said, "You know, dear brother, how many thousands of Jews have also believed, and they all follow the

law of Moses very seriously.²¹ But the Jewish believers here in Jerusalem have been told that you are teaching all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn their backs on the laws of Moses. They've heard that you teach them not to circumcise their children or follow other Jewish customs.²² What should we do? They will certainly hear that you have come. (Acts 21:18-22, NLT)

Paul and his crew went to meet with the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. At this point, all the original apostles had departed Jerusalem to share the gospel in other lands, much as Paul had done. The last time we saw the Jerusalem church in Acts 15, Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and possibly some of the other apostles spoke, and then James, Jesus' brother, suggested the plan to send a letter to the Gentile Christians letting them know that they did not need to follow all the Jewish laws, but should still be respectful of Jewish practices. The compromise formed the basis of the church's practice to this point.

Now James was the primary leader of the church in Jerusalem, but there was also a group of elders who helped to lead it as well. When they heard that Paul was arriving, the whole group of elders (some people think it may have been as many as 70 people, mirroring the Jewish Sanhedrin) gathered to hear from Paul

Presumably, Paul not only told them about what God had been doing in these Gentile lands, but also presented them with the offering from the Gentile churches. Initially, it seemed like it was going to be a wonderful reunion, because Luke says the elders praised God after Paul's report. But they quickly turned to their own agenda.

The elders were concerned. You see, they explained, their church had been growing as well. Many Jews had joined their ranks, and the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were very zealous for the law. They had heard Paul was teaching the Jews in these other places to abandon the law entirely and this was a major problem.

We should note a few things about the church's statement. **First, this wasn't true.** We have no evidence that Paul was telling believing Jews not to circumcise their children or follow other Jewish customs. Paul was adamant that these things could not save anyone, but he never told Jewish Christians to not to be circumcised. After all, Paul had Timothy circumcised and had even participated in some Jewish rituals himself during his time abroad. These charges were a distortion of Paul's teaching.

Second, Jerusalem was a volatile place at this time. We know from extrabiblical historians like Josephus that this time (56-57 AD) was marked by increasing violence in Jerusalem. There were several Jewish factions that had decided it was time to rebel against Roman rule and stand up for Israel. The Roman governor put down these rebellions violently, which had incited further rage amongst the Jews. There was an increasing sense of nationalism among the Jerusalem Jews, so they had a very "us vs. them" mentality. Anyone who they saw as opposing the nation of Israel and its traditions was a traitor and should be dealt with sharply. When you add to that the famine that

was in the land, there was desperation and anger all around. The Jerusalem church was understandably concerned that these revolutionaries would not take kindly to Paul.

Third, the Jerusalem church could have helped the problem, but didn't. It seems that the leaders in Jerusalem had not taken a firm stand on this issue. They could have done some research for themselves and discovered that Paul was simply teaching what they had all agreed was right. They could have tried to help the people who insisted on the necessity of following the law see that the law should no longer be the emphasis that it had once been. They could have told those who spoke ill of Paul that they were distorting his teachings and tried to correct them. But taking these stands would have been risky, difficult, and messy. And, it might have decreased the attendance and participation in the church that was just beginning to gain a foothold. I think the early church dropped the ball here by refusing to take a stand. Rather than standing up to those who shouted most loudly, they kept quiet and tried not to offend them.

The Solution

After presenting the dangers of the current situation to Paul they asked a question, "What should we do?" Luke gives us the sense that this was a rhetorical question, because the very next words he records give their prescription.

²³ "Here's what we want you to do. We have four men here who have completed their vow. ²⁴ Go with them to the Temple and join them in the purification ceremony, paying for them to have their heads ritually shaved. Then everyone will know that the rumors are all false and that you yourself observe the Jewish laws.

²⁵ "As for the Gentile believers, they should do what we already told them in a letter: They should abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality." (Acts 21:23-25, NLT)

The solution put forth by the elders in Jerusalem was that Paul should show the people there that he was still a "good Jew". They requested that Paul participate in a purification ceremony with four men who had completed a vow. Furthermore, they asked Paul to cover the expenses for this offering.

There is great debate over whether Paul should have gone along with this course of action or not. Part of the reason there is debate is because Luke doesn't tell us the exact nature of this vow and purification ceremony. Most have assumed this was a Nazirite vow, which was spelled out in the Old Testament law. In a Nazirite vow a person would set themselves apart for the Lord for a period of time. During that time, they were not to cut their hair, among other things. At the conclusion of the vow, they would shave their heads and offer the hair to the Lord along with a purification offering. The problem with this view is that the minimum length of time for this kind of vow was 30 days. Paul was expected to participate in the ritual in 7 days' time.

A more likely solution was that Paul's vow was a slightly modified version of the Nazirite vow that devout Jews would undertake after spending time in Gentile lands. When they returned home, they would shave their heads and offer sacrifices as a way of purifying themselves from the defilement of the Gentile lands. Paul himself may have participated in just such a vow in Acts 18.

The question many have asked was whether it was sinful for Paul to have participated in such a ritual. After all, if a sacrifice for sin was being made, then wouldn't that be saying that Christ's sacrifice wasn't sufficient? If Paul participated in a ceremony to be purified from defilement by the Gentiles wouldn't that negate the notion that God had made the Gentile believers one with the Jewish believers?

These are compelling questions...that the Bible doesn't answer clearly for us. Since we don't have all the details, we should probably withhold judgment. I would like to think that Paul thought carefully about these same questions before he agreed to this course of action. What is fairly clear, however, is why Paul agreed to do so. He wanted to see the church unified under one banner: Christ. Paul was willing to be inconvenienced by paying for these men's vows and participating in the ritual if it would help preserve the unity of the church and serve as a bridge to the Jews who had not yet believed. Paul was not concerned with his rights, but with what would be best for the body of Christ in the long-term. Regardless of whether we think Paul made the right decision, I think he certainly had the right heart.

The Fallout

Despite all the church's machinations to ensure that they could smooth things over with the Jews, it didn't work.

²⁷ The seven days were almost ended when some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul in the Temple and roused a mob against him. They grabbed him,

²⁸ yelling, "Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who preaches against our people everywhere and tells everybody to disobey the Jewish laws. He speaks against the Temple—and even defiles this holy place by bringing in Gentiles."

²⁹ (For earlier that day they had seen him in the city with Trophimus, a Gentile from Ephesus, and they assumed Paul had taken him into the Temple.)

³⁰ The whole city was rocked by these accusations, and a great riot followed. Paul was grabbed and dragged out of the Temple, and immediately the gates were closed behind him. ³¹ As they were trying to kill him, word reached the commander of the Roman regiment that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. ³² He immediately called out his soldiers and officers and ran down among the crowd. When the mob saw the commander and the troops coming, they stopped beating Paul.

³³ Then the commander arrested him and ordered him bound with two chains. He asked the crowd who he was and what he had done. ³⁴ Some shouted one thing and some another. Since he couldn't find out the truth in all the uproar and confusion, he ordered that Paul be taken to the fortress. ³⁵ As Paul reached the

stairs, the mob grew so violent the soldiers had to lift him to their shoulders to protect him.³⁶ And the crowd followed behind, shouting, “Kill him, kill him!” (Acts 21:27-36, NLT)

When Paul had just about completed the term of his vow, some Jews from the province of Asia (where Ephesus was) saw Paul in the temple and incited a riot. Most people assume these men were from Ephesus and therefore well-acquainted with Paul, because they had recognized Trophimus, who was from Ephesus as well. It was these Jews from Asia, who had probably returned for the Feast of Pentecost, who started making accusations against Paul.

The accusations were unfounded, of course. They claimed he was telling people everywhere to disobey the Jewish laws (a distortion of Paul’s teaching). They claimed he spoke against the temple (also a distortion). And worst, that he had even brought a Gentile into the temple (a completely false statement since they had seen Paul with a Gentile and incorrectly assumed he had brought him into the temple.)

These charges incensed the people at the temple. In the temple courts, there were signs between the court of Gentiles and the rest of the temple that said that no Gentile should pass through these gates “on pain of death.” Since these men claimed Paul had violated this law and the situation in Jerusalem was already a powder keg of animosity, the reaction was swift and severe. There was no trial, there was no questioning whether the charges were true, there was just violence. They seized Paul, dragged him out of the temple courts, and began beating him. The temple guards closed the gates behind the crowd so the riot wouldn’t spill into the temple courts.

Ironically, the hero of this story is the Roman commander, who we later learn was named Claudius Lysias. Right next to the temple was the Antonia Fortress, where a large garrison of Roman soldiers were stationed. When the Romans heard the uprising, they immediately dispatched a detachment of soldiers to investigate and calm things down. Since the text tells us the commander dispatched soldiers and officers (centurions, who commanded 100 troops each), we can assume that at least 200 soldiers descended on the scene.

When they arrived, the people stopped beating Paul. They knew the Romans would not hesitate to use deadly force to stop the riot. The commander took Paul into protective custody (fulfilling prophecy) and tried to figure out what was going on. But the crowd was so unruly and disorganized that he couldn’t get a clear answer. So he decided to take Paul away to the fortress. The crowd, which now had a bloodlust for Paul, feared he would escape their judgment and became violent once more, shouting “kill him” over and over again. The soldiers had to form a human shield around Paul and carry him on their shoulders just to make sure the crowd couldn’t kill him before they could figure out what the truth really was.

Conclusion

And that's where we're going to leave the story this week. Next week, we'll see how Paul responded to the entire situation. His response shows us a great deal about his own heart and some wisdom about how to respond to people hostile to the gospel. But today, we want to draw some lessons from this part of the story.

First, people hostile to the gospel will attack us unfairly. It happened to Jesus, it happened to Paul, and Jesus said the same would happen to us. The temptation in those situations is to respond in kind or to resort to worldly tactics to prove ourselves right. That is rarely helpful. The best course of action is simply to be consistent in our faith. When people say things about you that are unfair or untrue, respond with consistency—do what's right, even when those attacking you aren't. Truth will ultimately win out in the end—even if it doesn't always seem that way in the short-term.

Second, we must be willing to do hard things. This problem could have been stopped if the church in Jerusalem had taken a stand. If they had pushed back against those who were telling lies, they might have been able to preserve unity. The same is true for us today. We have seen many so-called churches departing from the gospel of Jesus Christ in favor of being accepted by the world. While that may work in the short-term, it is an exercise in futility, and it abandons the truth. Admittedly, the church often fights and divides over things that don't really matter, but there are some things worth fighting about. We must never compromise on the nature of the gospel or the truth of scripture. We shouldn't be mean about these truths, but we should be firm. When we become weak or wishy-washy about the gospel, we allow these distortions to gain a foothold. We must stand on the truth, even if it means people ridicule us or call us names, if our numbers decrease, or if the world lashes out at us. When we confront false teaching, it is always better in the long run, even if it's easier to keep silent.

Finally, we should place a greater priority on gospel unity than on ourselves. In all of what happens in Acts, we see that Paul's biggest concern was not his own comfort or reputation or wealth. Paul was willing to sacrifice any of these personal things if it meant it would preserve unity. Paul was unwilling to allow personal preferences to become a barrier to the gospel. Oh that the modern church would learn this lesson! We should refuse to allow personal slights or our own preferences to rob us or others of the blessings God intends for us. Too many people sacrifice Christian unity because of petty gripes. We could all stand to take a page from Paul and remember that the gospel is far bigger, and more important, than us.

Paul has a long way to go before he gets to Rome. He will face hardship over and over again. There will be many twists and turns along the way, but one thing will remain consistent—Paul knew that wherever he was he had one purpose, and that was to represent Christ well. My hope is that we would have a similar attitude in every situation we encounter as well. When we keep our eyes on our goal and our purpose, the other things will take care of themselves.

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