

MBC – 9/20/2020 – Pastor Doug Thompson  
**“Tension and Persecution in Jerusalem”**  
 Acts 21:17-40

Turn with me to Acts 21:17 (Pray)

Someone said that beginning from here until the end of Acts “is the most tedious portion of the whole book!” Oh, that sure whets your appetite for Bible study, doesn’t it? It’s a lot of Paul appearing before this person, then that person, and giving his testimony over and over – but beloved, it is the inerrant, inspired Word of God. It is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness – and God promised that it “shall accomplish that which He purposes, and shall succeed in the thing for which He sends it!”

Luke thought it was important to write it down for God’s people, and this is why: This was fulfillment of the promise that Jesus made to Paul when He saved him—

- Acts 9:15 Jesus told Ananias: “. . . he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry My name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel.

That’s exactly what happens in these remaining chapters: Paul proclaims Jesus before *Gentiles* like Festus and Felix, before *kings* like Herod Agrippa, and eventually, even the Emperor Nero. And in ch.23, Paul stands before the Jewish *Sanhedrin* – which would be the equivalent of addressing a joint session of the House and Senate in this country – to preach Jesus! I wish someone *would* do that!

- This wasn’t tedious to Paul! He would have said that this period was the highpoint of his entire life and ministry! To preach Christ to Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel!

We’re going to look at our passage for this morning in two parts. The first part is—

### **I. Tension with believing Jews.**

- Acts 21:17–26 <sup>17</sup>When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers (Jewish brothers-in-Christ) received us gladly. <sup>18</sup>On the following day Paul went in with us to James (not one of the Twelve, but James the half-brother of Jesus, and the head of the church in Jerusalem), and all the elders were present. <sup>19</sup>After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. <sup>20</sup>And when they heard it, they glorified God. 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, <sup>21</sup>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. <sup>22</sup>What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. <sup>23</sup>Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; <sup>24</sup>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. <sup>25</sup>But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter (This happened back in ch.15) 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.” <sup>26</sup>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.

Back when Paul was in Corinth, collecting the offering to take to Jerusalem, he wrote to the church in Rome, asking them—

- . . . strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf, <sup>31</sup>that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints.  
Romans 15:30–31

Two things Paul was anxious about in going to Jerusalem: 1.) Trouble from the unbelieving Jews, and 2.) he was unsure how the Jewish believers there would receive him and his gift from the Gentile churches. And he ran smack into both issues here. Let's look at—

#### **A. The reception.**

- <sup>17</sup>When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers (Jewish brothers-in-Christ) received us gladly.

Paul, the former Christian persecutor whom Jesus miraculously saved and transformed into *Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles*. Dozens of Gentile churches had been planted through Paul's preaching. He had with him men who represented these churches, along with their love gift for the saints there. Why wouldn't these Jewish brothers receive Paul and the others gladly?

Well, they did. . . but, it wasn't easy – in just a couple verses we read about a rumor going around, saying that Paul wasn't a loyal Jew. I mean, he's the Apostle to the Gentiles. . . that was still a hard thing for these Jews, even though they were saved. Racism dies hard.

Paul probably arrived in Jerusalem in 56 or 57 A.D., under the rule of Felix over Judea. Josephus wrote that this time period in the mid-50's was a time of political unrest. Jewish nationalism was on the rise, there were many insurrections by the Jews against Rome, and Felix brutally suppressed them all. Maybe there were protests in the streets of Jerusalem with signs: "*Jewish lives matter!*"

- There's nothing new under the sun, is there?

The flip side of this pro-Jewish zeal was to loathe anything or anyone non-Jewish, i.e., Gentiles. So here comes Paul, used to be a Hebrew of Hebrews, but now, *now* he is the "*Apostle to the Gentiles,*" even brought a few with him – to the heartland of Judaism.

So Paul meets with these Jewish-Christians: Yes they're rejoicing that Jesus is saving Gentiles. . . although it would be nice if the Gentiles would just become Jewish now, like them. But the Jerusalem Council already ruled on that and said, no. Gentiles don't have to become Jews. "OK, well, welcome . . . *brothers.*"

So the church is rejoicing with Paul. "Yay!" But the next day was the big day—

- Acts 21:18–20 <sup>18</sup>On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. <sup>19</sup>After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. <sup>20</sup>And when they heard it, they glorified God. 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,

Paul and James have met before. This is at least their 4<sup>th</sup> meeting, but again, it's a bit tense. Paul and James were the representatives of two different Christianities: Paul represented Gentile Christians – and

James represented Hebrew Christians. James was known inside and outside the church for being very Jewish. He had a reputation for keeping the Law of Moses even after he himself became a Christian—

- And if you remember, during Jesus' earthly ministry, James was not a believer! He became a believer when Jesus appeared to him after His resurrection.

The talk in the churches might have been that Paul and James were on different pages theologically: Paul taught salvation by grace – James taught salvation by works. Some people still say that – especially about James chapter 2 where James says, “*a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.*” “Wait a minute! James said that?” Yep, James 2:20. But Paul says in Gal.2:16: “we know that a person is *not* justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ.” Yep, Paul said that – and no, they don't contradict each other.

\*That's a sermon for another time, but still, James and Paul had different emphases: Paul stood against legalism and works-righteousness and said “*we are saved by grace, not works.*” James would have said, “Amen!” But James was more concerned about laziness than legalism, and said, “Yes Paul, but remember that we are only saved by a faith *that works!*” And Paul would have said, “Amen! . . .But. . .”

- And some of you know that Martin Luther was so much like Paul, fighting against the works-righteousness of the Catholic Church that he didn't care for the book of James. He called it “an epistle of straw!” (And personally, I'll take Romans over James any day of the week!)

But here are these two good, godly men, face to face, and it has to be awkward: God had blessed Paul's ministry among the Gentiles – dozens of churches had been planted, the Gospel was spreading throughout the Roman Empire. And Paul has some of the fruit of his ministry with him: not only the money he brought from those churches, but men representing those churches.

And James has with him the elders from the church there in Jerusalem – the original, mother church, and in v.20 he says that there are “thousands among the Jews who have believed.” “The Gk. word for thousands is “myriads,” it can mean 10's of thousands – of Jewish Christians now living in Jerusalem. God has certainly blessed the Gospel ministry among the Jews.

- <sup>19</sup>After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. (Paul took his time, story after story – this is for the glory of God, but it's also a bit of a sales presentation: “You see how God is blessing the Gospel among the Gentiles!” And they really did:) <sup>20</sup>And when they heard it, they glorified God. (but Luke doesn't even take a breath:) And they said to him—

Now stop right here: There is no mention of the lavish love-offering that Paul brought! This was such a huge deal to Paul. He writes about it in several of his letters. It was his best shot at bringing the Jewish-Christians and Gentile-Christians together. And not a word! Paul mentions it later on in Acts 24.17, but James didn't even say thanks? I'll tell you, this is one of those questions I want to ask when I get to heaven – “James, what was the deal?”

But James is in turmoil over the gossip going around the city—

- Acts 21:20–22 . . . “You see, brother (he calls Paul “brother”), how many *thousands* there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, <sup>21</sup>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. <sup>22</sup>What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.

This is what was happening: Paul had been travelling on his missionary journeys, preaching the Gospel, first to the Jews, right? He always started in the synagogues – the Jews got first shot at the Gospel. These Jews were Diaspora Jews – the scattered Jews who lived outside of Palestine. They were Hellenistic Jews, very influenced by Greek culture. But they were even more “*zealous for the law*” than the Jews in Palestine, because they wanted to prove that they were loyal Jews. It was these Jews who sent word back to Jerusalem that Paul was telling *Jewish*-Christians to stop being Jews: stop circumcising their boys, following the dietary laws, etc.

- Was that true? No. Not true. Now we have to understand this: Paul was adamant that if *any* person keeps *any* laws or rules as a way to be saved, that person forfeits salvation. If a Jewish still leaned on circumcision or Sabbath-keeping to save them – that was a rejection of Jesus and what He accomplished for our salvation.

But Paul never said that Jewish Christians couldn’t continue their Jewish customs – they could worship on Saturday, they could circumcise their boys, and only eat kosher food – as long as they didn’t do it as a matter of salvation.

- Now when it came to Gentiles, the Jerusalem Council settled the issue once and for all back in ch.15: Gentile-believers are not under the law of Moses. They do not have to become Jewish to be Christian. *But*, neither do Jews have to *stop* being Jewish to become Christian – as long as they are trusting in Christ and not the Jewish “stuff.”

So where did this rumor come from? Well, the fact is, Paul did talk down the Jewish “stuff” when it came to Gentiles being intimidated by Jews saying they must keep the Jewish stuff too. In Galatians he told Jews who would require Gentile believers to be circumcised, to go castrate themselves! He had no patience for Jewish legalism creeping into the Gospel.

- And in Romans 14, he deals with Christians who differ in their opinions about non-essential matters, like what day to worship on, or what kinds of food are acceptable to eat. . . i.e., Jewish-Christians and Gentile Christians. And he says, some people feel they should worship on a specific day of the week – now who would that be? Jewish-Christians. He says, “That’s Ok, they can do that – but they’re weak.” . . .

I believe that the more Paul grew in grace, the more distasteful all of the Jewish stuff became to him. He was a free man in Christ. But because he was free, his own preferences didn’t matter, only what would advance the Gospel: To the Jews he would be like a Jew – if he had to, to win them to Christ and that’s exactly what James asked him to do—

### ***B. The request.***

- Acts 21:22–25 <sup>22</sup>What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. <sup>23</sup>Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; (this is a Nazirite vow, like the one Paul took back in ch.18) <sup>24</sup>take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. (This vow was for 30 days, at the end of the 30 days, they would cut their hair and offer it up in the Temple along with animal sacrifices. And this whole ceremony was very expensive.) 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. <sup>25</sup>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.”

I.e., James says, “Gentiles aren’t the issue here – we settled that back in ch.15. This is about Jewish Christians: you need to show that it’s ok for them to still follow their Jewish customs – *just like you do.*”

Well I don’t think that last part was true. But how did Paul respond to James’ request?

- Acts 21:26 <sup>26</sup>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.

He went along with it! Remember last week we saw that some people thought Paul was wrong to go to Jerusalem – because it had been prophesied that he would be arrested there? Well some people say Paul was completely wrong to do what James asked! He was a Christian and he had no business going to the Temple and offering up sacrifices! Although as we read on, he never got as far as the sacrifice part, so maybe God spared him from that.

- I don’t think Paul was wrong, but I do think it was a huge personal sacrifice for Paul to do this. I picture Paul biting his lip when James asked him to do this. I think in his flesh he wanted to go all Galatians on James: “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse!” (Gal.3:10) “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery!” (5:1). Like Braveheart: “*Freedom!!*”

Instead, he reminded himself of what he had written to the Christians in Corinth—

- 1 Corinthians 9:19–23 <sup>19</sup>For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. <sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. <sup>22</sup>To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. <sup>23</sup>I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

The greatest example of this was back in ch.16:3 where we read this: <sup>3</sup>Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him *because of the Jews who were in those places*, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.” As a Christian, free in Christ, Timothy didn’t have to be circumcised. But because he was half-Jewish, Paul had him circumcised to take away what would have been a huge hindrance in sharing the Gospel with them. These men gave up their own freedom and preferences for the sake of the Gospel.

- How Christians need this attitude right now – *today!* We hear so much about rights: “I know my rights, you can’t tell me what to do!” Paul said, “I left my rights on the road to Damascus. I’m a happy slave of Jesus Christ now. I surrender my preferences to Him, and I use my freedom now for the sake of the Gospel!”

*If you are truly free in Christ, then you are not in bondage to your own freedom.* You can take it or leave it; enjoy it when possible, surrender it when the Gospel requires it.

So Paul goes to the temple – holding his nose – with these men to carry out this ritual for the sake of keeping the peace in the body of Christ – but before they could even complete it, something happened—

## II. Persecution from unbelieving Jews.

- Acts 21:27–29 <sup>27</sup>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 (I remind you that the feast of Pentecost is going on, that's why the city is crowded with zealous Jews) and, <sup>28</sup>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." <sup>29</sup>For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple.

What was happening here? Some "Jews from Asia," unbelieving Jews from Ephesus, who knew Paul well from his 3 years there – and hated him – whipped up a crowd against Paul with two accusations—

1.) He was teaching against the Jews, the Law of Moses and the temple.

That would amount to blasphemy. And isn't this just what they charged Jesus with? And what they charged Stephen with? – and they killed both of them. None of these men were anti-Jewish. Jesus came to fulfill the Law – and the church of Jesus Christ is now the true Temple of God – so yes, the Gospel shakes things up, and the old wineskins of Judaism are passing away. But neither Jesus, Stephen, or Paul taught *against* these things.

2.) These same Jews also recognized Trophimus, a Gentile from Ephesus, and they made up the story that Paul had taken him beyond the wall of separation into the "Jews only" section of the Temple grounds. There were literally signs up all along this wall that said, "If you are a Gentile and you proceed any further, you have only yourself to blame for your death!"

So if Paul had done that, then Trophimus would have been dead! It was a complete lie. There was no way Paul would have violated that law. He was at the temple to try and keep *peace* with the Jews. This was just fake news. But it worked—

- Acts 21:30–31 <sup>30</sup>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. <sup>31</sup>And as they were seeking to kill him. . . stop there.

### ***\*The root of racism.***

I want us to step back and see the root of the problem the Jews had with Paul: It was racism, pure and simple. They hated Gentiles, and this Paul was a turncoat, a traitor to his own people because he loved Gentiles. He hung out with them, ate their non-kosher food. The Gentiles were the ones oppressing their nation. These unbelieving Jews wanted Paul dead. He was like Judas to them.

- But it wasn't just unbelieving Jews, even the believing Jews, even *James* struggled with Paul being "the Apostle to the Gentiles." It was a lot for James to realize that Gentiles could receive their Jewish Messiah, and be co-heirs with them in the promises made to father Abraham. It was hard

for him to agree that Gentiles could become Christians without becoming Jews. But at least a Jew like Paul should *remain* a good Jew after he becomes a Christian.

I'm saying that we need to give James a lot of credit too. He was torn between his new birth in Christ, and trying to live under the New Covenant, and his entire Jewish upbringing – I mean he was brought up in the same home as the Jewish Messiah! Mary was his mother! But as zealous as he was for his old master, Moses, now he is doing everything he can to please his new Master, Jesus. But it was a hard adjustment to accept Gentiles as brothers and sisters in Christ.

- It was like a 66 year old pastor trying to learn how to use Zoom . . .

So back to our story: the crowd is seconds away from murdering Paul—

- Acts 21:31–36 <sup>31</sup>And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. <sup>32</sup>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. (Rome to the rescue.) <sup>33</sup>Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. (Now Agabus' prophecy is being fulfilled, isn't it? God is in control of this whole scene.) He inquired who he was and what he had done. <sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, <sup>36</sup>for the mob of the people followed, crying out, "Away with him!"

Does this sound familiar? It's what the crowd shouted out to Pilate—

- John 19:15 <sup>15</sup>They cried out, "Away with him, away with him, crucify him!"

Maybe it was some of the same hard-hearted Jews. "And people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil." John 3:19

There were 1,000 Roman troops stationed at Fort Antonius in Jerusalem and a man named Claudius Lysias was their commander. It was his job to prevent any disturbances or riots in the city, so he came personally with a small army when word reached him. Luke wants us to notice the contrast between the hostile Jewish lynch mob, and the restrained, orderly Roman authorities. In v.30, the Jews "*seized*" Paul to kill him, in v.33, the Romans "*arrested*" Paul – same word – to protect him!

- Acts 21:37–38 <sup>37</sup>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?"

Lysias thought Paul was just some uncultured thug, but he actually speaks Greek!

- <sup>38</sup>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 writes about this: Three years earlier, an Egyptian Josephus calls a "false prophet" rallied several hundred men, and told them that at his command, the walls of Jerusalem would fall flat – like Jericho – and they could enter in and defeat the Romans. While they were on their way, the Roman army came and killed 400 of them and took another 200 prisoners. But the Egyptian got away. So for some reason, Lysias thinks that Paul might be this man! Acts 21:39:

- <sup>39</sup>Paul replied, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city.

Tarsus was famous for being a very cultured city – it was known for philosophy and literature. So Paul is saying to this Roman officer: “First of all, I’m a loyal Jew myself – despite what the crowds might say – and I’m not some redneck rube.” As a matter of fact, he spoke at least 3 languages: Aramaic, Greek, and he’s about to address the crowd in Hebrew! Then Paul gets very bold and says:

- “I beg you, permit me to speak to the people.” <sup>40</sup>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:
- Acts 22:1–2 <sup>1</sup>“Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.” <sup>2</sup>And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said: (We’ll pick it up there next Lord’s Day!)

I want you to notice something: Paul spoke Greek to a Gentile, and now he speaks ancient Hebrew to these Jews. He wasn’t being a fake. He wasn’t being a people-pleaser. He meant what he said: to the Jews, he became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To Gentiles, he become as Gentiles to win them for Christ—

- 1 Corinthians 9:22–23 I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. <sup>23</sup>I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

\* \* \*

Please ask yourself this question this morning: “Can I say with Paul, “I do it all for the sake of the Gospel – that by all means I might save some!”

Our country is divided this morning. Christians are *very* divided this morning – and it’s not over theology or doctrine. It’s over politics. Are you red or blue? Who do you support; how are you going to vote? And what they mean is: “Are you on God’s side or the other side?” And it doesn’t help when a well-known pastor says how every true Christian should vote. How does that help our witness to unbelievers who might not share our political views?

- One of our new parents at MCS, a non-church gal said, “So, now that my kid is part of the Christian school, does that mean I can’t say the (Bleep) word, and I have to become a Republican?” She was joking, but it means that she identifies Christians with a certain kind of politics. I wonder where she gets that? Maybe it’s because she hears a lot of Christians talk more about politics than they talk about the Lord Jesus Christ.
- Beloved we need to pray that however we choose to vote, the church in this country would be known among unbelievers, only for Jesus Christ and the *Gospel!*

We should be known for *uniting* over the Gospel, not *dividing* over politics. And we should be ready to die to self, and surrenders any rights and preferences, that we might be all things to all men that by all means we might reach some for Christ!