

The Book of Acts / The History of the Apostles

Lesson 66 – Acts 21-28 – In Defense Part 1

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Acts, spanning from the ascension of Jesus to Paul's third missionary journey (AD 30–57), chronicles the early church's formation and the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to the Gentile world. Acts is a transitional book, bridging the ministry of Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels to the revelation of the church as the body of Christ, fully disclosed through Paul's epistles. Acts reveals how God's people, led by the Holy Spirit, proclaimed Jesus as Messiah amid diverse cultures and opposition.

In Acts 1-5, Peter's ministry in Jerusalem continues Jesus' kingdom message to Israel, urging repentance and baptism (mikvah) to prepare for the day of the Lord and the restoration of Israel's kingdom (Acts 2:38-40). The promise of the Holy Spirit's power, not salvation itself, is given to Jews and proselytes, including the Diaspora, for service in God's plan (Acts 2:39). Acts 6-7 introduces persecution with Stephen's martyrdom and Saul's role, scattering believers to Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1-4). Philip's evangelism, including to the Ethiopian proselyte (Acts 8:26-40), shows the gospel reaching beyond Jerusalem, though still within a Jewish framework.

Acts 10 marks a pivotal shift as Peter, through divine visions, learns God accepts Gentiles who fear Him, as seen with Cornelius (Acts 10:44-48). The Holy Spirit's falling on Gentiles, without mikvah or laying on of hands, confirms their inclusion in God's administration, not just salvation, shocking Jewish believers. Acts 13-14 details Paul and Barnabas's first missionary journey, spreading the gospel to Gentiles in Cyprus and Galatia, despite Jewish opposition (Acts 13:44-52). The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) resolves the first universal theological issue, affirming Gentiles need not follow Mosaic Law for inclusion in God's plan, establishing the grace economy through Paul's revelation (Acts 15:7-21).

Paul's second and third journeys (Acts 15:36-20:38) expand the gospel into Europe, planting churches in Macedonia and Greece. Then Paul finishes up in Ephesus before visiting the established churches and then leaving for Jerusalem. Opposition persists—Jews stir up mobs, and false teachers threaten physical harm (Acts 18:12-17, 20:29-30). Paul's adaptability (1 Corinthians 9:20), divine protection (Acts 18:10), and mentorship of leaders ensure the gospel's purity while the church is established. His farewell to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17-38) underscores faithful stewardship, warns of internal threats, and urges reliance on God's word.

Acts 1-20 shows God's providence in transitioning from Israel's kingdom program to the church's global mission. The Holy Spirit empowers diverse believers—Jews, proselytes, Gentiles—for service. Persecution, cultural barriers, and theological debates test the church, but God's plan prevails. Now we prepare for Paul's trials.

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ACTS 21:1-16 – TO JERUSALEM

Paul leaves Miletus, sailing to Cos, Rhodes, Patara, and Tyre, passing Cyprus to the south (map). The language, “we had parted” and “found a ship crossing over,” shows a determined journey. In Tyre, disciples urge Paul “through the Spirit” not to go to Jerusalem. They stay seven days, then part with prayer on the beach. Next, they stop at Ptolemais, then Caesarea, staying with Philip the evangelist, who has four prophetess daughters. Agabus arrives (the same prophet from Acts 11), binds himself with Paul’s belt, and says the Holy Spirit declares: “The Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.” The group pleads with Paul to stay, but he insists, “I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” They yield: “The will of the Lord be done.” Paul reaches Jerusalem, staying with Mnason, an early disciple.

Issues and Controversies: Why does Paul continue to Jerusalem despite warnings as indicated by the Spirit? Is the Spirit telling Paul not to go, or is the warning for another purpose? The warnings seem to conflict with his resolve.

Various Views:

1. The warnings are divine commands; Paul’s choice was stubborn, leading to avoidable suffering.
2. Luke harmonizes conflicting traditions, making Paul seem heroic despite a mistake.
3. The warnings test Paul’s resolve, like Old Testament prophets, without implying error.

Textual Analysis: The text doesn’t show Paul disobeying. “Through the Spirit” (4) suggests inspired concern, not a command; “they were telling” implies ongoing advice. Agabus’s prophecy predicts, not prohibits, and describes what will happen. Paul’s resolve matches his earlier commitment. The group’s final words affirm God’s will, and later, Jesus speaks to Paul and states, “Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also” (Acts 23:11). The text shows the Spirit preparing Paul for suffering, not stopping him.

ACTS 21:17-26 – PAUL AND JAMES

In Jerusalem, the brethren welcome Paul (17). He meets James and the elders, detailing his Gentile ministry, and they glorify God (18-19). They note that thousands of Jewish believers, “zealous for the Law,” believe Paul teaches Jews to abandon Moses, circumcision, and customs (20-21). To counter this, they suggest Paul join four men in a Nazirite vow, purify himself, and pay their expenses to prove he “walks orderly, keeping the Law” (23-24). They reaffirm the Acts 15 decree for Gentiles: avoid idols, blood, strangled things, and fornication (25). Paul complies, purifying himself and entering the temple (26).

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Issues and Controversies: Does Paul's vow contradict his grace walk (Galatians 2:16)? Are the rumors about him true? Is James's plan legalistic?

Various Views:

1. Paul adapts to a transitional period where Jewish believers keep the Law, consistent with 1 Corinthians 9:20.
2. Jewish zeal for the Law is misguided; Paul's participation is pragmatic, not an endorsement.
3. Luke shows Paul as Torah-observant here but anti-Law elsewhere, creating inconsistency.

Textual Analysis: Paul's vow doesn't contradict grace. The Greek *hagnizō* (26) and Nazirite context (Numbers 6) show an adherence to the Israeli Constitution; there is nothing to suggest that Paul was placing himself under the Law, meaning that he was doing so to obtain blessing and avoid curses. The rumors (21) are false—Paul never taught Jews to forsake Moses. His compliance (26) aligns with him being a Jew and not forsaking his nationality or functioning as a citizen of Israel (1 Corinthians 7:18). The Acts 15 decree (25) keeps Gentile freedom clear. Why does Paul go through this? Paul, having been estranged from Jerusalem for three years, indicates that he must go through purification for him to lawfully enter the temple grounds. Paul acts strategically to prepare himself for giving no fuel for the Jews to accuse him, though he knows that he will be arrested and then give his defense to the Jews.

ACTS 21:27-36 – PAUL IS ARRESTED

As the time of purification ends, Jews from Asia see Paul in the temple, accusing him of teaching against the Jews, Law, and temple, and defiling it by bringing Greeks (27-28). They base this on seeing Trophimus with Paul in the city (29). The mob seizes him, shuts the temple doors, and tries to kill him (30-31). Roman soldiers intervene, binding Paul and stopping the violence (31-33). Amid conflicting shouts, they carry him to the barracks as the crowd yells, "Away with him!" (vs. 34-36).

Textual Analysis: The text says the Asians "supposed" Paul brought Trophimus into the temple—no evidence supports this. The accusations (28) mix truth (Paul's teachings on grace) with lies (temple defilement). The mob's chaos ("stirred up,") shows incitement against Paul, not zeal for God. Roman intervention reflects historical peacekeeping.

ACTS 21:27-36 – PAUL'S DEFENSE TO THE ROMANS

Paul, carried to the barracks, asks the tribune in Greek to speak (37). The Roman commander assumes he's an Egyptian rebel who led "assassins" (38). "Aren't you the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand assassins out into the desert?" This situation occurred around 57-58 CE, during a period of intense Jewish unrest under Roman

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rule in Judea. There were various prophets and insurgents who were challenging Roman authority and promising liberation. The "Egyptian" here probably refers to the Sicarii, a radical Jewish zealot group known for carrying concealed daggers to assassinate Roman officials and collaborators in crowded places.

Josephus describes him in two works as a false prophet who emerged during the procuratorship of Antonius Felix (52-60 CE). Josephus portrays him as a charlatan who gathered about 30,000 deluded followers from the wilderness to the Mount of Olives, promising that at his command, the walls of Jerusalem would miraculously collapse, allowing them to overpower the Roman garrison and seize the city. Felix responded swiftly with Roman troops and local allies, dispersing the group, killing 400, and capturing 200, while the Egyptian himself escaped.

Paul clarifies: "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city" (39). Allowed to speak, he addresses the crowd in Hebrew, silencing them (40-22:2).

Textual Analysis: Paul's Greek and Hebrew gains respect and clarity from both the Roman guard and the Hebrews. The Hebrew calms the crowd, which will allow Paul to speak effectively. The Egyptian reference aligns with historical records (Josephus). Historical-critical skepticism lacks evidence; dispensationalism's "final appeal" isn't in the text; charismatic views downplay strategy. Paul speaks to testify, not provoke.

Summary

Acts 21 shows Paul's journey to Jerusalem. He is a devout Jew who honors the Law and demonstrates respect for the temple and festivals. Paul's adversaries despise him and falsely accuse him of speaking against Moses and defiling the temple, which led to his apprehension and beating before the Roman occupiers interceded.

The text resolves controversies: the Spirit's warnings prepare, not prohibit; Paul's purification is not in opposition to the message of grace but is in alignment with his Jewish nationality and culture.

The mob's reaction, fueled by misinformation, underscores the volatile atmosphere in Jerusalem, where Jewish zeal and Roman oversight collide. Paul's arrest marks a transition from freedom to captivity, yet his ability to speak Greek and Hebrew positions him to testify effectively to both Romans and Jews.