

ACTS 21:8-40 – Paul’s Final Visit to Jerusalem

Just to bring you up to where we are at -- Paul is just wrapping up his third missionary journey. He has arrived in Caesarea. That is a port city. He has been gone a long time. He just came from Tyre. The last time we studied this, he had been urged NOT to go to Jerusalem by his Christian brothers there. But Paul is determined to go to Jerusalem. We left off last time in v 8 and that is where we are going to pick it up.

But before we do...

The question was raised about Paul’s wife. What do we know about Paul and his marital status and so forth. Well, I did a little research and here is what I found out. First, the good question is: “Was Paul married? Most Bible scholars believe that YES, he was. One reason they give is what he says in 1 Corinthians 9:5. He is asking this question: “Do we [Barnabas and Paul] not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and [Peter]?” This question he is asking here implies he has a wife. Another reason that supports that Paul was married is that several of the Early Church Fathers (2nd and 3rd Century A.D.) attest in their writings that Paul was married. These include Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea and Origen of Alexandria. So, there is some evidence that, at least at one time, Paul had a wife.

But we know from our study in the book of Acts that Paul’s wife does not accompany him on any of his missionary journeys. At least, Luke never mentions her. Which leads to the obvious question then – “If Paul is married, why is his wife never mentioned?” Several possibilities have been put forth. One is that she was a good and understanding wife who quietly stayed home and endured the long separations from her husband. Perhaps. Another possibility is that when Paul was converted to Christianity, his wife (who would have been a Jew) left him. This was pretty common and still is in many parts of the world where you have families that will disown their own family members who embrace Christianity. That still happens today. And then, in Philippians Chapter 3,

Paul says this: "Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things..." (Philippians 3:8). "All things" could refer even to losing a wife. Another possibility that has been put out there is that Paul's wife died early on leaving him a widower and childless.

There are all kinds of wild speculations. One of them (which I do not embrace) that I found interesting is a theory that Paul later married Lydia, the businesswoman from Philippi whom he led to the Lord and baptized (Acts Chapter 16). Advocates of this theory suggest that these two became romantically involved at some point during his ministry. After all, he was staying at her house. While I do not particularly buy that, it makes for a good story. BUT there is absolutely no proof of this in the book of Acts. It is never stated in the Bible anywhere. It is never stated in any of his letters. It is just a guess by some people. So, while we do not know for sure Paul's marital status during much of the book of Acts, we can be reasonably certain that at some point in his life he was married. We just do not know where his wife was at this time. We also know from Paul's writings that he held a very high view of marriage. We are never told specifically any details about Paul's wife. We do not know her name. We do not know anything about her or what happened to her. It is never mentioned in scripture. It remains a mystery to this day. I don't know if that helps or not, but the Bible just does not say anything about her.

Well, back to our lesson. Paul is in Caesarea. There he meets up with a familiar character – a man we met for the first time back in Acts Chapter 8.

READ Acts 21:8-9

Do you remember Philip the evangelist? He was the one who witnessed to the Ethiopian court official and baptized him back in Chapter 8. It mentions here, in v 8, that he was "one of the seven," a reference to the seven men chosen by the early church to serve in ministry (in Acts Chapter 6). One of those was Philip and one of those was Stephen. We all know about Stephen (the first Christian martyr). Here it is 22 years later

and we see that Philip is now living in Caesarea. He has a family and he finally crosses paths with the Apostle Paul.

Philip's four grown daughters have a remarkable gift – the gift of prophecy. The English verb "to prophesy" comes from the Greek word meaning "to speak under inspiration." This refers to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Luke does not tell us what it is that they prophesied, but it has something to do with the things of God.

I want to remind you of Peter's sermon at Pentecost. In that sermon he quotes from Joel Chapter 2: "It shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and **your daughters** [my emphasis] shall prophesy... Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out My Spirit" (Joel 2:28-29). This is what Peter quotes from the prophet Joel in Acts Chapter 2 in his sermon. Philip's daughters are doing just that. They are prophesying. This is fulfilling scripture. That is what I want you to see. But they are not the only ones who are prophesying.

READ Acts 21:10-12

Here is Agabus, a true prophet of God, echoing the same warning that Paul heard from his Christian brothers in Tyre (Acts 21:4). Agabus says that trouble awaits Paul in Jerusalem. Of course, Agabus is quite dramatic in his presentation to Paul conveying this message. This latest warning prompts Luke and some of Paul's friends to implore Paul not to go to Jerusalem – "Paul, don't go!" At this point Paul still has a chance to turn back. It is not too late for him to change his plans. But what does he do?

READ Acts 21:13

You can see Paul's mindset. He has his mind made up.

READ Acts 21:14

That is a very important statement they just made right there. I mentioned this last time when I was giving application for that lesson – Sometimes godly, well-meaning people will try to keep us from going a

certain direction with our lives. And why is that? Because they care about us and they do not want to see us get hurt or suffer. This is the case here with Paul. These people really care about Paul. They do not want to see anything bad happen to him there in Jerusalem. They do not want to see him hurt – all the things Agabus has been talking about happening. They do not want that. But Paul feels strongly that God wants him to go to Jerusalem. He is convinced in his heart that going to Jerusalem IS, in fact, God's will, despite what these people are saying. There is an old expression that goes like this: "The battle for the mind is won in the heart." Realizing that Paul has his mind made up, his friends say, "Let the will of the Lord be done." And at that point, they leave Paul in God's hands.

READ Acts 21:15-16

Luke and some of the disciples from Caesarea walk with Paul the 60 miles or so, uphill, all the way to Jerusalem. They head to this place – "the house of Mnason." This man Mnason is an older gentleman who is a long-time member of the Jerusalem church. He is well-respected in the community. Other than that, we know very little about him.

Before we move on, I want to say something about this next section we are about to get into. When I first studied it, frankly, it took me by surprise. It shows how much the Jerusalem church's love and their missionary zeal has diminished ever since Pentecost, nearly three decades earlier. To me these verses are a sad commentary on the spiritual condition of the Jerusalem church at this time.

READ Acts 21:17

So far, so good. It has been approximately five and a half years since Paul last saw his Christian brothers here in Jerusalem (Acts Chapter 18). You would think that this would be a happy reunion for Paul. But do not be fooled by this one verse. As we are about to see, something is not quite right in the hearts of these believers.

READ Acts 21:18-19

These are the things we have been reading about in the previous chapters on his missionary journeys. Pretty exciting stuff, right? A lot of things that God has been doing. So, Paul recaps his missionary journeys. Now, you can just imagine the excitement in Paul's voice as he tells his brothers about the hundreds, even thousands of Gentiles who have been saved in places like Athens and Ephesus and Corinth and Thessalonica and Philippi and Troas. Paul relates story after story of prison and persecution, about speaking to all those people at Mars Hill, about the miracles and the mighty movement of the Holy Spirit. I would dare say that the Jerusalem brothers have never heard stories like these. I want you to notice is their reaction to Paul's testimony...

READ Acts 21:20

"And when they heard it, they glorified God" (Acts 21:20a). That part of this verse is fine. The problem comes in the statement that follows...

"And they said to him [Paul], 'You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law...'" (Acts 21:20b).

Their response to Paul's exciting report of literally thousands of Gentiles being saved throughout Europe and Asia is basically this (I am paraphrasing): "Big deal, Paul. Here in Jerusalem, there are thousands of Jews being saved and they are all zealous of the Law." The strong implication is that, unlike Paul's Gentile converts, these Jewish converts are zealous for the Law. They are good upstanding citizens. They are not barbarians. They are zealous for the Law. They are good, godly people. What you get a sense of when you hear this and read this is their spiritual pride. The divide had long existed between Jew and Gentile and it is alive and well here in the Jerusalem church.

Have you ever had someone pour cold water all over you when you tried to share some fantastic news with them? Has that ever happened to you? That is essentially what is happening to Paul here.

The Jerusalem elders are not finished though. They continue their less-than-encouraging response...

READ Acts 21:21

Is that true? Is that what Paul had been teaching? NO. Paul had never, not one time, told the Jews NOT to follow the Law and NOT to be circumcised. That was never a part of his message. What he DID teach was that Jewish believers should not FORCE the Law and circumcision on the Gentile converts. The things the elders are saying are merely rumors. The Christian community of Jerusalem had heard false rumors about Paul. Apparently, the elders believed these rumors based on how they are relaying it to Paul. In essence, Paul has been presumed guilty until he can prove himself innocent. I find all of this to be indicative of spiritual pride that exists in the Jerusalem church at this time.

We need to understand where most of these Jerusalem Christians are coming from. They had been converted from Judaism. Paul himself had been. They are a bit prejudiced against Gentiles. That is part of the culture they have been raised up in. This group here in Jerusalem is the same group that had stirred up the debate that led to the Council of Jerusalem back in Acts Chapter 15 – the same bunch. We can see that the decision rendered by that council years before had apparently not resonated with these believers.

So, Paul understands what is going on here. He understands what they are saying. He writes this to the Galatians (there was a mixture of Gentile and Jewish believers in the Galatian churches) – Paul says this in Galatians 6:13: “For those who are circumcised (speaking of the Jewish believers) do not even keep the Law themselves (because Christ had set them free from that), but they desire to have you (Gentile believers) circumcised, that they may boast in your flesh.” That is what is going on here and Paul sees it. He knows what is going on.

The Jerusalem brothers continue talking to Paul...

READ Acts 21:22

The Jerusalem church is aware of all the trouble that Paul seems to attract everywhere he goes. They are aware of the various commotions he has stirred up. They do not want anything like that to happen here in Jerusalem. They fully expect that, when the Jews discover that Paul is in town, that more than likely trouble is going to erupt. One of the options is they could do what they did before and sneak Paul out of town. But, instead, they propose a little test that in their minds they believe will prove to the Jews in Jerusalem once and for all that Paul is, in fact, a pro-Jewish Christian.

READ Acts 21:23

This vow is not a Christian vow. It is a Jewish vow. It is called a Nazarite vow. By the way, that has nothing to do with being from Nazareth. The term Nazarite means "dedicated one," one who is separated or consecrated, and it comes from Numbers Chapter 6.

[Note: Numbers 6:1-21 gives three restrictions associated with a Nazarite vow. (1) Abstain from wine or fermented drink; (2) Do not cut hair during service; and (3) Do not touch a dead body, human or animal.]

This is something that Paul himself had done during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:18). I did not talk about it because it was not important at the time. Even though Paul practiced this, he never discusses it in any of his letters. It is strictly a Jewish practice. Paul is a Christian first and foremost, but he still, on occasion, practiced some things related to his Jewish heritage, like this. It is a part of who he is. By the way, there was a famous person in the Old Testament that we know was under a Nazarite vow. Do you remember who that was? Samson. It is an Old Testament practice, a Jewish thing. But Paul never forces his Jewish ways on his Christian brothers. All these allegations that they are making about him are false.

There is a purification process that goes along with this vow and that is described in the next few verses.

READ Acts 21:24-26

Paul is asked to help these four Jewish Christians to complete their Nazarite vows. This is something that Paul had practiced himself. He knows how to do it. He knows the ropes. It involves taking a costly offering, presenting it to the priest and sacrificing it at the altar in the temple. Paul is basically being asked by the Jerusalem elders to pay for their offering and accompany them to the temple; to be their mentor. Paul agrees to do this. For one week (which is how long this takes), for the sake of peace and unity, Paul does what he has been asked to do.

Let me stop here and answer a couple of questions that are on people's minds about Acts Chapter 21 and Paul. The first question that people ask is, "Was it God's will for Paul to go to Jerusalem?" Remember, he had been urged not to go by godly, well-meaning people. But Paul insisted on going. So, was it God's will for him to go to Jerusalem in the first place? People have debated that. I personally believe that it WAS (because I have read ahead and see how God used the events there to get him to Rome). A lot of bad things happened to Paul. But I believe that it was. And Paul expressed how strongly he felt God leading him to go. So, I am not going to argue with God's leading on Paul's life. I would not argue with God's leading on your life either if you expressed it to me. I am going to believe you. "OK, God's leading you. You go!"

The second thing that people ask is related to this incident that we just read about. "Why did Paul agree to do this? Why did he agree to take the risky move of going to the temple complex where there could be trouble. Why would he do this?" I am going to answer that and it comes from First Corinthians Chapter 9: "To the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law" (1 Corinthians 9:20). Ultimately, Paul's motive for going into the temple with these four men was to lead people to Christ. That is what is on Paul's heart. That is why he does what he does. He is fully aware of the chance he is taking.

Everything is going along just fine. No problems. He has been there for seven days. And then...

READ Acts 21:27-29

Again, false accusations. Paul NEVER taught the Jews to forsake Judaism. We talked about that. And the four guys he brought in were Jewish Christians. They were Jews. It says, "they supposed that Paul had brought him [Trophimus the Ephesian] into the temple." But there is no evidence that Paul actually did this. The accusations being brought against Paul are totally unfounded. But since when is one's hatred ever concerned about the truth? These Jews just want to get Paul!

Paul finds himself in this very precarious situation. He is inside the temple and he is trapped in there. He is at the mercy of this angry mob. What I want you to remember is that Paul would never have been in the temple in the first place if he had not been asked by the Jerusalem elders to go. It was not as though Paul asked, "Can I go to the temple?" No. They asked him to go.

READ Acts 21:30

Have you ever tried to reason with an angry mob? Good luck with that! I wonder what the elders of the Jerusalem church are thinking at this point. The whole city "was stirred up." Everybody knew what was happening.

READ Acts 21:31-32

Make no mistake about it. This mob's intention is clear. They want to kill Paul. Fortunately for Paul the Roman authorities intervene just in time. When the rioters see the well-armed Roman soldiers approaching with swords drawn, they back off.

READ Acts 21:33

Paul is handcuffed and taken prisoner by the Romans. Little does Paul realize that he is going to remain a prisoner for two years. He will also have his dream fulfilled of going to Rome. I am sure that he never envisioned that it would happen this way. The Roman commander, referred to in v 31 as "the tribune of the cohort," naturally wants to know

what it is that Paul had done to get the mob all worked up into a frenzy. He knows he has done something. This guy has done something terrible and he might even be a dangerous criminal. So, the Roman commander turns first to the mob to hear their side of the story.

READ Acts 21:34-36

Typical mob. Everybody is yelling and shouting. They all want to get Paul. He is a rebel. He is no good. He has blasphemed. He has profaned the temple. He has done this or he has done that. They are all shouting different things, cursing, and fists flying. The mob suddenly sees the soldiers taking Paul away to the safety of the barracks and they become agitated.

The "barracks," v 34, refers to the Antonian Fortress which was connected to the Temple complex. This is where the Roman soldiers would have been stationed. That was the barracks. This way the Romans could have easy access to the city or to the temple.

The soldiers, sensing that this crowd might turn violent and seeing Paul's weakened condition, physically pick him up and carry him up to the safety of the barracks.

READ Acts 21:37-38

We see here what is in the mind of the Roman commander. He thinks that Paul is this Egyptian who had led a revolt four years before against the Roman government. The Greek historian Josephus mentions that the leader of this particular revolt had just disappeared. No one knew where he went. Obviously, the commander thinks that Paul could be this missing revolutionary leader. When Paul starts speaking to him in Greek, it takes him by surprise. Paul's accent and his language give him away. The commander realizes that Paul is no wild-eyed radical. He is an educated and cultured man. He can tell that from the way he is speaking. From this point on the Roman commander takes a totally different view of whoever this guy is, this mysterious prisoner.

Well, if Paul is NOT that Egyptian scoundrel, who is he? Paul now introduces himself...

READ Acts 21:39

The Roman commander thinks about it for a moment. The crowd is still milling around outside. They are still worked up quite a bit. Maybe Paul can persuade them to disperse peacefully. That is what he wants. He does not want to get in trouble with his bosses. Maybe he can help calm the crowd down. So, he gives Paul permission to speak to the crowd. Remember, he is there on the safety of the steps with the crowd below.

READ Acts 21:40

What Paul says we will get into next time. This is going to be his first defense. Paul will have five "defenses" – two with the Jews and three with the Gentiles (Romans). He will have five defenses over the next few chapters. This will be the first of his defenses before this Jewish crowd here.

There is a lot here. What applications can we take away from this? These are just a few I came up from this action-packed chapter...

- (This first one we covered last time) Do not allow well-meaning people to steer you away from doing what you believe God wants you to do. To Paul's credit, he stuck to God's plan (as he understood it), regardless of the consequences.
- God's plans for your life may turn out to be different from your own plans. None of us can predict how life will turn out. Paul could not. Paul would never have predicted this. We must leave the future in God's hands. Trust that He knows what He is doing.
- Do not believe the negative rumors you hear about others. Also, do not make assumptions about them. Investigate the facts for yourself and then, draw well-informed conclusions. In this lesson we saw that the Jerusalem elders, the Jews in the temple complex, and the Roman commander all started out with

negative views of Paul. Only one of those three takes the time to find out the truth! That is the Roman commander, as we will see.

- Whatever you decide to do, make sure you do it with the right motive. That is really important.
- Life is hard even when you are in God's will. See Paul. See Jesus. Paul's life will NOT be easy over the next few years. We are going to see that as we finish out our study in Acts, what Paul's life is like. He is completely, at least as he sees it and as he gives testimony of it, in God's will. And yet all these negative things happened to him.