

## CHAPTER 35: Acts 21 thru 28 and Introduction to Paul's Letters

Paul is on his way from Caesarea up to Jerusalem and is accompanied by Luke. **When we arrived in Jerusalem, the [Christian] brothers welcomed us gladly. The next day Paul went in with us to see James, and all the elders were there. When Paul had greeted them, he began to explain in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. When they heard this, they praised God.** (Acts 21:17-20)

Reports have been circulating that Paul is urging Jews to abandon the Law of Moses. Of course this is not true at all. The only thing Paul had insisted on is that newly converted Gentiles not be forced to become Jews. This is what the Jerusalem Council had agreed to. The Christian brothers in Jerusalem are aware of all the trouble Paul has attracted, especially among the Jews. They suggest that Paul show the local Jews that he is NOT anti-Jewish. They request that Paul help four young Jewish Christians as they complete the Nazarite vows they have taken.

Paul had actually done this very thing toward the end on his second missionary journey. Let's do a quick flashback to his second missionary journey... **Paul, after staying many more days in Corinth, said farewell to the brothers and sailed away to Syria accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila. He had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because he made a [Nazarite] vow.** (Acts 18:18)

So, what is a Nazarite vow? It is an act of consecration to God. It is talked about in Numbers 6. There are several aspects to a Nazarite vow which you may recall from the story of Samson – (1) abstaining from alcohol; (2) not cutting your hair, and (3) not touching a dead body. For these four men their vow will involve going to the temple and making an offering. It was not unusual for many of the early Christians to continue practicing some Jewish traditions even following their conversion. The brothers ask Paul to pay for the offering and then accompany these four men to the temple. For the sake of unity, Paul agrees to do this.

Well, you can probably guess what happens when the Jerusalem Jews see Paul in the temple. They are not pleased. They seize the opportunity to get rid of this trouble-maker Paul once and for all. A riot ensues inside the temple complex. They grab Paul and accuse him of desecration, blasphemy and even insurrection. The wrath of all Jerusalem comes down upon Paul. It seems as though trouble follows Paul wherever

he goes! The crowd wants to kill Paul and begins to beat him. At the very last minute, however, Paul is rescued.

**While they were trying to kill [Paul], a report was sent up to the commanding officer of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. He immediately took soldiers and centurions and ran down to the crowd. When [the crowd] saw the commanding officer and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the commanding officer came up and arrested [Paul] and ordered him to be tied up with two chains.** (Acts 21:31-33) Recall the prophecy by Agabus earlier – that Paul would be tied up and handed over to the Gentiles, in this case Roman soldiers.

**[The commander] then asked [Paul] who he was and what he had done. But some in the crowd shouted one thing, and others something else, and when the commanding officer was unable to find out the truth because of the disturbance, he ordered Paul to be brought into the barracks.** (Acts 21:33-34). In the safety of the fortress the Roman commander is determined to find out exactly what Paul did to work the crowd up into such a frenzy. He has no idea who Paul is. He thinks that maybe Paul is some sort of dangerous criminal. So he proceeds to question him. At first he thinks that Paul might be the Egyptian who led a revolt four years earlier against Rome. But when Paul speaks to him in perfect Greek, it throws him for a loop. Paul's language and accent are not that of a wild-eyed radical. This is an educated and cultured man.

Paul introduces himself: **“I am a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of an important city. Please allow me to speak to the people.”** When the commanding officer had given him permission, Paul stood on the steps and gestured to people with his hand. **When they became silent, he addressed them in Aramaic.** (Acts 21:39-40) Aramaic is the native language of the mostly Jewish citizens of Judea at this time. And so now Paul stands up and speaks to the crowd in their language...

**“Brothers and fathers, listen to my defense that I now make to you.”** (When they heard that he was addressing them in Aramaic, they became even quieter.) **“I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated with strictness under Gamaliel according to the law of our ancestors, and was zealous for God just as all of you are today. I persecuted this Way [Christianity] even to the point of death...”** (Acts 22:1-4) Paul mentions that he actively pursued and persecuted many of the believers. But then something happened that changed all that.

Paul came face to face with Jesus on the road to Damascus. He tells the story about how he was blinded by a bright light and came to saving faith in Jesus. The crowd is intently listening to everything Paul says. Paul reveals to them a conversation he had with Jesus shortly after his conversion. This is actually new information for us. It is not mentioned earlier in the book of Acts. He says, **“I saw the Lord saying to me, ‘Hurry,**

**and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.’ I replied, ‘Lord, they themselves know that I imprisoned and beat those in the various synagogues who believed in You.’” (Acts 22:18-19) Paul adds, “I even actively participated in the killing of Stephen!”**

**“Then [Jesus] said to me, ‘Go, because I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”** (Acts 22:21) As soon as Paul mentions that buzz word “Gentiles” this quiet crowd turns against him. The people fly into a rage against Paul. This indicates the main problem that the Jews have with Paul. In their minds he has totally rejected the Jews and their beliefs and crossed over to embrace those heathen Gentiles, those barbarians! The Roman soldiers who occupy their country, this is what they picture, the enemy! Paul has gone over to the enemy. Their anger at Paul is rooted in their extreme prejudice against all Gentiles.

Upon seeing the crowd in an uproar, the commander of the Roman fortress pulls Paul back inside to protect him. Since he does not speak Aramaic, he has no idea what Paul had said and what had just happened. All he knows is that things were going well one minute and then suddenly things escalated out of control. The Roman commander is angry with Paul. He blames him for inciting the crowd. He orders Paul to be flogged. When Paul informs the soldiers that he is a Roman citizen, they become afraid because what they are about to do, beating a Roman citizen without a fair trial, is illegal. So now, not only are the streets of Jerusalem in an uproar, but now his prisoner, the very man who caused the disturbance, has been illegally bound.

Despite these setbacks, the Roman commander is determined to find out why the Jews are so angry with this man. To get some answers the commander brings Paul before the ruling body of the Jews, the Sanhedrin. This proves to be a complete waste of time. The various Jewish factions end up squabbling among each other and nothing gets resolved. When the Jews finally do turn their attention to Paul they try to hurt him. So the commander escorts Paul back into the fortress until he can figure out what to do.

**The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, “Have courage, for just as you have testified about Me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.”** (Acts 23:11) Remember, this has been Paul’s dream since his ministry in Ephesus – to go to Rome. Now Jesus Himself tells Paul that he WILL go there. This is great news for Paul!

The Jews become frustrated with the way the Romans are handling the Paul situation. They grow impatient. They decide to take matters into their own hands and plot to kill Paul. When the Roman commander discovers their plot he transfers Paul to Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast under the cover of darkness and heavily

guarded. This is where Paul will remain in protective custody until the governor of Judea, Antonius Felix, has a chance to hear Paul's case.

**After five days the high priest Ananias came down with some elders and an attorney named Tertullus, and they brought formal charges against Paul to the governor.** (Acts 24:1) They present a series of bogus charges against Paul. They accuse him of leading a rebellion against Rome, of teaching heresies, and of profaning the temple.

Paul then tells his side of the story. He explains what he was doing in the temple to begin with. He uses this as an opportunity to present his own religious views and to give his personal testimony. Basically Paul's response to Felix is, "There is no way I could possibly have done the things I am being accused of. That goes completely against everything I believe in and everything that I am."

Felix cannot condemn Paul as a criminal. He hasn't done anything wrong that he can see. But at the same time, he cannot release Paul. If he were to do so, the Jews most certainly would find Paul and kill him. So, in order to protect Paul and keep the peace, Felix orders that Paul remain in Roman custody here in Caesarea for now. **He ordered the centurion to guard Paul, but to let him have some freedom, and not to prevent any of his friends from meeting his needs.** (Acts 24:23) While he is held in Caesarea Paul is given a little more freedom. But he is still a prisoner of Rome.

Two more years go by. Paul remains in protective custody in Caesarea. Felix is replaced as governor by Porcius Festus. The arrival of a new governor means the reopening of Paul's case. The Jews request that the hearing be moved to Jerusalem. When Festus suggest to Paul that this might be a good idea, Paul speaks up: **"I have committed no offense against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar... I am standing before Caesar's judgment seat, where I should be tried. I have done nothing wrong to the Jews, as you also know very well. If then I am in the wrong and have done anything that deserves death, I am not trying to escape dying, but if not one of their charges against me is true, no one can hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar!"** (Acts 25:8-11)

**Then, after conferring with his council, Festus replied, "You have appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you will go!"** (Acts 25:12) The Caesar at this time is Nero.

During Paul's long wait in Caesarea, King Herod Agrippa II, the king of Judea, makes a courtesy visit to Governor Festus. This is the fourth King Herod we have seen so far. But we haven't heard from this one. Festus discusses Paul's unusual case with the king. The next day the governor, the king, and the queen array themselves in their royal apparel. Paul is brought before them. Standing in chains Paul gives an

impassioned defense and gives his personal testimony of how he was saved on the Damascus road. He even preaches the Gospel to them.

Festus interrupts Paul thinking that he's surely insane to be saying these things. But Agrippa is intrigued by what Paul says. There is this brief exchange at the end of Paul's remarks. **Agrippa said to Paul, "In such a short time are you persuading me to become a Christian?" Paul replied, "I pray to God that whether in a short time or a long time not only you but also all those who are listening to me today could become such as I am, except for these chains."** (Acts 26:28-29) We have no idea whether or not King Herod Agrippa ever came to faith, but Paul presents the Gospel to him here. The group adjourns in agreement that Paul is surely an innocent man. But because he has made an appeal to Caesar, Paul remains in Roman custody a little longer.

After more than two years of defense after defense and a whole bunch of legal wrangling, Paul's transportation to Rome by ship is finally set. You could say his ship has finally come in! He is escorted to the harbor and put on a ship headed for Rome. He remains under guard. We know that Paul's good friend Luke is with him on this voyage because once again Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, uses the terms "we" and "us."

The trip from Caesarea to Rome takes place during the fall. The prevailing headwinds in the Mediterranean Sea this time of year make travel in the open sea very difficult. For this reason the ship takes a route along the coastline and around Cyprus. At Myra the Roman commander learns that there is a better ship suited for the treacherous voyage ahead. He procures a larger merchant ship loaded with grain from Egypt on its way to Italy and he and his prisoners board it. Eventually the prevailing headwinds become so strong that the ship can no longer continue on its westward course. It turns south and heads for the island of Crete. The ship sails around Crete using that island as a windbreak. They dock at a port on the southern coast of Crete called Fair Havens. There they wait for more favorable weather conditions.

**Since considerable time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous because [it was late September or early October], Paul advised them, "Men, I can see the voyage is going to end in disaster and great loss not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives."** (Acts 27:9-10) Paul suggests that they wait out the winter on the island of Crete until better wind and weather conditions the following spring. Being a seasoned traveler, Paul knows what he is talking about. **But the centurion was more convinced by the captain and the ship's owner than by what Paul said.** (Acts 27:11) The Roman commander ends up listening to the wrong people. He will soon find himself in a big mess.

The ship's crew, enticed by the soft south winds, leaves the safety of the port. The gentle winds suddenly give way to a treacherous storm. The storm effectively pushes the ship away from the safety of Crete and out into the rough open sea.

The crew is barely able to keep the ship under control. The conditions grow worse and worse. The original travel plans are abandoned and the crew now concentrates on damage control. They lower the ship's topsail and its rigging to make the ship more stable in the high winds. Now the ship is at the mercy of the wind and waves. All night the wind howls and the seas toss the ship about. The next day the crew, seeing their vessel starting to take on water, lightens the load of the ship. They begin tossing their cargo overboard.

On the third day the crew lightens the weight of the ship even more by tossing the ship's tackle overboard. The tackle may be quite heavy, but it is vital for controlling the ship. At this point the ship's captain and crew are willing to part with their cargo and give up control of their ship in order to save their lives. Despite all the best efforts of the ship's crew, those on board gradually lose hope of surviving this terrible ordeal. Luke writes, **"We finally abandoned all hope of being saved."** (Acts 27:20)

It is at this point of complete despair that Paul offers these words of hope and encouragement: **"Men, you should have listened to me and not put out to sea from Crete, thus avoiding this damage and loss. And now I advise you to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only the ship will be lost. For last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve came to me and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul! You must stand before Caesar, and God has graciously granted you the safety of all who are sailing with you.' Therefore keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will be just as I have been told. But we must run aground on some island."** (Acts 27:21-26)

Of course, this doesn't happen right away. After all they are out in the middle of the ocean! For two more weeks the ship is adrift out in the open sea with no sails. Finally they get some hope that they are approaching land.

It is the early morning hours and still dark outside. The sailors take soundings – a weight attached to a known length of rope and lowered down below the ship. They can tell that the water depth is getting shallower. This indicates that they are approaching some sort of land mass. The crew knows that if it gets much shallower they will run aground on the rocks. Their situation is dire. They have no sails. The ship is drifting and they need to slow the ship's momentum. To do this they drop four anchors and drag them along the sea bottom. They cannot see much in the darkness. Daylight is still a few hours away. The weakened wooden vessel is about to crash on the jagged rocks

and when it does, it will surely break apart. The ship's crew begins to panic. It's every man for himself!

The sailors attempt to make a break for it in their lifeboat leaving the passengers to fend for themselves. However, Paul recognizes what they are doing and he alerts the Roman commander to it. This time the Roman commander listens to Paul. His soldiers slash the ropes holding the lifeboat and it falls into the water below and drifts away. Paul recognizes that if the ship and its passengers are going to be saved it will require this experienced crew to guide its vessel safely toward a beach and run aground there. God may have promised to save them, but He will use this boat's crew as His instruments to do so.

For several hours Paul encourages the passengers and crew to eat something. **As day was about to dawn, Paul urged them all to take some food saying, "Today is the fourteenth day you have been in suspense and have gone without food; you have eaten nothing. Therefore I urge you to take some food, for this is important for your survival. For not one of you will lose a hair from his head."** (Acts 27:33-34) Paul then gives thanks and eats some bread. The rest of the men also eat.

It's now starting to get light. With renewed strength and ambition, the crew makes ready to beach the ship on an approaching island. They lighten the load some more and identify a suitable spot, a beach, to run aground on. They maneuver the ship the best way they can and head toward the beach. Before they can reach the shore, however, the ship runs aground on a shoal and begins to break apart in the pounding surf.

**[The Roman centurion] ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land, and the rest were to follow, some on planks and some on pieces of the ship. And in this way all were brought safely to land.** (Acts 27:43-44) All 276 people on board the ship make it safely to dry land. The ship itself is completely destroyed by the pounding it sustains on the rocks. This is a nothing short of a miracle and it is exactly what God had told Paul would happen.

After drifting in the open sea for two weeks the island they finally run aground on is Malta. The local inhabitants are friendly. They treat the shipwreck victims with kindness. They build them a fire so they can dry off and keep warm. Luke mentions the adverse weather conditions. He says that **"it had started to rain and was cold."** (Acts 28:2)

While they are on the island of Malta two incidents occur that indicate how God's providential hand of power and protection is on Paul. First, while Paul is gathering wood for the fire, he is suddenly bitten by a deadly poisonous snake. **When the local people saw the creature hanging from Paul's hand, they said to one another, "No doubt this man is a murderer! Although he has escaped from the sea, Justice herself has not allowed him to live!"** However, Paul shook the creature off into the fire

**and suffered no harm. But they were expecting that he was going to swell up and suddenly drop dead. So after they had waited a long time and had seen nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.**  
(Acts 28:4-6)

Several days later Paul is directed to the bedside of a gravely ill man. He is suffering from fever and dysentery. **Paul went in to see him and after praying, placed his hands on him and healed him. After this had happened, many of the people on the island who were sick also came and were healed.**

**They also bestowed many honors, and when we were preparing to sail, they gave us all the supplies we needed.** (Acts 28:8-10) The people of Malta are sad to see their visitors go and make sure their ship is well-stocked.

After three months on Malta, Paul and the others board a large Alexandrian grain ship. They make the last leg of their journey without incident northward via Syracuse and Rhegium. Because Rome's harbor is not deep enough to receive their large ship, they are forced to dock 150 miles south of Rome at the port of Puteoli. From there they will walk the rest of the way to Rome.

**There [in Puteoli] we found some brothers and were invited to stay with them seven days. And in this way we came to Rome.** (Acts 28:14) After a week of rest and recovery Paul and those with him travel up to Rome along the Appian Way (much of this road has been preserved to this day). Many of the people from the church in Rome have been informed that Paul is coming and so they make their way south to greet Paul. They are thrilled to finally meet this man that they've heard so much about.

**When he saw them, Paul thanked God and took courage. When we entered Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.** (Acts 28:15-16) Paul finally makes it to Rome!

While he waits for his case to be heard by the Roman emperor Nero, Paul is under house arrest and receives many visitors. He invites the Jewish leaders who are living in Rome to come visit him. Paul tells them the entire story of how and why he had been arrested in Jerusalem several years before; how he had appealed his case to Caesar; how he had been held in Roman custody and eventually the whole story of his trip by ship from Caesarea. Strangely, none of them had ever received news about any of this from their Jewish friends back in Jerusalem. So this is all news to them.

Always eager to preach to his fellow Jews, Paul presents the Gospel. He shows them Jesus from their own scriptures. **From morning until evening [Paul] explained things to them, testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to convince them**



**about Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the prophets. Some were convinced by what he said, but others refused to believe. (Acts 28:23-24)**

How fitting it is that the last recorded words from Paul in the Book of Acts are him trying to convince his fellow Jews that their long-awaited Messiah has already come! The mixed reaction by the Jews to Paul's message is not surprising nor is it anything new. Whether it was the prophets of old or Jesus or the Apostles, the Israelite nation has consistently resisted and rejected God's truth whenever it was proclaimed to them.

Paul says, **“The Holy Spirit spoke rightly to your ancestors through the prophet Isaiah...”** (Acts 28:25) Then Paul quotes from Isaiah 6 where God informed Isaiah that the people will hear but not respond to the truth. **‘Go to this people and say, “You will keep on hearing, but will never understand, and you will keep on looking, but will never perceive. For the heart of this people has become dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have closed their eyes, so that they would not see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.”** (Acts 28:26-27).

Paul's point is that eight centuries later not much has changed!

God still loves His covenant people Israel. He wants them to be saved. This has never or will ever change. But God also loves the world. And so Paul preaches the Gospel of salvation to both his Jewish brothers and to the Gentiles. In doing so Paul is obeying the Great Commission, making disciples of ALL nations... proclaiming Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the farthest parts of the earth!

And here is how the book of Acts ends: **Paul lived [in Rome] two whole years in his own rented quarters and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with complete boldness and without restriction. (Acts 28:30-31)**

## INTRODUCTION TO PAUL'S LETTERS

Following the events in the book of Acts Paul remains in Rome for a while longer and writes what we know as his “Prison Epistles.” An “epistle” is simply a hand-written letter. From Rome Paul writes three letters to churches – Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians – and then one personal letter to Philemon. Paul finally does have his hearing with Nero and is set free. But these prison epistles were NOT his first letters.

Paul writes his very first letter to the Galatians from Antioch after his first missionary journey. This is a circular letter (passed around) written to the various churches that he had started in the region of Galatia.

On his second missionary journey, while in Corinth for a year and a half, Paul writes both of his epistles to the Thessalonians. These were in response to questions they have. If you recall Paul had been run out of Thessalonica and unable to finish his work and say everything he wanted to say to the new believers there.

On his third missionary journey, while in Ephesus for three years, he writes his first epistle to the Corinthians. In this letter Paul responds to serious sin issues that this church was dealing with. Paul then travels north into Macedonia. There Titus reports that the church at Corinth has repented. This prompts Paul to write his second epistle to the Corinthians. Paul feels compelled to visit the Corinthians in person to see how they are doing. While in Corinth he writes his epistle to the Romans.

Then Paul goes to Rome and writes the four prison epistles mentioned earlier.

After leaving Rome, Paul travels to the region of Macedonia. There he visits the churches in Berea, Thessalonica and Philippi. He writes his first letter to Timothy at this time. He then travels to Asia where he was reunited with Timothy at Ephesus and spends time mentoring him.

From Ephesus Paul's travels are somewhat debated. It is a common belief that Paul made a much desired trip to Spain. We don't know for sure. At some point during this period he stops off at Crete and visits Titus, Philemon and Onesimus. When he returns to Asia, Paul writes his letter to Titus. He then goes back to Corinth and to Miletum. He spends the winter in Nicopolis and then travels to Troas.

At Troas Paul is arrested and shipped back to Rome. The exact story behind Paul's arrest and the charges are uncertain. By this point Nero's reign of terror against Christians has escalated. Many scholars believe that Paul was betrayed and turned over to the Roman authorities by a man called Alexander the coppersmith. Paul is accused of being the leader of the now-illegal group called Christians.

In Rome, Paul's imprisonment is not at all like what we read about in the book of Acts. It is more like the dark, damp dungeon you associate with him in other places. In Rome Paul is sentenced to die for being a Christian. Shortly before Paul's scheduled execution he writes the last of his letters, Second Timothy. Sadly Paul pens these words: "**Only Luke is with me.**" (2 Timothy 4:11)

Next time we'll explore the rich content in the Pauline Epistles, Paul's 13 letters.