

BIBLE STUDY

ACTS 21

PAUL ARRIVES IN JERUSALEM

A. Events on the way from Asia Minor to Jerusalem.

1. (Acts 21:1-2) Leaving Miletus and the meeting with the Ephesian elders.

Now it came to pass, that when we had departed from them and set sail, running a straight course we came to Cos, the following day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. And finding a ship sailing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail.

a. **When we had departed from them:** More literally, this is *tore ourselves away from them*. This was not an easy parting. Paul poured his life and love into these leaders from Ephesus, and they loved him deeply in return.

2. (Acts 21:3-4) Paul is warned again in the city of Tyre.

When we had sighted Cyprus, we passed it on the left, sailed to Syria, and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload her

cargo. And finding disciples, we stayed there seven days. They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem.

a. **Landed at Tyre... and finding disciples:** We are not told how a church was planted in Tyre, but there were **disciples** there. This reminds us that the Book of Acts gives only a partial picture of the early church's activity.

b. **They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem:**

Apparently, among the disciples at Tyre, some prophesied of the danger that awaited Paul in Jerusalem, something that he had been warned about before in several other places (Acts 20:22-23).

i. It would seem that the specific warning **not to go up to Jerusalem** was a human interpretation of the Holy Spirit's prophecy of the danger that awaited Paul. Otherwise, it is difficult to see why Paul would have gone against the Holy Spirit's direction — unless he was in direct rebellion, which some commentators believe is so.

3. (Acts 21:5-6) Departing from Tyre, on the way to Jerusalem.

When we had come to the end of those days, we departed and went on our way; and they all accompanied us, with wives and children, till we were out of the city. And we knelt down on the shore and

prayed. When we had taken our leave of one another, we boarded the ship, and they returned home.

a. **We departed and went on our way:** Despite the heartfelt pleas of

the Christians of Tyre, Paul and his group did not turn away from going to Jerusalem. He was persuaded it was God's will, so they continued.

b. **They all accompanied us... till we were out of the city:** The

practice of walking with a traveler to the outskirts of the city was traditional; yet the practice of kneeling on the shore together for prayer was uniquely Christian (**we knelt down on the shore and prayed**).

4. (Acts 21:7) Arrival in Ptolemais.

And when we had finished our voyage from Tyre, we came to

Ptolemais, greeted the brethren, and stayed with them one day.

a. **We came to Ptolemais, greeted the brethren, and stayed with**

them one day: It must have been wonderful for Paul and his

companions to find Christians in virtually every city they stopped. This showed the expansion and the deepening of the Christian movement across the Roman Empire. *Christians were everywhere*, it seemed.

5. (Acts 21:8-9) Arrival at Caesarea and the home of Philip the evangelist.

On the next day we who were Paul's companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied.

a. **Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven:** Acts 8:40 tells us that after Philip's work in bringing the Ethiopian eunuch to faith, he preached through the costal region and ended up in Caesarea. Many years later he was still there.

i. It's a wonderful title: **Philip the evangelist.** He was known by the good news he presented to other people, the good news about who Jesus is and what He did for us.

b. **Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied:** It's interesting that with these four daughters who had the gift of prophecy, none of them seemed to tell Paul anything about his upcoming time in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit *could* have used them, but He chose to use someone else.

i. According to ancient records, "The daughters, or at least some of them, lived to a great age, and were highly esteemed as informants on persons and events belonging to the early years of Judean Christianity."

6. (Acts 21:10-14) Agabus warns Paul at Caesarea.

And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver *him* into the hands of the Gentiles.'" Now when we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, "The will of the Lord be done."

a. **A certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea:** In the spirit of Old Testament prophets, Agabus acted out his message to Paul — that certain danger awaited him at Jerusalem.

b. **So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles:** The prophecy of Agabus was true, and genuinely from the Holy Spirit. But to this true word, they added a human application (they **pleaded with him not to**

go up to Jerusalem). That additional word was not of the Lord,

otherwise Paul would have been disobedient to go to Jerusalem.

i. Acts 21:12 shows that even *Luke and Paul's traveling companions* tried to persuade Paul not to go to Jerusalem (**both we and those from that place pleaded with him**).

ii. Paul had received several prophetic words on this very topic. This is God's custom with such a remarkable prophecy, that there should be a great deal of confirmation, as there was in Macedonia (Acts 20:22-23), in Tyre (Acts 21:4) and now in Caesarea.

c. **For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus:** Paul's insistence on going to Jerusalem despite the dangers predicted by the Holy Spirit was not a result of rebellion, but an obedient response to the command of the Holy Spirit in his heart. He was *bound in the spirit* to go to Jerusalem (Acts 19:21 and 20:22).

i. The warnings from the Holy Spirit were intended to *prepare* Paul, not to *stop* him.

ii. “To choose to suffer means that there is something wrong; to choose God's will even if it means suffering is a very different thing.

No healthy saint ever chooses suffering; he chooses God's will, as Jesus did, whether it means suffering or not."

iii. Think about the *Savior* Paul was willing to pay this price for; think about the *message* that brought this willingness.

d. **The will of the Lord be done:** Paul companions — including Luke — came to the understanding that God's will would be done. They came to trust that even if Paul was probably right, and even if he was wrong, God would use it.

i. Again, the warnings of *danger* came from the Holy Spirit and were meant to prepare Paul. The *request to turn back* was understandable, even logical; yet it wasn't of God. They recognized as much when they here attributed Paul's insistence to go to Jerusalem despite the danger as **the will of the Lord**.

ii. It is easy to do — and a source of trouble — when we add our interpretation or application to what is thought to be a word from God, often thinking that it is also from the Lord. We *often* find it too easy to judge God's will for someone else.

7. (Acts 21:15-16) Departing Caesarea and going up to Jerusalem.

And after those days we packed and went up to Jerusalem. Also some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us and brought with them a certain Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we were to lodge.

a. **We packed and went up to Jerusalem:** Paul and his companions finally were on the way to Jerusalem. Paul's deep love for his Jewish brothers and sisters made every trip to Jerusalem important ([Romans 9:1-3](#)).

b. **Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple:** Based on the dating of Paul's Corinthian ministry at about A.D. 51 and other considerations, it is reasonable to think Paul arriving in Jerusalem in A.D. 57. Even though this was only some 25 years after the beginning of the Book of Acts, some Christians were already recognized as "**an early disciple**," one who had been associated with the followers of Jesus from the earliest years.

B. Paul comes to Jerusalem.

1. **(Acts 21:17-20a) Paul reports the good work of God among the Gentiles.**

And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all

the elders were present. When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard *it*, they glorified the Lord.

a. **He told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry:** Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Paul met with the leaders of the church there (**James** and **all the elders**) and gave them a full report of his work in preaching and planting churches.

i. Williams on **told in detail**: “The Greek has the sense of recounting every single thing.” Paul told these Christians from a Jewish background everything God had done in his missionary efforts.

b. **And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord:** The elders in Jerusalem were thankful for what God was doing among the Gentiles. They saw some of the Gentile converts with Paul and could tell of their genuine love for and commitment to Jesus.

2. (Acts 21:20b-22) Paul learns of his bad reputation among some of the Christians of Jerusalem.

And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law;

but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise *their* children nor to walk according to the customs. What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come.”

a. **You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law:** The elders of

Jerusalem were happy for what God was doing among the Gentiles.

Yet in Jerusalem the Christian community was almost entirely from a Jewish background, and these Christians still valued many of the Jewish laws and customs. They were still **zealous for the law.**

b. **They have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses:** The Christian

community of Jerusalem heard bad, false rumors about Paul. They

heard that he had become essentially anti-Jewish and told Jewish

Christians that it was wrong for them to continue in Jewish laws and customs.

i. Based on [Romans 14:4-6](#), it seems that Paul didn't have a problem with Jewish Christians who wanted to continue to observe old customs and laws. It seems that he himself did so sometimes,

such as when he took and fulfilled a vow of consecration in [Acts 18:18-21](#) (probably a Nazirite vow). Paul seemed fine with this, as *long as they didn't think it made them more right before God.*

c. **What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come:** This has the sense of, “Paul, this is controversial and people will hear about it. Let’s do something about this.”

3. ([Acts 21:23-25](#)) The leaders of the Jerusalem Church make a recommendation.

“Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. Take them and be purified with them and pay their expenses so that they may shave *their* heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but *that* you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law. But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written *and* decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from *things* offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.”

a. **We have four men who have taken a vow. Take them and be purified with them and pay their expenses:** They advised Paul to both *join* and *sponsor* these four Christians from a Jewish background.

i. **Four men who have taken a vow:** The particular vow of consecration was probably similar to Paul's Nazirite vow mentioned in Acts 18:18-21.

b. **That all may know:** The Jerusalem elders believed this would convince everyone that Paul did not preach against Jewish laws and customs for those Christians who wanted to observe them.

i. Paul agreed to do this, to demonstrate that he never taught Christian Jews *to forsake Moses* and *not to circumcise their children* and that they were required to ignore Jewish customs, as he had been false accused by some among the Jerusalem Christians.

c. **But concerning the Gentiles who believe:** The Jerusalem elders understood that this had *nothing* to do with **Gentiles who believe** in Jesus. It didn't mean that *they* had to perform any Jewish rituals to be right with God. Paul would rightly refuse to compromise on this important point.

4. (Acts 21:26) Agreeing with the recommendation, Paul sponsors and joins some Christians in a Jewish purification rite.

Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them.

- a. **Then Paul took the men:** Paul could agree to this and sponsor the four men taking the vow of consecration because there was never a hint that such things would be required of Gentiles as a test of righteousness.
 - i. “He had shown them that their ceremonies were *useless* but not *destructive*; that they were only dangerous when they depended on them for salvation.”
 - ii. Many commentators believe this was a terrible compromise on Paul’s part; that he was a hypocrite. Yet the motive behind Paul’s sponsorship of these Christian Jews completing their Nazirite vow is explained in 1 Corinthians 9:20: *And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law.*

b. **At which time an offering should be made:** It's important to understand that this offering — an animal sacrifice — was not in any way for the purpose of atonement or forgiveness. Paul absolutely understood that *only the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross atones for sin*. Yet not every sacrifice in the Jewish system was for atonement; many were for thanksgiving or dedication, as this one was.

5. (Acts 21:27-30) Jews from Asia stir a mob against Paul.

Now when the seven days were almost ended, 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 teaches all *men* everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore, he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.” (For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.) And all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut.

a. **Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd:** They claimed that Paul was **against the people** [Israel], **the law, and this place** [the temple], but these accusations were

unfounded. Paul simply rejected trust in any of these as a basis for righteousness before God, which comes only through Jesus Christ.

- i. The charges against Paul in [Acts 21:28](#) were an echo of the charges Stephen was executed for ([Acts 6:13](#)). Paul helped preside over that execution; now he is accused in a similar way.
- b. **All the city was disturbed; and the people ran together:** The crowd was *enlarged* because it was feast-time ([Acts 20:16](#)). It was *enraged* because they believed Paul not only preached against the people, the law, and the temple, but also profaned the temple by bringing Gentiles into its inner courts (they said, “**he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place**”).
- c. **Trophimus the Ephesian... whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple:** It was absolutely prohibited for Gentiles to go beyond the designated “Court of the Gentiles” in the temple grounds. Signs were posted which read (in both Greek and Latin): “No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Anyone who is caught trespassing will bear personal responsibility for his ensuing death.” The Romans were so sensitive to this that they authorized the Jews to execute anyone that offended in this way, even if the offender was a Roman citizen.

6. (Acts 21:31-36) Roman soldiers rescue Paul.

Now as they were seeking to kill him, news came to the commander of the garrison that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. He immediately took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the commander came near and took him and commanded *him* to be bound with two chains; and he asked who he was and what he had done. And some among the multitude cried one thing and some another. So when he could not ascertain the truth because of the tumult, he commanded him to be taken into the barracks. When he reached the stairs, he had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob. For the multitude of the people followed after, crying out, “Away with him!”

- a. **Now as they were seeking to kill him:** Paul had been seized by an enraged mob, and the mob didn't just want to take him out of the temple courts. They wanted to kill him, right there in the outer courtyard area of the temple mount. Paul had been near death because of the attacks of murderous mobs before (Acts 14:5, 19), and he must have thought, “Here we go again!”

b. **News came to the commander of the garrison that all**

Jerusalem was in an uproar: From the Tower of Antonia, at the northwest corner of the temple mount, more than 500 Roman soldiers were stationed only two flights of stairs from the Court of the Gentiles.

c. **When they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped**

beating Paul: The Romans didn't sympathize with Paul, but they were interested in keeping public order, so they arrested Paul both for his own protection and to remove the cause of the uproar.

i. **Two chains** means Paul was handcuffed to a soldier on either side. Paul must have immediately remembered the prophecy of Agabus ([Acts 21:11](#)).

d. **The multitude of the people followed after, crying out, “Away**

with him!” When the mob cried out for his death, Paul must have remembered when he was part of such a mob, agreeing with the martyrdom of Stephen ([Acts 7:54-8:1](#)).

i. Or, perhaps, it even reminded him of the trial of Jesus: “The shout *Away with him!* which pursued him as he was carried up the steps was the shout with which Jesus’ death had been demanded not far from that spot some twenty-seven years before ([Luke 23:18](#); [John 19:15](#)).”

ii. Boice on **Away with him!** “They did not mean, ‘Take him away from the temple area.’ They meant, ‘Remove him from the earth.’ They wanted him dead.”

7. (Acts 21:37-39) Paul speaks to the Roman commander.

Then as Paul was about to be led into the barracks, he said to the commander, “May I speak to you?” He replied, “Can you speak Greek? Are you not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a rebellion and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness?” But Paul said, “I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city; and I implore you, permit me to speak to the people.”

a. **As Paul was about to be led into the barracks, he said to the commander:** At first, the Roman **commander** thought that Paul was a terrorist, and was surprised that Paul was an educated man and could **speak Greek.**

i. *The language was a surprise*, because both the language and phrasing showed that Paul was a man educated in the Greek world, not a rabble-rouser. *The phrase itself was a surprise*; it seems far too polite and reserved. We would expect Paul to be screaming,

“Help, help!” and not, “Pardon me sir, may I have a moment with you?”

ii. **The Egyptian** mentioned (also mentioned by the Jewish historian Josephus) led a ragged army of four thousand men to the Mount of Olives where they declared they would take over the temple mount. Roman soldiers had quickly scattered them, but the leader got away.

b. **I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city:**

When Paul identified himself to the Roman commander, it put him in an entirely different standing. He was a citizen of **Tarsus**, not a suspected terrorist.

c. **I implore you, permit me to speak to the people.** At this moment, when his life was in danger from an angry mob and he was suspected of being a dangerous criminal, Paul had one thing on his mind: “Let me preach the gospel!”

i. It’s amazing that Paul could think and speak so clearly, considering that he had just been beaten. Some critics — such as the German theologian Ernst Haenchen — think that this proves that this whole account is a fabrication. What they don’t take into account is the power of the Holy Spirit and Paul’s great passion.

8. (Acts 21:40) Paul is permitted to address the mob that wanted to kill him.

So when he had given him permission, Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to *them* in the Hebrew language, saying,

a. **So when he had given him permission:** The Roman commander bound Paul with two chains (Acts 21:33) because he suspected Paul was a troublemaker. Yet, he gave Paul **permission** to speak to the crowd, probably because he hoped that Paul's speech might quiet the mob. At first, it did quiet the people down.

b. **Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language:** What a dramatic moment! Paul, standing on stairs overlooking the massive open courtyard of the temple mount, made a dramatic sweep of his hand — and the angry, rioting mob fell silent. Then, Paul **spoke to them in the Hebrew language**, identifying himself with his Jewish audience, not with his Roman protectors.

i. This was an opportunity Paul had waited a lifetime for. He had an incredible passion for the salvation of his fellow Jews (Romans 9:1-

5), and had probably thought of himself as uniquely qualified to effectively communicate the gospel to them — if he only had the right opportunity.

ii. Similarities between Jesus and Paul as shown in [Acts 20](#) and [21](#):

- Like Jesus, Paul traveled to Jerusalem with a group of disciples.
- Like Jesus, Paul had opposition from hostile Jews who plotted against his life.
- Like Jesus, Paul made or received three successive predictions of his coming sufferings in Jerusalem, including being handed over to the Gentiles.
- Like Jesus, Paul had followers who tried to discourage him from going to Jerusalem and the fate that awaited him there.
- Like Jesus, Paul declared his readiness to lay down his life.
- Like Jesus, Paul was determined to complete his ministry and not be deflected from it.

- Like Jesus, Paul expressed his abandonment to the will of God.
- Like Jesus, Paul came to Jerusalem to *give* something.
- Like Jesus, Paul was unjustly arrested on the basis of a false accusation.
- Like Jesus, Paul alone was arrested, but none of his companions.
- Like Jesus, Paul heard the mob crying out, *Away with him!*
- Like Jesus, the Roman officer handling Paul's case did not know his true identity.
- Like Jesus, Paul was associated with terrorists by a Roman official.

iii. In a way unique to most of us, Paul really did know *the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death* ([Philippians 3:10](#)).

iv. Paul's particular call and ministry make these similarities especially striking, but we are called to follow after Jesus also. We shouldn't be surprised when events in our lives are like events in Jesus' life. There may be a time of temptation in the wilderness, a

time when people come to us with needs only God can meet, a time when we seem at the mercy of a storm, a time when we must cry out to God as in the Garden of Gethsemane, a time when we must simply lay down our lives and trust God will gloriously raise us up.

We, like Paul, are *predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son* ([Romans 8:29](#)).

v. However, Paul's experience was obviously different in many ways, not the least of which was the manner in which he will make his defense in the next chapter, while Jesus refused to defend Himself before His accusers.