

Denying Self to Follow Jesus

Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 21:17-36 / August 9, 2026

Introduction:

As we arrive with Paul in Jerusalem, Luke will slow down from verse 17 of chapter 21 to the end of chapter 23 to cover events spanning less than twelve days as Paul faces accusations, afflictions, arrests, and arraignments similar to what Jesus faced. The close correlation with Jesus' treatment moves us to carefully consider Mark 8:34-35, where Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." Jesus calls all of us to self-denying, cross-bearing discipleship. To walk a similar road as Him, sacrificing self-interest, comfort, and security as we lay down our lives for others. The similarities between Paul and Jesus' life remind us of this call. Yet, the differences show our path is not exactly the same path as Jesus, because our goal is not exactly the same. Jesus gave His life to provide atonement for our sin. We give our lives to point to display the purpose of that atonement. To redeem a people for Himself who love what He loves, serve how He serves, and go where He goes. And our passage today shines a light on that call, modeling how to deny self to follow Jesus through a testimony, example, and illustration. First, we see,

A Testimony of Rejoicing in God's Work

Consider how Luke sets the stage of this story. Look at verses 17-20, "When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God." Pause there. It's unclear whether the warm reception in Jerusalem is from all disciples in the church or just those gathered in Mnason's house. Either way, this reception is worth pondering. Paul arrived during a tense time in Jerusalem, likely around A.D. 56 or 57. Josephus describes this period having heightened Jewish nationalism and political unrest, with the Roman governor, Felix, brutally suppressing several insurrections. These things served to increase the hatred of Rome, and heightened suspicion and disapproval of Gentiles by the Jews. So, this warm reception of Paul and his Gentile companions was no small thing. Then, Paul relays story after story of God's work among the Gentiles to James and the Jerusalem elders. Imagine that moment as Paul shares each event, miracle, and salvation on his missionary journeys, while also presenting the collection from the Gentile churches. Then, note the result, "when they heard it, they glorified God." They could have been sceptical, jealous of Paul's success, or sad they needed help from these Gentiles. But they aren't. They rejoice in God's work. We can learn from this. Tony Merida comments, "At times it's difficult for some Christians to rejoice when God is working through someone else or through someone else's church. But that's an attitude from which the follower of Jesus must repent. We must take note of the united praise that takes place here in Jerusalem. When God is at work in other places, saving sinners by his amazing grace, it's always a reason to rejoice!" (Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts*, pp. 335-336). Family, when we hear of God working in other churches or ministries, do we rejoice? Or start comparing and wondering why we aren't seeing the same results? Part of denying self to follow Jesus is becoming primarily concerned about the increase of Christ's kingdom, not just our local expression of it. In 1 Corinthians 3:5-7, Paul reminds us we are all just servants of God, but it is "God who gives the growth." Could we rejoice in God's work like this, even among people we despised and had suspicions of? Second, we see,

An Example of Being a Servant to All

Some believe the elders in Jerusalem, and even Paul, may have sinned in the next part of the story, but I think that misses the beauty of what we see taking place. Notice the problem introduced in verses 20-21, "And they said to him, 'You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed.

They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.” By God’s grace, the gospel advanced among the Jews as well, as thousands had believed. The problem, though, was these Jews remained zealous for keeping the law and had concerns over rumors of Paul’s teaching related to it. Paul’s teaching may have led some Jews to find freedom in Christ to adjust their adherence of the law for the sake of fellowship with Gentiles, causing these rumors, but they ultimately were false. While Paul did teach Christ as fulfillment of the law and insisted that circumcision wasn’t necessary for salvation, there are no records of him ever teaching Jews to forsake Moses and not follow the law. Continue in verses 22-25, “What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.” Recognizing Paul’s presence could cause difficulty to gospel advancement, they encouraged him to help men complete their vows to show the substance of the rumors wasn’t true. Shaving their heads suggests these were Nazarite vows. Consider a few things. First, as Nazarite vows lasted thirty days, these men would have been nearing the end which concluded in a temple ceremony. Luke mentions only seven days in verse 27, so Paul probably did a special purification following a sojourn in Gentile territory to participate in the temple ceremony. Second, paying for their expenses not only shows his support but was also viewed as an act of piety. Third, and most importantly, repeating the decision from the Jerusalem council maintains the law as non-binding for salvation. As we saw in Acts 15, sacrificial food, blood, things strangled, and sexual immorality were all directly related to idol worship at the time, so abstaining from these things was a call to turn from idolatry, not adherence to the law. Concluding with this decision shows us this was not primarily a matter of the law but maintaining unity. The hope was this would quell the concerns to continue gospel advance. Notice Paul’s response in verse 26, “Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.” This presents the tension of our story. Why did Paul accommodate their request? Because unity and gospel advancement was Paul’s main concern. In Christ, Paul found freedom to observe the law when it didn’t harm gospel purity. We saw this in Acts 16, when Timothy, who was half Jewish, was circumcised. Yet, when Jews demanded Titus to be circumcised, Paul refused. The law could be followed when the intent wasn’t salvific. Consider Paul’s reasoning in 1 Corinthians 9:19-20, saying, “though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.” Paul chose to be a servant to all to win people to Christ. For the Jews, this meant observing the law, when possible, even though Paul knew it wasn’t necessary for purity. Note this example, family. Paul did whatever he could to spread the gospel, when it didn’t compromise it. The way he denied his liberties is an example to consider and follow. Are we willing to sacrifice our rights and liberties like this to save others? Will we show selfless, redeeming love? Or will we fight for rights and liberties at the expense of loving others? As Merida says, “When the gospel is our main thing—when we find our identity in Christ rather than in an ethnic group, social class, or particular culture—then we will be able to minister humbly and lovingly with Pauline flexibility.” (Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts*, p. 338). Let this example help you deny self to follow Jesus. Finally, we see,

An Illustration of the Way of the Cross

While we are wondering if this decision will prove effective, Luke immediately transitions to the next scene.

Notice the climax of this story in verse 27-29, “When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, ‘Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.’ For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple.” The text suggests Paul was entering the temple on the seventh day to complete his purification, ensuring we understand this scene in light of Paul’s accommodation. Do the charges sound familiar? They begin with the same charges Stephen faced in Acts 7, adding defiling the holy place with the presence of Gentiles. And we learn they stem from assumptions that Paul brought Trophimus, a Greek, into the temple. This wasn’t the temple proper, as Gentiles could enter the Court of Gentiles, but the inner courts separated by a four-and-a-half-foot stone barricade. Josephus describes multiple stone slabs warning foreigners from entering. One was found and read, “No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for what follows—death” (Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, p. 654). This reveals how serious this charge was. Yet, note the irony. Paul is accused of profaning the temple while completing a purification ritual, only days after adhering to the elder’s council. Follow the resolution, then, in verses 30-36, “Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains.” Pause there. Stirred into a commotion, crowds drag Paul out of the inner courts and shut the gates behind them. Then, “as they were seeking to kill him,” the tribune, or Roman commander, received word, rushed down with soldiers, and stopped everything. And note the result in verse 33, “Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains.” This is the fulfillment of Agabus’ prophecy, which actually helped Paul escape the same fate of death as Stephen and Jesus. Continue in verses 33-36, “He inquired who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, for the mob of the people followed, crying out, ‘Away with him!’” Just like the trial of Jesus, no one could agree on the charges against Paul. Then, he has to be carried into the barracks by the soldiers because of the crowd’s violence. And pay attention to the reason in verse 36, “for the mob of the people followed, crying out, ‘Away with him!’” Luke recorded this same response in Luke 23:18 at Jesus’ crucifixion, meaning to do away with and kill him. Consider how this illustrates the way of the cross. Paul had denied himself, sacrificing his liberties to quell the accusations against him. But, was it successful? Possibly within the Christian community, but certainly not among unbelieving Jews. Family, our efforts to be a servant of all will not always be met with warm fuzzy feelings. After the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Jewish Christianity was declared heretical and Christian Jews were removed from the Jewish community. Throughout church history, Christians have faced false accusations and persecutions, while being a sacrificial people. We don’t deny self to follow Jesus for our lives to be easier in the world. We do it to save some, knowing Christ, as the Suffering Servant, stands with us in the way of the cross. Note also how there is no hint of believers fighting back. As I look at evangelicalism today, I believe we’ve lost sight of this to our detriment. A large portion of professing Christians pride themselves in “fighting back,” and they are ugly in it. Frankly, we should be ashamed of this. It is not the way of the cross and we need to repent.

1 Peter 3:8-17 says, “Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. For ‘Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.’ Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.” Don’t gloss over those words. Is this how you respond in the face of opposition to Christ? We need to humble our hearts, stop repaying evil for evil, stop reviling people, keep our tongues from evil, and not be troubled by those who oppose the Lord. Rather, we should do good, pursue peace, and honor Christ by giving people reasons for our hope in Christ, both in words and deeds, with gentleness and respect. We need our character and behavior to represent the way of the cross. We need to deny self to follow Jesus.

Conclusion:

As the worship team comes for our time of reflection and response, take this time to ask what God is calling you to believe, desire, or do in light of this passage. Do you need to learn to rejoice in God’s work through others? Or evaluate your desires and willingness to serve others? Maybe God is calling you to lean into the way of the cross through sacrifice, or holding your tongue. All of us have ways in which we can better heed the call of Jesus to deny ourselves, pick up our cross and follow Him. Take this time to go before the Lord, asking Him to have this passage move you one step closer in losing your life so you can save it. Let’s pray as we prepare to respond.