



Session Twenty-Five

The Book of Acts, Pt.9

Acts 21:17-23:35

With this week's reading, we reach the final section of Acts. Paul returns a final time to Jerusalem and embarks on his final missionary journey, which will end in Rome and, ultimately, death.

1) 21:17-26 concerns Paul's meeting with James and other Elders of the Jerusalem church. This meeting, in effect, is a continuation of the earlier Jerusalem Council (see 15:20-21, 28-9). Rumors have arisen that Paul is attempting to persuade Jews not to observe Mosaic laws and customs, including the circumcision of children. Given that these laws and customs defined what it meant to be a Jew, what Paul was being accused of was challenging what it meant to be a follower of YHWH. This is instructive for any faith community that is faced with change. To the extent a church is rethinking what it means to be a follower of Jesus, how should such reactions to change be addressed and dealt with?

2) 21:27-39 is a reminder that Paul's ministry, as Jesus promised, would be occasion for much suffering. At the same time, it demonstrates Paul's faithfulness not only to the Lord but to the promise that he'd bear witness to the Gospel in Rome. In other words, bad as the current situation is, Paul knows it will not be the end for him: he must go to Rome. His request to speak to the people, therefore, (21:39) is not because he wants to convince the crowd to leave him alone—he knows he'll be delivered—but because he wants to make it clear that his imprisonment is an act of faithfulness on his part. How far would your faith take you in the face of an angry mob calling for your death?

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21:40-23:35 is a lengthy narrative in which Paul defends himself to Jews who are calling for and/or actively plotting his death. Paul's defense touches on a number of points we've already considered (often at some length); rather than revisit those, I want to urge you to engage with Paul's words in a different way.

3) You may be familiar with the idea of *apologetics*: defending (in this case) the Christian faith in the face of questions from non-believers. While, traditionally, apologetics has not played a significant role in the Reformed Tradition or the life of most Presbyterians, for many Christians it is fundamental to their faith. Paul's defense of himself in 21:40-23:35 can be read as an exercise in apologetics, combining both theology and biography. Note that Paul's intent is not to marshal evidence to "prove" the truth claims of the Gospel, nor is to convince or convert others. Instead, Paul's intent is to explain clearly his own faith in a way that specific non-believers at a specific place and point in time can understand, that they might find parallels in their own lives and consider how Jesus might be of importance to them.

Throughout our time together, I've urged you on multiple occasions to get in touch with your own story as a follower of Jesus and consider how you might share it with others. When we've discussed this, many of you have responded with words to the effect that you desire to tell your story through how you live. That's absolutely appropriate; it can also be a way to avoid addressing the issue with any real specificity. For example, if you have no strategy for consciously placing yourself among non-Jesus followers (as Paul did), what does telling your story through how you live actually accomplish? What have you done for the Kingdom if you live most of your life among people who already believe?

Therefore: what *specific* strategy do you have for growing the Kingdom by how you live your life? What is your apologetics?

4) I want you to consider how comfortable you are with absolutes.

Part of the reason people reacted so violently to Paul's defense is the nature of the Gospel itself, which makes very specific, very absolute claims about who God is, what God does, and to whom God belongs—claims that often are at odds with people's most deeply-held beliefs.

- a) How comfortable are you with absolutes?
- b) What do you think the absolutes of the Gospel are?
- c) If you're not comfortable with absolutes, why not?
- d) How would you respond to the statement that if you aren't comfortable with absolutes, you have no reason to believe in God? Or, if you prefer to think of it this way, what do you understand God to be if you aren't comfortable with absolutes? How can God be God apart from absolutes?