

## 28. On to Jerusalem: Acts 21

Luke closed Acts 20 with an account of Paul's sad departure from Miletus. Acts 20:36-38 captures the sense of the grief of the Ephesian elders:

36 When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. 37 They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. 38 What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.

The final scene of sorrow and tears speaks for itself. Paul is off to Jerusalem.

### ***Paul's Journey to Jerusalem***

Acts 21:1-6

21 *After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea and sailed straight to Cos. The next day we went to Rhodes and from there to Patara.* 2 *We found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, went on board and set sail.* 3 *After sighting Cyprus and passing to the south of it, we sailed on to Syria. We landed at Tyre, where our ship was to unload its cargo.* 4 *Finding the disciples there, we stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.* 5 *But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray.* 6 *After saying good-bye to each other, we went aboard the ship, and they returned home.*



They found a ship in Patara sailing for Phoenicia, on the Syrian coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Perhaps, as they sailed south of Cyprus, Paul remembered his work there with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus and the sorcerer, Elymas, on his first journey about 10 years ago. Or perhaps he thought of Barnabas, whose home was in Cyprus. [See the notes on Acts 13:1-12.] At Tyre on the seacoast, they found disciples, with whom they stayed for seven days. The entire group of disciples, wives, and children said their *goodbyes* as the group boarded the ship.

### ***Agabus Prophesies Paul's Imprisonment in Jerusalem***

Acts 21:7-9

7 *We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for a day.* 8 *Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven.* 9 *He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.*

At Caesarea, they stayed with Philip, one of the seven [See notes on Acts 6 and 8]. The fact that the four daughters of Philip prophesied shows that spiritual gifts as listed in 1 Cor 12 were not restricted to men alone.

Paul ordered women to keep silent in the church in 1 Cor 14:33-35:

As in all the congregations of the saints, 34 women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says.

35 If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

His use of the phrases *all the congregations, in the churches, and in the church* makes this command applicable only to the assembly and not applicable outside the assembly. The same principle is implicit in his command to Timothy in 1 Tim 2:11-13: "11 A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. 12 I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent."

Here, the qualifying phrase is *to teach or to have authority over a man*. It is evident that women had a broad role in prophesying, serving, and teaching. In addition to the women, here, who were prophets, Paul describes Phoebe as a servant in Rom 16:1-3:

16 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant [diakonon; deacon] of the church in Cenchrea. 2 I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me.

Any reasonable reading of this passage would have Phoebe in a role beyond that role of *servant* ascribed to all Christians. Priscilla is a clear example of a woman teaching a man in the privacy of the home and not in the assembly. In Acts 18:26, Priscilla taught Apollos along with Aquilla: "When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately."

The church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century must take special care not to overly limit the work that women can do, thus denying their many talents to the work to the Lord. At the same time, the church must take seriously the commands of Paul regarding women in the assembly.

Acts 21:10-11

10 After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'"

Agabus, a prophet foretells the Paul's impending fate metaphorically, tying his hand and feet with Paul's belt. The prophecy, which foretells Paul's imprisonment by the Gentiles (Romans), does not prophesy bodily harm. Also important to note is the fact that although Agabus is the prophet, the Holy Spirit speaks. Although Luke does not say so, this Agabus could be that same Agabus who prophesied in Antioch of the impending worldwide famine in Acts 11:28-29:

28 One of them, named Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.)

Acts 21:12-14

12 When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. 13 Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." 14 When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."

Once again, through Luke's account, we witness the love of the disciples for Paul and the fear they experience concerning his fate. For Paul's part, he was willing to suffer and die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. Notice that Paul's companions, including Luke, were joining in to try to dissuade Paul from going. "The Lord's will be done," is reminiscent

of the Lord's own prayer before his offering in Jerusalem in Matt 26:42: "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

Acts 21:15-16

15 After this, we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. 16 Some of the disciples from Caesarea accompanied us and brought us to the home of Mnason, where we were to stay. He was a man from Cyprus and one of the early disciples.

While they were in Jerusalem, they would stay in the home of Mnason.

### James Instructs Paul to Join in Purification Rites

Acts 21:17-19

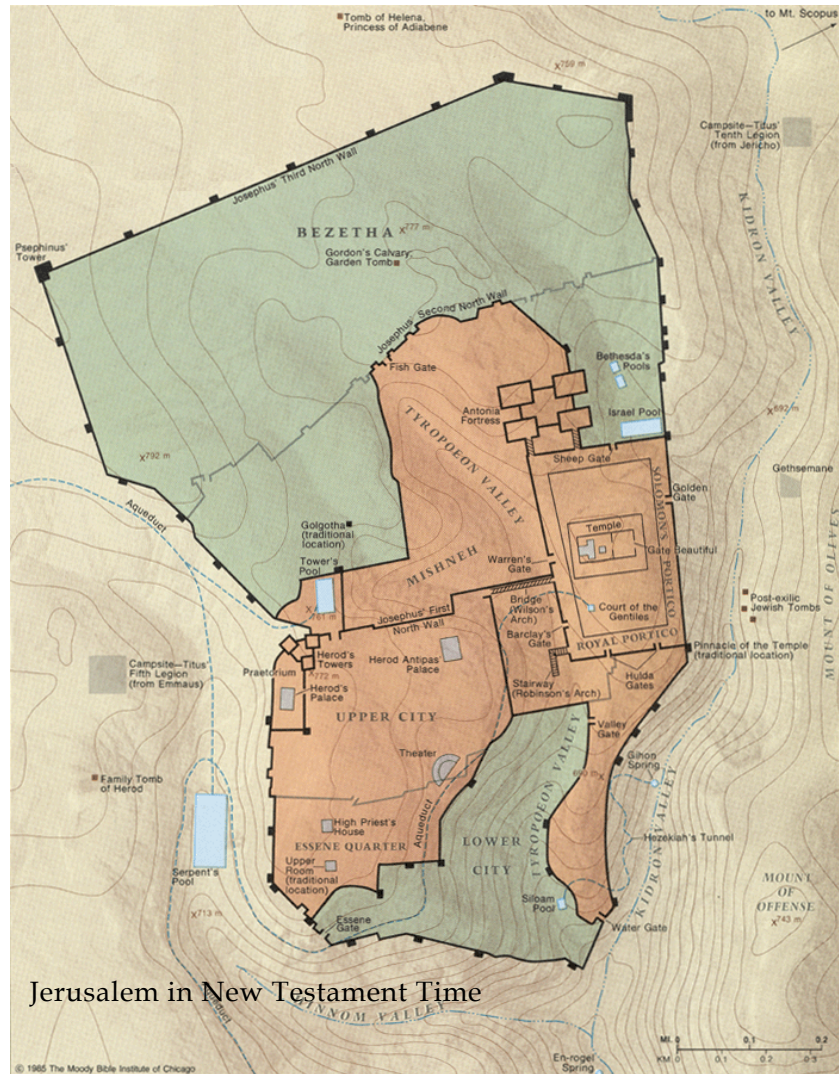
17 When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. 18 The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. 19 Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

James, and all the elders continue to play the leadership role in the church of Jerusalem. They had conferred on the issue of circumcision with the Antioch church in Acts 15:4: "4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them." It was in that meeting in Acts 15 that James presented the core of what would be their decision—a decision to which he refers in Acts 21:25, below:

25 As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.

Acts 21:20-25

20 When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. 21 They have been informed



*that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. 22 What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, 23 so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. 24 Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. 25 As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality."*

Luke has already recorded occasions where Paul accommodated the sensitivity of the Jews toward the necessity of keeping the customs of the Jews. However, the controversy here is special since "thousands of Jews have believed," and they were "all of them. . . . zealous for the law." In addition, rumors had preceded Paul that he was teaching Jews to turn away from Moses and not keep the Jewish customs. James' instructions were clear: Paul was to join in the purification rites so that the Jews would know that he was living in obedience to the law.

This is not the first time that Paul accommodated the Jewish customs. In Acts 16:1-3, he had Timothy circumcised to avoid conflict with the Jews:

16 He came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek. 2 The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. 3 Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

In Acts 18:18, Paul took a vow that required that his hair be cut—a vow very similar or the same as the one here in Jerusalem: "Before he sailed, he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken." On both occasions, the vows were most probably Nazirite Vows. [See notes on Acts 18:18-22.]

Acts 21:26

*26 The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.*

Paul purified himself along with men, went to the temple, and made an offering at the end of the days of purification. These actions make very clear that the Lord did not require Jewish Christians to stop keeping the customs of the law. However, Paul kept these customs as a matter of expediency and not as a matter of the law of the gospel. He explained his position clearly in 1 Cor 9:19-22:

19 Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 20 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. 21 To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law.

Paul was wide ranging in his application of this principle, extending it to Jews, Greeks, and the church of God in 1 Cor 10:31-33:

31 So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. 32 Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God— 33 even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved.

## **Asian Jews Stir up the Crowd against Paul**

Acts 21:27-29

*27 When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, 28 shouting, "Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple area and defiled this holy place." 29 (They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple area.)*

James' hope that the Jewish Christians would accept Paul clearly excluded Jews that were not Christians. For, Jews from Asia immediately stirred up the crowds, falsely accusing Paul alleging that he taught against the law and the temple. They further accused him of bringing Greeks into the temple and defiling it.

Acts 21:30-32

*30 The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. 31 While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. 32 He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.*

The whole city was in turmoil, and they dragged Paul into the temple and tried to kill him. When the Roman troops arrived, the Jews stopped beating Paul.

## **Paul, Arrested by the Romans, Asks to Speak**

Acts 21:33-22:1

*33 The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done. 34 Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. 35 When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. 36 The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Away with him!"*

*37 As the soldiers were about to take Paul into the barracks, he asked the commander, "May I say something to you?"*

*"Do you speak Greek?" he replied. 38 "Aren't you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the desert some time ago?"*

*39 Paul answered, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people."*

*40 Having received the commander's permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic: 22 "Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense."*

Acts 21 concludes with Paul's arrest, which, oddly, served as his rescue from death at the mob's hands. Paul, mistaken at first for an Egyptian terrorist, asked to speak. What follows is the first of Paul's dramatic defenses, which eventually led to his appeal to Caesar and his trip to Rome.