

Learning from Paul's Witness

Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 21:37-22:21 / August 16, 2026

Introduction:

Our passage for today, in Acts 21:37-22:21, will focus almost entirely on the speech Paul gives to defend himself to those who mistreated and beat him in the temple. And how Paul chooses to defend himself speaks volumes to our hearts today. When studying speech material in narratives, understanding the main point comes from careful observation of how the stage is set and what the character communicates, especially in the beginning and end of the speech. Notice how Luke sets the stage. Look at verses 37-39, "As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, 'May I say something to you?' And he said, '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?' Paul replied, 'I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people.'" Before Paul entered into the barracks, he surprises the tribune by speaking in fluent and polite Greek, leading to a disclosure of why the commander arrested Paul. The historian, Josephus, told of an Egyptian Jew who claimed to be prophet around this time leading a large revolt against Rome. Thousands of men, known as dagger-men, because of how they secretly plunged daggers into pro-Roman enemies at large city gatherings, were taken to the Mount of Olives to wait for the walls of Jerusalem to fall and the messiah to come overthrow Rome. Instead, Felix arrived, killing hundreds and taking others captive, while the Egyptian prophet escaped. The arrested Paul in suspicion he was this man. Paul shares his birthplace; to not only prove he is no revolutionary, but gain favor from the commander. Tarsus rivaled Athens and Alexandria as an intellectual center of Roman life and honor was often given because of one's birthplace. Continue in Acts 21:40-22:3, "And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying: 'Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.' And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said:" Pause there. Paul opens by showing respect for Judaism, using the Hebrew dialect, which would have been Aramaic, and calling them "brothers and fathers." This quiets the crowd and note how Paul discloses his intent. This is more than a simple defense, as I. Howard Marshall notes, "This word [defense] does not simply mean the giving of reasoned answers to charges made in court; in the light of Jesus' words in Luke 12:11f.; 21:12-15 it also includes the concept of witness to him" (I. Howard Marshall, Acts: An Introduction and Commentary, p. 373). In other words, while Paul is answering the charges against him, his primary bears witness to Christ to call them to faith. This morning, I want to carefully observe Paul's defense to shape our own response and witness. Consider two things Paul relays. First,

The Acknowledgement of Guilt Coming from an Awareness of Glory

Notice how Paul opens by establishing common ground with his accusers. Look at verses 3-5, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished." Paul describes being born in Tarsus but raised in Jerusalem, studying under Gamaliel, a leading Pharisaic teacher, who taught him "according to the strict manner the law," making him just as zealous for God. Zeal that was evidenced by his persecution of followers of Jesus, which the high priest and council could attest to, who gave Paul permission to bind and bring defectors back to Jerusalem for punishment. Paul describes how far he had gone, personally identifies with their anger and zeal, to reveal how everything changed. Look at verses 6-11, "As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me.

And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And 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 understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.’ And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.” Consider several things Paul highlights from his experience. First, how a divine action stopped him. The description of this great heavenly light coming around noon may allude to God’s promised curse in Deuteronomy 28:28–29, where Moses said, “The Lord will strike you with madness and blindness and confusion of mind, and you shall grope at noonday.” This marks this moment as a divine rebuke, and Paul’s companions seeing the light confirms it happened. Second, how the voice identifies Himself as Jesus of Nazareth, confirming Jesus is the risen and ascended Christ. Third, how Paul’s persecution of Jesus’ followers is shown to be persecution of Jesus, Himself. Lastly, how Paul’s response, “What shall I do, Lord?”, acknowledges guilt and Jesus’ authority. Paul identified with them in every way up to highlight what changed his course. When he saw the glory of Jesus, he understood his own guilt, confessed Christ as Lord and asked how to obey. Next, we see,

The Relief of Atonement Leading to a Redirection of Life

Pay attention to how Paul’s language in verses 12-15. Look there with me, “And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing by me said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard.’” Ananias’ devotion to the law and character among the Jews, along with the immediate healing serve to solidify the God of Israel stands behind his words. Words that are laced with significance for any Jew with ears to hear. “God of our fathers” is what God told Moses to share with the people of Israel in Egypt. “Righteous One,” used by Peter in Acts 3 and Stephen in Acts 7, is specific a Jewish messianic title derived from Isaiah. And why did Paul see and hear Jesus? God had appointed him to be a witness for Jesus to all people. Paul indicates he and Ananias are servants of the Most High God, and Christianity is the fulfillment of God’s promises. Then, he shares what Ananias told him to do. Look at verse 16, “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.” Ananias’ call to “be baptized and wash away your sins” doesn’t mean atonement is found in baptism. The language stresses their connection to calling on Jesus’ name. As David Peterson says, “Baptism expresses repentance and faith because it is a means of calling on his name... Outward washing with water expresses the cleansing from sin that is proclaimed in the gospel and received by faith sacramentally in baptism” (David G Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 603). Notice how Paul immediately moves on in verses 17-21, “When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’ And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.’ And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’” Several things are worth noting as Paul describes this vision. First, the vision happened while praying in the temple, subtly showing Paul’s respect for the temple and establishing Christ as Lord of the temple. Second, after suggesting his testimony would be effective in Jerusalem because of the change from persecuting believers, even standing over Stephen’s stoning, to following Jesus, notice the greater purpose disclosed by Jesus. Paul’s witness would extend far beyond the walls of Jerusalem to reach the nations. Third, Paul aligns himself with Samuel and Isaiah were likewise commissioned by God in the temple. In fact, the commissioning closely mirrors Isaiahs in Isaiah 6:1-13. Both saw the Lord in the temple. Both receive a call to take God’s message to His people. And both were informed their message would be resisted.

Isaiah was called to speak to Israel in the city, Paul was called to find God's people among the Gentiles. This expressed God's sovereign will to bring Jew and Gentile alike to Himself. Consider the redirection of Paul's life. He went from being zealous for the purity of Judaism to extending God's mercy and grace to the hated Gentiles. His commissioning reveals it is the divine purpose of God to bring people from every nation, tongue and tribe close to Himself. And he subtly reveals what he says to Gentiles more pointedly in Ephesians 2:14-21, "[Christ] is our peace, who has made [both Jew and Gentile] one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord." In a way, I think Paul is saying, "God has chosen to lavish His grace on all people through His Son Jesus. Maybe we should be asking why this barricade even exist." He didn't need to defend whether he did or didn't bring a Greek into the temple, they needed to understand all people can be brought near to God by the blood of Jesus. With this, the speech concludes by their reaction, which we will cover next week. For today, consider what we can learn from Paul's defense. First,

1) We Can Learn from Paul's Witness

I was struck by the calm and courageous focus of Paul. Family, Paul didn't defend himself like we might do today. He didn't try to point out how he didn't take Trophimus into the temple. He didn't mention whether it was right or wrong that he was unjustly beaten by the crowds who didn't even appear to know what was going on. He didn't lob accusations back at his accusers. He calmly and courageously shared how Christ transformed his life, beautifully weaving the gospel into his story. He focused on his sin, shared the glory of Jesus, gave the response needed for forgiveness, and proclaimed how Christ redirected his life. These are the essential elements of any witness to Christ. Acknowledging guilt, declaring how we came to see Christ's glory, sharing the need to call on Jesus' for forgiveness, and describing how our lives have been transformed since. Sometimes, I think we struggle to witness because we make it more complicated than it is. We think we need the answers to every question or charge lobbed against the gospel. But we need to remember, it is not our responsibility to control the outcome. As Peter tells us in 1 Peter 3:15, your defense is sharing "a reason for the hope that is in you." Learn from Paul's witness and take the gospel to the world around you. Second,

2) We Can Learn from Paul's Experience

Paul's primary goal in his defense was to have his hearers respond to the call of Christ by seeing how Christ transformed him. Opening and closing with a detailed description of his persecution followers of Christ to the death discloses his sin to magnify the Lord's mercy. Saul of Tarsus could not have been farther from the grace of God in Christ. He imprisoned and beat believers, even standing over and approving the murder of Stephen. Yet, Christ met him with astounding mercy. As Tony Merida puts it, when Christ met him on the road to Damascus, "Paul was commissioned, not consumed" (Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts*, p. 342). Think about this. Rather than consuming Paul with a fiery vengeance for his sin, Jesus mercifully redeemed him, sending Ananias to heal Paul's blindness and beckon him to call on Jesus for forgiveness and cleansing. Listen to how Paul describes this mercy in 1 Timothy 1:15-16, "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life." Not only did Jesus redeem him, as the foremost of sinners, He makes Paul the display of His perfect patience to all who believe in Him.

Conclusion:

As the worship team comes for our time of response, learn from the experience of Paul. Has an awareness of the glory of Jesus has led you to acknowledge your sin and find the relief of the atonement Jesus provides? If not, know the grace and mercy of God available through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross Jesus. Know that the same Jesus who showed astounding mercy to Saul of Tarsus, who persecuted His people, will show mercy to you. Hear Him calling and find the forgiveness bought with the blood of Christ. If you are striving to follow Jesus but still feeling overwhelmed by the weight of your sin, hear Jesus calling you to find rest again in His overwhelming mercy. Know that if you confess your sin, He is faithful and just to forgive you and cleanse you from all unrighteousness. Know that when you sin, you have an advocate with the father, Jesus the Righteous One. No matter where you are this morning, respond to the call of Jesus to find the same mercy and grace Paul found. And then, let Christ redirect your life to live as a testimony to His grace and mercy. Would you pray with me as we prepare to respond?