

TUTORIAL

2.25

Paul is arrested in Jerusalem and imprisoned

In Jerusalem, Paul faces an angry mob that accuses him of religious sedition and tries to kill him. The Roman army commander arranges a meeting between Paul and the Supreme Jewish Council but it disintegrates into chaos. The Lord speaks to him, bringing reassurance and comfort. Paul is taken to Caesarea and is tried by the Roman governor. No clear verdict is reached and he is jailed, although well treated, for two years.

The portion of Scripture referred to in this tutorial is: **Acts 21:15-24:27.**

Last time

God gave Paul the ability to perform miracles to validate his ministry. A widely reported incident involving an evil spirit caused the Ephesian believers to recognize the contradictions between their lifestyle and what they said they believed - in response they publicly burned books of incantations. A riot erupted in Ephesus when Paul's ministry seriously impacted the profits of the artisans making miniature shrines to the goddess Artemis. After leaving Ephesus, Paul went to Troas, and then visited the churches in Macedonia before making it down to Corinth. A plot to kill him forced he and his friends to travel by a circuitous route to Syria. Knowing he'd probably not be back again, Paul said emotional farewells in Troas and to the Ephesian elders in Miletus.

Paul complies with a request from Jerusalem

Luke continues his account with their arrival in Jerusalem, where they are warmly welcomed by their brothers and sisters in the faith (Acts 21:15-26). In a meeting with the leaders of the Jerusalem church, Paul has opportunity to "give a detailed account of the things God had accomplished among the Gentiles through his ministry." It is no doubt encouraging for Paul to hear the leaders praise God for the report from his ministry, but as equally disappointing when the focus immediately shifts to their local concerns and internal church politics.

This highlights the challenges that very often exist in the relationship of 'those who send and stay' with 'those who are sent and go'. Each has their own most

recent experiences, focus and concerns and it can be difficult for those coming back to find that everyone at home isn't able to fully relate to the challenges, and lows and highs they've experienced 'out there'. On the other side, those in the sending church can find that their returning friends have been changed by their unique experiences, and no longer seem as interested in what's happening 'back here'. These are not insurmountable challenges, but there needs to be a real commitment on each part to really listen and try to understand.

What the Jerusalem leaders raise with Paul relates to a controversial issue that has dogged the Church since the very beginning. Almost all Jewish converts to Christianity up to this point have continued in their commitment to the Old Covenant Law. Now, however, rumors are circulating that not only does Paul tell Gentile believers that it's not necessary for them to follow Moses' law, but that he's also urging Jewish believers in other areas to abandon it, not even to circumcise their sons. So the Jerusalem elders want Paul to quell these rumors through a display of orthodoxy by joining some other men in a purification ceremony and paying for their expenses. Whatever Paul's feelings, he complies without protest and goes along to the Temple each day.

Paul is rescued from an angry mob

It's nearly the end of the seven-day ritual purification when things suddenly erupt (Acts 21:26 - 22:23). Some Jews from Asia, no doubt having stayed on after Passover, recognize Paul: "Hey it's that guy, he goes everywhere teaching against the Law...yeah, and the Temple. Brings filthy Gentiles in here. Grab him. Help, everyone. Death to Gentiles who come in here. Death to anyone bringing them in!" People come streaming from everywhere, drag Paul outside the Temple, everyone trying to land a hit or kick, they want blood...just like with Stephen years ago when Paul was an approving bystander. Word reaches the Roman commander in the nearby garrison: "Sir, it's gone crazy out there, Jews rioting about something." "Right, you there, I want two brigades. Follow me, now! On the double." The crowd parts in front of them, the ones beating Paul stop. "What's going on? Who's that you've got?" But it's no good. Everyone starts yelling, screaming accusations. "Okay, arrest him. We'll sort this out later in the fortress. Must be that terrorist leader from Egypt. You've chained his hands? Right, march. Look out, look out; they're trying to get him. Hold him up on your shoulders." They elbow roughly through the crowd that's chanting "Kill him, kill him!"

Now, up ahead on the steps to the barracks, the crowd can see the man at the centre of all this controversy talking to the Roman commander. He looks surprised, but nods his head, gives a command. The soldiers turn and put the man down, stand close, guarding him. He's got his hand up. "Hey everyone, be quiet! Listen to what he has to say." What's his name, Saul or Paul, isn't it? He's speaking in good Aramaic, perfect accent. He calls them brothers and fathers. Reminds them that he's from a good Jewish family, well educated, orthodox,

zealous. Yes, of course, he was a leader in the violent clampdown against the Way back when it was still new. Now he reckons he had a supernatural encounter on the road to Damascus, with Jesus from Nazareth. But he was crucified! How could that be? Who knows, maybe it *was* a vision from God of some sort? Afterwards, he says, he badly wanted to share this message with his own people. Well of course, who else would he go to? What's that? What's that? God told him no one would listen, and so he was to take this revelation to the Gentile dogs? Blasphemy! We were right. He has to die. "Kill him, kill him!"

Paul identifies himself as Roman and as a Pharisee

The commander has had enough. "Take him in and beat the truth out of him. I'll get to the bottom of this." But just as they're getting ready to whip Paul, the situation changes dramatically when Paul reveals that he's a Roman citizen. Even to shackle a Roman citizen without a conviction or charge is considered a crime - to whip one is unthinkable. The next day the commander takes a different approach (Acts 22:24-23:9).

The 71 Jewish religious leaders - the Council, or *Sanhedrin* - are summoned to a meeting, and Paul is made to stand in front of them. During the following exchanges, Luke records three times that Paul addresses these men as "brothers". The third time is when he identifies himself as a second generation Pharisee, asserting that he's on trial for believing that people will rise from the dead. He does this knowing that the Council is divided between Pharisees and Sadducees and that the flashpoint of controversy between the two leading Jewish sects is resurrection.

It is very instructive to note Paul's nuanced sense of his own identity and how he wisely highlights different aspects of who he is, depending on the context and the purpose of a particular interaction. Clearly Paul sees himself first and foremost as a *disciple* and *witness* of the Lord Jesus. Then, in most of his letters that we have, he opens by stating that he's an *Apostle*, primarily to the Gentiles. He serves as one of God's designated Storytellers - a *prophet*...he's also a *church builder*, a spiritual *father* to many, and a *brother*. Without any sense of contradiction, he's also a *tent-maker*, someone who works with his hands. When necessary, he'll highlight his impeccable *Jewish credentials*, and at other times assert his legal rights as a *Roman citizen*. If needed, he cites *educational qualifications* and claims his *hometown status*. With Jewish leaders he's a *Pharisee* and *son of a Pharisee*; with Gentile believers he plays down his Jewishness; for the sake of the legalist Judean Christians he'll go through an orthodox purification ceremony. He speaks perfect Aramaic or Hebrew to Jews and fluent Greek to a Roman commander. There's no lack of integrity in presenting himself in these different ways, they are all perfectly real and valid. Nor is this about protecting or promoting himself...instead, it is all

about being *who he needs to be* to help others know the One with whom Paul identifies so closely.

Jesus encourages Paul to stand strong

With the argument between the Pharisees and Sadducees on the Council quickly headed for a brawl, Paul has to again be rescued by the Roman soldiers (Acts 23:10,11). Held in the barracks for a couple more days, Paul is perhaps wrestling with uncertainties about where all this is headed. How does this serve the Lord's purposes? But in the night he sees Jesus standing right there, encouraging him to be brave. "Paul, this is all about you being able to tell people about me here in Jerusalem and in Rome." Any frustration or fear must have immediately been replaced by a sense of peace and quiet joy. Perhaps lying in the dark cell he remembers things he'd been trying to say to the believers in Rome facing similar difficulties...for us who love God and have been invited to be involved in His purposes, every circumstance works out for our good (Romans 8:28).

Paul is taken to be tried by the governor

Certainly the encouragement from the Lord is timely. Paul is in real danger and this ordeal has only just begun (Acts 23:12-24:27). At the same time, if he's prepared, there will also be great opportunities to share truth with people who might otherwise never have a chance to hear. The Commander of the Roman forces in Jerusalem decides to get Paul out of the city and down to Caesarea. Through a nephew of Paul, a plot to kill the Apostle by Jewish zealots has been uncovered. In the Roman provincial capital there'll be better prison facilities away from the immediate reach of the Jewish leaders. That night a large force of infantry and cavalry escorts Paul to the halfway point, and other mounted troops take him the rest of the 100 kilometers to the coast.

Five days later the High Priest with some of his colleagues and a Jewish lawyer come to argue their case against Paul before Felix, the Roman governor of Judea (fifth or sixth in line since Pontius Pilate). They accuse him of being a ringleader of the subversive cult that reveres Jesus of Nazareth, and of profaning the Jewish Temple, something certain to bring strife in this volatile Roman province. Paul has an opportunity to respond, and explains that there is no evidence for the charges against him. It turns out that the governor is quite familiar with *the Way* - a term Luke uses regularly for early Christianity in his Narrative. He adjourns the hearing without any definite verdict, but he is at least sympathetic enough to allow Paul some freedom and visiting rights. A few days later, Felix brings his Jewish wife to also hear Paul speak about faith in Jesus the Messiah, but the governor cuts him off when the conversation turns to God's view of behaviour that falls short of His perfect standards. Luke comments that over the coming months Felix talks to Paul quite often, but he leaves him in jail for two years hoping to be paid a bribe for his release.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Paul is arrested in Jerusalem and imprisoned

1. The Holy Spirit rarely led Luke to pass any comment on the choices the key characters like Paul made in the events he records. But what do you think about Paul's decision to comply with the Jerusalem elders' request for him to take part in the purification ceremony at the Temple? Does this seem to line up with, or violate, what we've seen so far of Paul's teaching and previous actions? Please explain.
2. Reflect on the way Paul highlighted different aspects of his identity in different settings. Can you give an example of how you might apply this principle without jeopardizing your integrity (a) here in your own society, and (b) in a country that legally restricts teaching God's Word?
3. Imagine that you've been sharing God's Narrative up to this point with a friend who is then put in jail for sharing his or her faith. Now after two years you have opportunity to smuggle in a brief message to them. What would you write to help them be patient and not despair?