

Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work
Sunday Morning Bible Study
Lesson Sixteen – Acts 21:18-23:35
Politics & Religion

The future of the gospel was at stake, as powerful forces raged for and against it. On the one hand, the Jewish persecutors were prejudiced and violent. On the other hand, the Romans were open-minded and went out of their way to maintain the standards of law, justice and order of which their best leaders were understandably proud.

Between these two powers, religious and civil, hostile and friendly, Jerusalem and Rome, Paul found himself trapped, unarmed and totally vulnerable. One cannot help admiring his courage, especially when he stood on the steps of Fortress Antonia, facing an angry crowd which had just severely manhandled him, with no power but the Word and the Spirit of God. The source of his courage was his serene confidence in the truth. And he knew that his Lord and Savior was with him and would keep his promise that he would bear witness someday, somehow, in Rome.

OPEN

- What examples of religious and political conflict throughout the world do you know of?

STUDY

1. *Read Acts 21:18-26.* Paul and his companions have been received warmly at Jerusalem. In your own words, describe the interaction between Paul and James.

In some ways the encounter seems a bit tense. Certainly, James is grateful for the work that God has done in Paul's life, but he is also concerned about the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. He's concerned that they will be led astray by what they have heard about Paul.

2. To what extent were both men willing to go for the sake of Jewish-Gentile solidarity?

James references the letter written after the Jerusalem Council. He is apparently willing to let Gentiles not hold to the Law. Likewise, Paul is willing to observe some Jewish traditional rites for the sake of Jewish believers.

3. Though they were willing to make concessions when it came to cultural and traditional practice, was there any difference between them doctrinally and ethically? Explain.

There does not appear to be any difference between them, either doctrinally or ethically. They both affirm the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and they both affirm the moral restrictions of the Law (and of the Gospel, actually).

4. How willing are you, would you say, to compromise on the nonessentials of the faith for the purpose of solidarity with your Christian brothers and sisters?

Summary: We have already seen Paul’s conciliatory spirit in accepting the Jerusalem decrees and circumcising Timothy. Now, in the same tolerant spirit, he was prepared to undergo some purification rituals in order to pacify Jewish scruples. James seems to have gone too far in expecting Paul to live “in obedience to the law” in all matters and at all times, if that was what he meant (21:24). But Paul was certainly ready to do so for the sake of Jewish-Gentile solidarity. According to Paul’s conviction, Jewish cultural practices belonged to the “matters indifferent,” from which he had been liberated, but which he might or might not himself practice according to the circumstances.

James manifested a similarly sweet and generous mind both by praising God for the Gentile mission and by accepting the offering from the Gentile churches. The unbending prejudice and fanatical violence of the unbelieving Jews, which Luke now describes, stands out in ugly contrast to the cooperation between Paul and James.

5. *Read Acts 21:27-36.* What two accusations are made against Paul by the angry crowd?

He is teaching against the people, and he brought Greeks into the temple, which defiled the Holy Place.

6. How were these accusations both inaccurate and ironical?

They were inaccurate because Paul never preached against people or the Law, and he never brought someone into the Holy Place. People only thought he did because he was accompanied by Trophimus.

The Jews misunderstood both Stephen and Paul, just as they had misunderstood Jesus. Jesus spoke of himself as the fulfillment of the temple, the people and the law, and Stephen and Paul followed suit. This was not to denigrate them, however, but to reveal their true glory.

Gentiles were permitted to enter only the outer court, the Court of the Gentiles. According to Josephus, beyond this, and preventing access into the Court of the Israel, there was “a stone wall for a partition,” four and a half feet high, “with an inscription which forbade any foreigner to go in under pain of death.” The Roman government had given the Jews permission to kill any non-Jews who went beyond the barricade, even Roman citizens. Paul was surely thinking of this barrier when he wrote of “the dividing wall of hostility” between Jews and Gentiles.

7. *Read Acts 21:37-22:29.* In what ways did Paul demonstrate sensitivity to the crowd as he boldly made his speech of defense?

He spoke in Hebrew to connect with the people. He also highlighted his Jewish background and credentials.

In 22:22 Paul is interrupted by the crowd, who demanded his death. In the eyes of Jews proselytism (making Gentiles into Jews) was fine; but evangelism (making Gentiles into Christians without first making them Jews) was an abomination. It was tantamount to saying that Jews and Gentiles were equal, for they both needed to come to God through Christ, and that on identical terms.

8. How do Roman law and justice come to Paul’s aid (22:24-29)?

The Roman soldiers protect him from the crowds, and then the law also protects him from being flogged because he is a Roman citizen.

9. *Read Acts 22:30-23:35.* Ananias ordered Paul to be struck in the mouth when he said, “My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day” (23:1-2). What was Paul claiming about himself?

That he had obeyed the Lord and fulfilled his ministry. He was also claiming that everything he said (the Gospel) was what God had told him.

10. How does your own purpose in life compare with Paul’s statement?

11. What is the source of the conflict between the Sadducees and the Pharisees (23:6-10)?

Different views on the resurrection, and perhaps an angel spoke to Paul

12. What effect do you think the Lord's appearance and message had on Paul as you consider what he had been through and what he had yet to face?

I think it confirmed for Paul that he was being guided and watched over by the Lord. Paul had been through a lot but he was still strong. He would also go through a lot later, but the vision helped Paul remain strong and convinced of his purpose.

13. How do you see God continuing to protect Paul in 23:12-35?

He made sure that Paul's nephew heard about the plot to kill him. Then, he gave the nephew and Paul favor with the Roman guard so that they would listen to him.

APPLY

- In what ways are you like and unlike Paul in your response when you are falsely accused?

In what ways would you like to emulate Paul in your commitment to the gospel of Christ?

What do you need for this to happen?

PRAY

- Ask God to help you to listen long and hard before you speak to those you disagree with, both Christians and others.

All material taken from:

John Stott, *Acts: Seeing the Spirit at Work*. Downers Grove, IL: IV Press, USA, 1998.