

A Witness before Israel, Gentiles and Kings

Last week we saw the peril of Paul's situation increase as he traveled from city to city on his way back to Jerusalem. Paul obediently followed the Holy Spirit's leading knowing full well he was headed into danger as he returned to the City of the Jews. I am amazed at his unwavering dedication and obedience to God's calling even in the face of the earnest and misguided counsel of dear friends trying to persuade him not to go.

This week we will focus on the events of Paul's return to Jerusalem. You can almost imagine the Jews planting spies in the temple courts just waiting and plotting his downfall. Yet with confidence and a composed manner he walks into to their trap. His unruffled demeanor is in complete juxtaposition to the agitation and uproar of the crowds. In reasoned and impassioned speech he implores and attempts to share the Gospel with his own people in an attempt to demonstrate that he is truly one of them, a Jew to the core of his being. Yet too well does he also appear to be like the Gentiles and converses openly with the Roman authorities as a Roman citizen. The Jewish leadership has already decided Paul's fate, so he is forced to demand his right for a trial in Rome as Roman citizen. As a prisoner of Rome, at least he will still be alive to share the Gospel until such a time that his life would be forfeited in the name of the Lord.

This portion of Acts is filled with legal proceedings and long speeches. While at times it may become tedious, we must keep in mind that Luke recorded these events with a purpose. That purpose is to point out the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to Paul: Paul would testify on behalf of the Lord before Gentiles, kings and the people of Israel (9:15). This week our first scripture passage of study is Paul's moment to testify that Jesus is the Messiah to the people of Israel and then before the Sanhedrin. Paul then will testify before Gentiles in his conversations with Roman officials and especially before the procurator of Judea, Antonius Felix. Paul gives his final testimony before King Agrippa II, great-grandson of Herod the Great and titular ruler of Judea. While Paul's speech may be somewhat repetitious, Luke's reiteration of material delineates and draws together the major themes of Acts. It is in these passages that we reach the climax of the book of Acts and Luke's purpose in recording this History. In Acts 1:8-9 Jesus tells his followers: "*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" The fulfillment of the Lord's promise to Paul in Acts 9:15 sets the stage for the ultimate fulfillment of bringing the Gospel to the ends of the earth as Paul takes the message to Rome, and over time that message is transmitted far and wide to the very ends of the earth.

Before the Jews, Part 1



Read Acts 21:17-22:29 and answer the following questions.

Upon his return to Jerusalem Paul sought out James and the elders of the Jerusalem church. Describe the concerns expressed by James and the elders, and their plan to prove that Paul still adhered to the customs of the Jews.

Why was this important?

Read 1 Corinthians 9:20. How does Paul explain his actions?

🔥 Paul continually taught that salvation was by grace and not by adherence to the law of the Torah. The value of the law is that it teaches us what sin is. It tells us of God's expectations of relationships between man and God and man and man. Paul taught that Jesus fulfilled the law and released us from the burden of law. Adhering to the law and to pharisaic traditions would not lead to salvation, only belief in Christ would lead to salvation. If Paul wasn't observing the temple traditions in order to be saved, then why do you think he was he willing to submit to these traditions?

Paul's participation in the Jewish customs surrounding the temple was not a matter of salvation or sanctification. His salvation and sanctification were already secure in firm belief in Jesus' death and resurrection. Acts 18:18 tells us that Paul had previously taken a Nazarite vow. Rather his participation in these traditions and customs should be viewed as part of his own heritage and his efforts to win the Jews over to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah was the next logical step in the faith of the Jews. They had been waiting for the Messiah to come, and as Paul proclaimed, the Messiah did come in the person of Jesus. Faith in Jesus did not negate the rich traditions of the Jews, he

fulfilled them giving them a richer and more complete meaning. While on the surface it may appear that Paul was subjecting himself to the law and denying the church, he wasn't. He was trying to lead the Jerusalem Jews to faith. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "*To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law*" (1 Cor 9:20). One of Paul's goals of returning to Jerusalem was to bring the gospel to the Jews, thereby bringing together the Jews and the Gentiles into one body of faith – one unified people of God, despite difference of customs and traditions. Patience, respect and at times compromise on non-essential customs and traditions may be necessary to further the spread of the Gospel. This does not mean that the Gentiles would have to become Jews by custom and tradition – James and the church elders reiterated their stand on Gentile requirements regarding the law in Acts 21:25, making way for Gentiles and Jews to fellowship together.

In Acts 21: 27-29, what claims were brought against Paul, and by whom?

What does verse 31 say they were trying to do to him?

Who is it that arrests Paul and where is he taken?

In verses 37-40 there are three significant details that require consideration. Please fill in the blanks and then we will take a closer look at those three points. (While I normally write and study from the NIV, in this instance the NRSV has a better translation. If you don't have access to an NRSV translation www.biblegateway.com might be a helpful resource; otherwise, use whatever translation you prefer, it will be close enough in meaning.)

37 Just as Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, "May I say something to you?" The tribune replied, "Do you know _____? 38 Then you are not the Egyptian who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness?" 39 Paul replied, "I am a _____, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a _____ of an _____; I beg you, let me speak to the people." 40 When he had given him permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the people for silence; and when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the _____ language, saying..."

In verse 37, presumably what language is Paul addressing the tribune (commander)?

What is the significance of Paul's legal standing and ethnicity in Tarsus¹ (v.39)?

What language does he address the crowd in verse 40?

What is it about these details, easily missed upon first reading, that are significant to Paul's situation?

What do you think is the significance of Paul's reiteration of his past (22:1-5)?

🔥 What statement of Paul's in verses 6-21 caused the crowd to turn on him?

Why would taking the Lord's message to the Gentiles enrage the Jews?

What significant piece of information comes forth regarding Paul's legal status in verses 22-29?

Paul amazes me. He is severely beaten by a mob, to the point where the soldiers had to carry him up the steps leading to the Antonia Fortress and away from the violent crowd. In all the uproar and tumult, Paul has the presence of mind and clear thinking to address the commander in perfect Greek identifying himself as a Jewish citizen of Tarsus. He immediately establishes some credibility for himself as being an educated man from an elite Hellenist city. He doesn't yet reveal his Roman citizenship, but he does draw a definitive line between himself – an educated and cultured citizen of Tarsus – and the Egyptian terrorist². Paul is no rebel drawing the Jews into revolt against Rome. He is an educated Jew requesting to speak to his own people and who, as far as can be determined by the

¹ Tarsus was a leading center of Hellenistic education and culture, *not* known for breeding terrorists or rabble-rousers.

² The historian Josephus wrote of an Egyptian who led a revolt of 4,000 people in Jerusalem in A.D. 54 and then disappeared. —Life Application Bible Notes

commander, has broken no law. The commander acquiesces to Paul's request and permits him to address the crowd.

Paul then turns to speak to the Jews in the language of the Jews – not Greek, the language of the Empire and spoken by Jews throughout the Empire, but in Aramaic, the language of the Jews of Israel. Paul speaks of his upbringing in Jerusalem and his teaching under Gamaliel, the foremost teacher in Jerusalem. He speaks of his activity under the sanctions of the Sanhedrin against the Followers of the Way and even the stoning of Stephen. His words and argument are clearly and cogently presented to establish a foundation of common ground with the Jews before sharing the Gospel message. The Jews seem to listen patiently even to his Damascus conversion story, as he goes into detail about Ananias – a well respected Jew of Damascus, giving him more credibility and acceptance among the Jews. I suspect that he may have the crowd with him up until the point he has his vision in the temple when the Lord tells him the Jews there will not accept his testimony about him. At this point I think the crowd becomes uncomfortable with Paul's speech as he begins to point out the Jews unwillingness to consider that they may be rejecting God's message. In their eyes, they are the chosen of the Lord. It is unfathomable to them that they would not recognize the messiah. But when Paul states that the Lord sent him to take his testimony to the Gentiles, it is at this moment when the mob decides it has had enough of Paul. Teaching and accepting the Gentiles into the kingdom of God was a defilement of and a sacrilege to all they held dear. The word "gentile" roused their anger and revealed their arrogance. God had set a mission before them, to bring the light of truth to the Gentiles and they had rejected that mission in favor of keeping that special relationship for themselves and excluding the world from a relationship with God. They separated themselves from the world around them with their purity laws and rituals holding the world at a condescending self-righteous arms length from God. Paul had previously, and likely repeatedly, reminded the Jews of God's special calling for them: *'I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth'*³ (Acts 13:47).³ God's mission was going to the Gentiles through Jewish Christians like Paul and Peter despite the prideful disobedience of the Jews.

The mob erupted into a violent fury. Fearing an uprising, the Roman commander had Paul dragged into the barracks and ordered him to be flogged. It is at this moment that Paul reveals his Roman citizenship ensuring not only fair treatment and a fair trial, but also fair protection until his time of trial. The Romans now must provide Paul with protection from the Jews.

Personal Reflection

Where do you see the presence of the Holy Spirit in this passage? In times where you feel under fire or under attack for your faith, where do you think the Holy Spirit is at work?

³ While this specific reference is pulled from Paul's speech to the Jews of Antioch, it is likely he used the same argument with Jews everywhere – even Jerusalem (Acts 9:28-29) though unrecorded by Luke. Paul is quoting from Isaiah 24:6 and 49:6.

Before the Jews, Part 2

There was a small detail in our previous lesson left unmentioned, and as we progress through today's scripture passage its symbolism becomes more evident. Acts 21:30b says, "*Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut.*" As you prepare for today's scripture lesson, ask the Lord to open your eyes to what is truly going on in the undercurrent of these passages this week. There is more going on than meets the eye as we see Paul testify before the Jews, the Gentiles and ultimately the King of Judea.



Read Acts 22:30-23:35 and answer the following questions.

Why did the high priest Ananias have someone strike Paul?

This moment of violence appears to momentarily shake Paul as he heatedly accuses the high priest of doing what?

Why do you think Paul didn't recognize Ananias as the high priest?

As Christians we are representative of Christ. Certainly not perfect, but our behavior ought to be a reflection of the one we serve. The high priest was the ultimate mediator between man and God. He was to bring people into a closer relationship with God. Paul calls him a "whitewashed wall" what does that mean? Jesus used a similar phrase in Matthew 23:27. What do these verses tell us about the high priest?

How does Paul stand in contrast to the high priest?

By the end of the hearing in front of the Sanhedrin, has Paul been convicted of anything?

Why is Paul brought back to the barracks?

What does the Lord promise Paul in verse 11?



Why do you think Paul receives this special vision of the Lord at this point?

Who formed the conspiracy against Paul?

What was their intent?

How many Jews were involved in the plot?

Who became willingly involved in the plot?

According to Jesus in Matthew 23:27-28, what were the teachers of the law and the Pharisees filled with?

According to verse 23, what does Lysias do to protect Paul?

In his letter to Governor Felix does Lysias find Paul guilty of anything (v.29)?

Before whom is Paul to stand next? _____ Who will present the case against Paul? _____

I have to feel kind of sorry for the Roman commander Claudius Lysias. He really has no idea what is going on between Paul and the Jews. Paul's speeches are beyond his understanding of Judaism. While he certainly knows that leaders of the Sanhedrin are power hungry vipers, he just can't understand what this gentlemanly man, Paul, has done to threaten the peace in Jerusalem. Paul is calm, collected, reasonable, and peaceful even in the face of the raging mob. To get to the bottom of the issue, Lysias orders the chief priests and the Sanhedrin to assemble. Paul momentarily loses his cool when he is

physically abused by the high priest. Whether or not Paul truly recognizes that Ananias is the high priest is hard to know, but the high priest's actions certainly are not appropriate as Paul points out. Striking the accused who has yet to be convicted of anything is against the Law. Paul stands before a judge who carelessly breaks the law yet who has the audacity to hold the law against another. The high priest's hypocrisy is self-evident. His wickedness is soon displayed through the plot to kill Paul. Just as Jesus had called the teachers of the law and the Pharisees white washed tombs filled with hypocrisy and wickedness (Matt 23:27-28), this high priest truly is one of their kind!

At the beginning of our lesson today I quoted Acts 21:30b: "*Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut.*" You are probably wondering what this has to do with our scripture passage. As Paul is dragged from the temple into the court of the Gentiles, the temple gates closed with a bang. This is the last scene in the entire book of Acts that includes the temple. In fact historically speaking this moment in Luke's history is the last vision of the temple we see until the New Jerusalem described in the book Revelation. It is the year 57, and the temple comes crashing down in 70 AD. I'm not saying those doors didn't open again when the riot died down. Of course they did. The temple priests continued to do their work up until Jerusalem fell 13 years later. But look at the description of the high priest, the teachers of the law and the Pharisees we studied today. They were filled with hypocrisy and wickedness, not concerned with God and his message of salvation. I think it highly interesting that just as the people of Israel reject Paul, the Lord's messenger, and his message of salvation the temple gates are firmly shut as the riot commences. Presumably they are shut to keep the riot from defiling the sanctuary. But perhaps it was God's hand that shut those gates because his people the Jews had rejected him yet again. We are left with our last view of the temple, the House of God, with its doors shut against the people of Israel railing in the courts against Paul and the Lord's message of salvation.

Personal Reflection

God has a plan for Paul's life. In 23:11 the Lord says to Paul, "*Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome*" assuring Paul that he is in charge of every situation even when we may not feel or see his presence. What assurance does this give you in your life?

Before the Gentiles

Our passage yesterday ended with Paul being escorted to Caesarea under heavy guard to stand trial before Governor Felix. Caesarea was the Roman center of government in Judea. Paul's accusers travel 60 miles to present their false charges against Paul hoping to convince Felix to execute Paul under the guise of keeping the peace in Jerusalem.



Read Acts 24:1-27 and answer the following questions.

Who came from Jerusalem to present their case against Paul?

What three charges did they bring against Paul and what was Paul's defense for each charge?

Charge (v. 5-6) ⁴	Defense
1.	v12-13, 18-20
2.	v. 14
3.	v.18

What was Felix's decision on the case?

What was he hoping for?

🔥 Acts 24:25 says, “*As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, ‘That's enough for now! You may leave.’*” What do you think Felix was afraid of?

⁴ Interesting note on verse 5-8. Most translations exclude the end of v. 6 and all of v.7, copied here for your reference:

[continue verse 6:] ... and wanted to judge him according to our law. [7] But the commander, Lysias, came and with the use of much force snatched him from our hands [8] and ordered his accusers to come before you. By examining him yourself...

Felix didn't necessarily support Paul's case. Felix wasn't interested in justice or salvation; he was interested in political peace and the possibility of monetary gain. He kept Paul in Caesarea for nearly two years. The scriptures say he spoke frequently with Paul hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe in exchange for freedom (v.26). At the same time, Felix wished to curry favor with the Jews in Jerusalem so he kept Paul in prison and eventually made Paul his successor's problem to deal with (v.27).

Personal Reflection

Felix was interested in what Paul had to say until it became too personal. Paul's words about righteousness, self-control and judgment affected Felix in a way Felix didn't want to consider. Paul's words and the Gospel shed a light on our sins and we can respond in one of three ways: We can resist and justify our actions to ourselves; we can run from it (that's what Felix did); or we can allow it to change our hearts. Felix felt a pricking of his conscience, an action of the Holy Spirit trying to break through a hard heart. Have you felt the pricking of your conscience lately? If so, what do you think you need to do about it?



Read Acts 25:1-12 and answer the following questions.

When Festus becomes the new governor, how long has Paul been in prison? (See 24:27) _____

What was still on the minds of the chief priests and Jewish leaders?

When Festus convened the court in Caesarea, were the Jews able to prove their charges?

In his defense Paul makes a three point statement in verse 8. What are the three points?

For what reason does Festus ask Paul to go to Jerusalem to stand trial?

What would have been the likely outcome if Paul consented to going to Jerusalem? (v3)

What does Paul assert as his right in verses 10-11?

Paul is a Roman citizen and has the right to protection and appealing to Caesar. Appealing to Caesar meant that Paul's case would be heard in the highest Roman courts. Festus was looking for the easiest way to maintain peace in Judea. If Paul refused to be handed over to the Jews, at least by his appealing to Caesar, Festus could send Paul out of the country and thereby pacify the Jews. Paul's choice was either certain death with the Jews or go to Rome as a prisoner. Paul chose Rome. The Lord had promised he would share the Gospel in Rome as he had in Jerusalem (23:11), his appeal to Caesar would give him the opportunity to share the Gospel in Rome and along the way.

Before the King

Today we stand with Paul before the King of Judea. Herod Agrippa II was the great-grandson of Herod the Great, and as a friend of the Roman Imperial Family he had the privilege of appointing the Jewish high priest and was also the custodian of the temple treasury. Being of Jewish descent, he was more than familiar with the Judaism and highly qualified to hear the case presented before him. Paul takes advantage of this opportunity not only to defend himself, but again to present the Gospel to unbelievers. As we prepare for today's scripture passage, take a few moments to present yourself before the throne of grace asking him to give you insight into his Word.



Read Acts 25:13-26:32 and answer the following questions.

Festus says the Jews from Jerusalem did not bring the charges against Paul that he expected. What was the case they presented against Paul? (v.18-19)

What does Festus openly confess to King Agrippa regarding Paul's case? (v.20)

In verse 25 Festus reiterated his verdict from the previous trial. What had been Festus' decision?

What does Festus want to come of the preceding before the king? (v.26-27)

Why do you think Paul devotes so much of his speech to reiterating his personal history as a Pharisee as well as his conversion story?

In verse 26 what are the things that Agrippa would have been familiar?

What is Agrippa's verdict upon hearing Paul's defense?

What does Agrippa say could have happened had Paul not appealed to Caesar?

Why was it necessary that Paul appealed to Caesar?

🔥 Agrippa is an example of a man who has known the truth his entire life yet still rejects it. He listens attentively to Paul, but finds him entertaining, not enlightening. He finds humor in Paul's attempt to share the truth with him. Why do you think it is so difficult for people like Agrippa to take the step of faith?

In Chapter 26 Paul spends a very long time detailing his personal history as a Pharisee, and then goes into a long discourse about his conversion, faith in Jesus and his mission to share the Gospel. While speaking before the Jews (in Chapter 22) he focused primarily on the continued "Jewishness" of the Way (mentioning Ananias as a devout and highly respected Jew) and that Jesus was the awaited

Messiah. Before the Sanhedrin Paul turned the debate to focus on the resurrection, a point the Sadducees did not believe in, but the Pharisees did. Paul drew a direct line of descent from the Pharisaic tradition to the followers of the Way. In so doing he established the Way as a valid sect in Judaism as it believed the same tenants as the Pharisees as to the promise of the resurrection of the dead. Now as he stands before Herod Agrippa – a Jew by descent, but fully immersed in the Hellenistic Gentile world, and also several high-ranking Roman officials, including the governor Festus, his appeal is not just to the “Jewish” king but also to the present Gentiles. In his discourse Paul takes time to turn his focus on the Lord’s call for Paul to share the Gospel among the Gentiles. The purpose of Paul’s speech is not only to present a defense against the charges brought against him, but to also share the Gospel with those before whom he stands. He took time and patience to explain that the Gospel is for Gentiles, as well as Jews, and that the Gentiles, too, have a share in God’s promises. Paul’s motives are sincere. He tells Agrippa that whether it takes a short time or long time he will continue to pray that all who hear his message will accept it (v.29).

Paul’s speech before Agrippa brings together all the themes of the previous speeches before the mob of Jews, the Sanhedrin, and Felix and Festus. No one is able to convict him of any of the charges presented against him by the Jews and it becomes increasingly clear that Paul has become a prisoner for his belief that Jesus is the resurrected Messiah. It is his preaching on this belief that has enraged the Jews to the point of their plotting his murder not once, but twice. The Roman authorities admit they have nothing with which to charge Paul, and only because he demanded his right to appeal to Caesar does Paul remain in chains. The alternative would have been his release and certain death at the hand of the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. These passages of Paul standing trial before the Jewish people, the Sanhedrin, the governor and ultimately the king of Judea strongly parallel Jesus’ trials where he too was found not guilty by the Roman authorities to any of the charges brought against him by the Jews.⁵ We should not conclude without noting that Paul’s testimony before King Agrippa was the fulfillment of Jesus’ commission that Paul would share the Gospel before kings (Acts 9:15). Jesus had prophesied to his disciples that day would come when

“... they will lay hands on you and persecute you. They will deliver you to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name. This will result in your being witnesses to them. But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.” Luke 21:12-15 (NIV)

Personal Reflection

In the speeches we studied this week Paul makes comments like “*I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day*” (Acts 23:1) and “*I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God*

⁵ Luke 23:14-15

Empowered by the Holy Spirit

and men” (Acts 24:16). Both of these statements reveal Paul’s devotion to honoring God by conducting his life in a righteous and blameless manner. He models the concept of “being Holy because I am holy” Peter describes in 1 Peter 1:13-16. Reflect on this passage and consider the connection of “being holy” and how that prepares one to receive *“words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict”* (Luke 21:15) through the empowering of the Holy Spirit.