

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson 6i: Acts 21.17 – 24.27 – Paul Captivity – Part 1

Introduction

Paul was warned throughout his third missionary journey of what awaited him in Jerusalem. As with all of God's prophecies, this one was also fulfilled. In these last chapters of Acts, we see Paul transform from a traveling missionary to a prisoner. It is amazing that despite being bound in the flesh, the Lord allows opens new doors to be opened that enlarges Paul's ministry.

Acts 21:17-26 – Rumors abounding

Besides having Timothy and Luke traveling with him, Paul also brought Sopater of Berea, three men from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, and two men from Asia. Why did he bring these men along with him? What was the response to Paul's news of his travels?

Paul probably brought these men along to expose them to the saints at Jerusalem and to expose the saints in Jerusalem to these men. It would be a blessing to both parties that would establish both the message that Paul preached in the various cities during his missionary journey and his testimony about the Gentile converts to the saints in Jerusalem. The saints in Jerusalem rejoiced at what God accomplished through Paul.

Who did Paul give the credit to for the success of the ministry?

Paul put all the credit in God. The Lord was the one who made the ministry succeed, saved the lost souls, and transformed their lives. Paul knew that he was only a vessel.

What was the rumor that was circulating about Paul?

The rumor circulating about Paul was that he was teaching the Jewish converts that they should abandon the Jewish rituals prescribed in the Old Testament.

Was the rumor true? (See also Romans 14:1-6)

No. Paul never told any Jewish convert that they had to relinquish the old ways. In fact, Paul himself took the vow of the Nazarine, an Old Testament tradition, at the end of his second journey. However, Paul did teach that following the rituals did not save your soul, but that it was only faith in Christ. At the same time, Paul did not teach the new Gentile converts that they needed to do anything but follow the commands of Christ and respect the requests of the counsel at Jerusalem (Acts 15:28-29). The only purpose of that was to maintain harmony between the Jewish and Gentile converts.

What was the purpose of the advice given to Paul by the brethren in Jerusalem?

They wanted to make it clear that rather than being against the law, Paul still respected and even obeyed the law. By purifying himself and paying for the four men to shave their heads, it would demonstrate that he didn't push Jews disregard the Old Testament traditions, but would even go out of his way to help them fulfill their sacred rituals.

Should Paul have followed this advice? Why or why not? (See also 1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

Paul knew that the rumors were not true and also that he wasn't obligated to fulfill the Jewish laws. However, Paul regarded peace between the Jewish and Gentile believers as more important than flaunting his freedom. Paul makes it clear in the passage in 1 Corinthians that he would put himself under the law or go without it in order to win people to Christ. In this case, Paul was willing to purify himself and also pay for others to have their head shaved to fulfill their Nazarine vow. I believe it was appropriate for Paul to regard unity between the churches as more important than his personal liberty.

Acts 21:27-36 – Paul attacked by the mob and arrested

Despite Paul's best efforts to keep the peace he still ran into trouble. Who were the people that recognized Paul? How did they recognize him and what were they doing in Jerusalem? (see Acts 19:8-10, and 20:16)

The Jews from Asia recognized Paul. He had taught in their synagogue for three months and then lived in that area for two years preaching the gospel daily, next door to the synagogue where they worshipped. They were in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost.

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson 6i: Acts 21.17 – 24.27 – Paul Captivity – Part 1

What was the accusation made against Paul by the Asiatic Jews? Was it true?

Apparently, these Jews were just looking for an excuse to get Paul in trouble. They saw him earlier with a man from Ephesus (where they were probably from) but were not able to do anything at that time. However, when they saw him in the temple with other men, they made the accusation that Paul was bringing Gentiles into the temple. There was an area of the temple where Gentiles could come and worship. However, the other parts of the temple were reserved for Jews only because allowing a Gentile would “pollute” its sanctity (see).

Why would this accusation upset the other Jews to the point that they would attack Paul? (See Lamentations 1:10)

They were extremely zealous over the temple and allowing a Gentile into the “pure” portions of the temple would profane God’s commandment and pollute the holy places. The accusation against Paul that he brought a Gentile into the temple put them over the edge and they formed a mob and attacked him.

Why did they shut the temple doors after they drug Paul out?

They planned to kill him and didn’t want to “further” defile the temple by killing him there.

Fort Antonia was the headquarters of the Roman occupation of Jerusalem and it was located upon a precipice overlooking the temple area, which was the gathering place of the Jews during their religious festivals and the most likely location of a riot. The soldiers standing watch over the temple grounds saw the riot and immediately told the ranking Roman official. The title, “chief captain” means “chiliarch” or “commander of one thousand troops”. He decided to send soldiers and at least two centurians (commanders of 100 men) down to break up the mob. This gives us a clear picture of the scene. Over 200 Roman soldiers rushed down and immediately those that were beating Paul stopped so that they wouldn’t be arrested.

Why is it important to note that Paul was bound with two chains? (See Acts 21:10-11)

This was the fulfillment of God’s prophecy through Agabus. He was bound with two chain, presumably upon his hands and his feet.

Acts 21:37-22:30 – Paul’s address to the Jews

Who did the chief captain think that Paul was? What clarified this for him?

He thought Paul was “the Egyptian”, a false prophet that led a group of 4 thousand Jewish extremists (called the Assassins) to carry out an attack against Rome. The rebellion was stopped by the Romans, but “the Egyptian” escaped along with several of the Assassins. They were still carrying out plots to overthrow the Romans, primarily by assassinating high-level Jews that cooperated with Rome. They disguised themselves in large public places to get close to their victim. They would then stab them and pretend to be part of the crowd reacting to the murder. The chief captain though that Paul was “the Egyptian” himself, caught in an assassination attempt. Paul’s ability to speak Greek, the language of the educated, made him realize that Paul wasn’t “the Egyptian”.

Why did Paul speak to them in the Hebrew dialect of Aramaic? What effect did it have?

Hearing Paul speak to them in their native tongue caught their attention. Paul was trying to be all things to all people. He wanted to relate to them.

Looking at the entirety of Paul’s speech, what was his main point?

Paul addressed these Jews for the sole opportunity of sharing his testimony. As a witness of the murder of Stephen, he knew that even in the midst of a mob attack, the Spirit could take his testimony and use it to affect the hearts and minds of the Jews that he loved so deeply. He himself used to be just like them and that gave him a compassion for them in the midst of their hatred.

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson 6i: Acts 21.17 – 24.27 – Paul Captivity – Part 1

Where did Paul say he was raised? (see verse 3)

Although Paul was born in Tarsus, he was raised in Jerusalem.

Paul said that he was taught “at the feet” of Gamaliel. Gamaliel was the most prominent rabbi (Jewish teacher) of that time and one of the most revered rabbis in Jewish history. He was the grandson of Hillel, another significant rabbi. He was also a leader of a more liberal wing of the Pharisees during his time. As a student of Gamaliel, Paul would have been respected among the Jews because of his teacher’s reputation. In fact, Gamaliel was present and spoke when Apostles were interrogated by the Jewish Sanhedrin in Acts 5:33-40.

Who did Paul appeal to as witnesses of his former life?

The high priest and Sanhedrin council itself knew Paul prior to his conversion and were the ones who sent him out to try and destroy the Christian movement.

The denominations that believe baptism is a requirement for salvation use Ananias’ statement in verse 16 as a proof-text. How should we interpret this passage?

When we look at other texts in Acts, like Acts 8:36-37 and 10:44-48, we see that the normal Scriptural order for this process was salvation and then baptism. We also see that Paul taught salvation was by faith, not any works of the flesh when we read his epistles (Galatians 2:16). It wouldn’t make sense for him to teach that salvation was by faith alone when he obtained it by works. Finally, there are other accepted interpretations of this passage. According to The MacArthur New Testament Commentary on Acts 13-28, it should say, “arise, get yourself baptized and your sins washed away, having called on His name.” This translation demonstrates that calling on the name of the Lord was what washed Paul’s sins away. His baptism came as a result of what already happened.

What was it about Paul’s testimony that caused the Jews to reject him?

He said that the Lord sent him away to the Gentiles. This implied to the Jews that the Lord was rejecting them.

Did the chief captain believe Paul’s story? Why or why not?

When he saw the reaction of the Jews to Paul, he thought that Paul must not be telling him the whole truth, so he needed to be “examined” by scourging. Obviously, the chief captain did not really understand the intensity of the Jewish passion against the Christians and thought there must be more to it than religious differences.

What was it that saved Paul from being scourged?

He was a Roman citizen and it was unlawful to scourge a Roman citizen without a trial first. His citizenship carried certain privileges and guarantees that non-citizens did not possess. In fact, Roman citizens shouldn’t even be put in chains without a trial. This is why the captain was afraid he would be in trouble for binding Paul in chains.

What did the chief captain decide to do with Paul and why?

He heard Paul’s testimony and knew that the chief priests and the Sanhedrin would know why everyone was so upset, so he decided to make the Jewish leaders get together and listen to what they said to Paul.

Acts 23:1-11 – Paul appears before the Sanhedrin

This event marks the fifth time that the gospel and message of Jesus Christ was presented to the Sanhedrin. First, Christ himself stood before them; then Peter and John; then all the Apostles; then Stephen; and finally the Apostle Paul. At each juncture, they rejected the message of the gospel and in doing so, condemned themselves and brought judgment upon the whole nation, by virtue of being a representative body. Not many years later, we see God bring judgment and destruction upon the Jews and Jerusalem as the city and temple are destroyed by the Roman army. We see another extension of God’s mercy in this passage and another blatant rejection of the truth in favor of men’s lies.

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Lesson 6i: Acts 21.17 – 24.27 – Paul Captivity – Part 1

What did Paul mean when he said that he served God in a clear conscience up to this day?

Paul means that he has intently followed the path that he honestly believed to be true and pure up to this day. Originally, Paul followed a wrong path against Christianity, but he believed it to be true in his conscience. However, once saved, his conscience was reformed and he began to follow the Lord's leadership wholeheartedly.

The high priest, Ananias, was one of the most corrupt and evil high priests in recorded Jewish history. He reportedly stole money from other priests and had them beaten if they objected. He was very pro-Roman, which angered many of the Jews that were against the Roman occupation. Once the Jewish revolt began in 66 AD, he was promptly killed.

What did Paul mean when he referred to Ananias as a white-washed wall? (see Matt 23:27, and Ezekiel 13:8-16)

Paul may have referred to him as a tomb, like Jesus did of the Pharisees. It looks pretty on the outside, but is dead on the inside. However, he is more likely referring to him as a white-plastered wall, as referred to in Ezekiel 13:8-16. These Jewish leaders were the fulfillment of the prophecy in Ezekiel 13:8-16. They were saying, "Peace", when there was no peace. They were misleading people and professing lies. They rejected the truth of the gospel and the need to repent, instead leading Israel to believe that all was well. Things were not well. The Jews needed to turn to God because His wrath was close!

What was Paul's accusation against Ananias?

Paul said that Ananias was supposed to be a judge of the law, but had Paul struck in a manner that opposed the law. Since Paul had not even been charged with a crime, much less convicted of one, he could not legally be beaten because he was a Roman citizen.

Should Paul have lashed out against Ananias like this (see 1 Corinthians 4:12 and 1 Peter 2:23)? What does this teach us about Paul?

No, Paul should not have responded like this. It is contrary to the example of Christ and contrary to Paul's own inspired teachings later. What we see here is that Paul is a man just like you and me and was not the sinless Lamb of God, like Christ. In fact, we see Paul acknowledging his sin in the next passage.

When Paul quoted from Exodus 22:28 after he was told that Ananias was the high priest, was he implying that the Jewish system was still in place and God recognized Ananias as a high priest? (see also 1 Peter 2:13-14)

No, Paul wasn't implying that the Jewish system was still in place. Jesus now reigns as an eternal high priest. Ananias was just a figurehead. However, he was a leader of the Jewish people and Scriptures teach that governmental figures, even evil ones, should be treated with respect. That doesn't mean we always agree with them, but we should not speak evil of them or publicly dishonor them, unless it is required to obey God.

How did Paul ultimately disrupt the Sanhedrin council?

He perceived that there were two different sects of Jews there and brought up an issue that he knew would divide them. By stating his heritage as a Pharisee and a believer in the resurrection of the dead, he immediately pulled a lot of the Pharisees to his side, because they wanted to defend their belief system. The Sadducees were another popular Jewish sect that did not believe in the resurrection from the dead. A great tumult followed and the chief captain decided to remove Paul from that situation so that he would not be unlawfully killed.

What consolation did the Lord provide to Paul that night in prison? (See Acts 19:21)

The Lord made it clear to Paul that He would allow him to become a witness for Christ in Rome. In Acts 19:21, we read of Paul's burden to share the gospel in Rome. On this night in a prison cell, the Lord makes it all clear to him and shows him how all of these things are working together to accomplish His plan.

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Lesson 6i: Acts 21.17 – 24.27 – Paul Captivity – Part 1

Acts 23:12-35 – *The plot against Paul*

What vow did the forty Jews make and why would they go to this extreme?

They vowed they would neither eat nor drink until they killed Paul. They were clearly pawns of Satan and were against the gospel of Christ. By taking this vow, they certainly damned themselves. The usual form of their vow was, "God do... to me if I don't do this."

What was the plan they devised to kill Paul?

They convinced the Sanhedrin to call for Paul as if they planned to question him more thoroughly and ambush him on the way to the meeting.

How did the Lord work to thwart this plan?

Paul's nephew found out about the plan and notified Paul where he was being held.

Why did Felix, the governor, ask where Paul was from?

He was determining whether he had jurisdiction over Paul's case.

Why did Paul have to wait before speaking to Felix?

According to Roman law, there needed to be sufficient opportunity for both the plaintiff and the defendant to have their cases heard. They had to wait for the Jews to arrive.

Acts 24:1-27 – *Paul's trial before Felix*

Who did the Jews bring with them to accuse Paul?

They brought Tertullus, who was probably a respected lawyer that was well acquainted with Roman law.

What does Tertullus do in his opening statement?

He blatantly kissed up to Felix in a feeble attempt to "butter him up" to the plaintiffs. He also misrepresented the popular opinion of the Jews at that time by implying that Felix was a wonderful governor that kept the people happy and quiet. Most Jews hated Felix and his barbarous efforts to squash any signs of insurrection.

What are Tertullus' three charges against Paul?

- 1.) Sedition – Paul was accused of trying to cause a Jewish uprising against Rome
- 2.) Breaking Jewish law – He was a ringleader of Nazarenes (Christians)
- 3.) Breaking God's law – He profaned the temple.

What was the weakness in Tertullus' case?

He cited no specific examples of any violations by Paul. It was all just an attempt to level harsh accusations against him and judge him guilty by implication.

What was Paul's defense?

Tertullus couldn't prove the accusations and his accusers, the Jews from Asia, were not even present to testify about Paul had supposedly done in the temple that caused such an uprising.

What was Felix's response to the testimonies of both parties.

Felix recognized that Tertullus did not have a solid case and that he needed witnesses of the events to determine who was really at fault. Therefore, he declared that Paul should be held under house arrest until Claudius Lysias could come down to testify of what happened during the uprising in Jerusalem.

Why did Felix and Drusilla desire to hear Paul speak?

Like most people from that time, they had heard about Christianity second hand and they wanted to hear what Paul, one of their most prolific ministers, had to say. It was a sort of entertainment to them, like watching a 60 Minutes interview with a celebrity.

How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

Lesson 6i: Acts 21.17 – 24.27 – Paul Captivity – Part 1

Before we look at the message that Paul preached to Felix and Drusilla, it is helpful to understand their background. Felix was a brother of Pallas, the notorious favorite of the Roman emperor Claudius. Both had been slaves and were now freedmen. Felix was made procurator of Judea by Claudius A.D. 52. He held the position till Festus succeeded him after complaints by the Jews to Emperor Nero. He was one of the most depraved men of his time. The historian Tacitus says of him that "with all cruelty and lust he exercised the power of a king with the spirit of a slave."

Josephus, a Jewish historian that lived during this era said of Drusilla, "But for the marriage of Drusilla with Azizus, it was in no long time afterward dissolved, upon the following occasion: while Felix was procurator of Judea, he saw this Drusilla, and fell in love with her; for she did indeed exceed all other women in beauty, and he sent to her a person whose name was Simon, one of his friends; a Jew he was, and by birth a Cypriot, and one who pretended to be a magician; and endeavored to persuade her to forsake her present husband, and marry him; and promised, that if she would not refuse him, he would make her a happy woman." [Josephus, Antiquities, 20.7.2].

What was Paul's message to Felix and Drusilla? Why did he preach this message? (See John 16:5-11). Didn't they ask to hear about faith in Christ?

Paul's message was about righteousness, temperance (self-control) and the coming judgment. This is perfectly in line with the work of the Holy Spirit to bring men to Christ. By preaching about self-control, he made it obvious to Felix and Drusilla that they were sinners. Felix was an evil man and Drusilla was an adulteress. They lacked self-control. Paul couldn't preach about righteousness without preaching Christ, the definition of perfection. Finally, Paul preached on the coming judgment that awaits all who reject Christ. By doing this, Paul put the cross in context. Likewise, we must preach about sin, righteousness and judgment. Men do not come to know Christ unless they first see themselves as helpless sinners that are bound for hell. This was the most clear and effective way that Paul could preach to them about faith in Christ.

What was Felix's response to Paul's message? What is wrong with it?

Felix responded to Paul's message by trying to push away the feelings of conviction until a "more convenient" time. God was obviously working on him and drawing him to salvation. Felix resisted the truth and in doing so, lost an opportunity and hardened his heart even further.

What was Felix's motive for holding Paul captive?

He was hoping for someone to pay him off to release Paul. At this time the Roman government was very corrupt and bribery was common.

Why did Felix ultimately leave Paul in prison?

He wanted to do the Jews a political favor to gain their approval and support. The Jews (as a people) were against Paul and the gospel.

Assignment:

Read Acts 25:1 – 26:32 in preparation for the next lesson