

The Imitation of Christ

Acts 21

PRAYER

In Acts chapter 21, we'll follow Paul as he follows Christ to Jerusalem, and into the jaws of his enemies. We'll see that despite Paul's labors, and despite visible fruit in the Gentile churches, Paul is not as popular in Jerusalem as he is elsewhere. There is resentment and suspicion as to what Paul has been teaching. Paul knows that. And so he is going to Jerusalem *personally* to ensure that the gifts he has been collecting are received in the spirit of unity, and that he has a chance to answer the charges of his enemies. What Paul has done in Asia and Greece to ensure that Jews and Gentiles **share** their common inheritance, he must now explain to the Jews in Jerusalem. As he wrote to the church at Ephesus (4:4-6), "*There is one body and one Spirit, ...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all...*" But that's not how many of the believers in Jerusalem see it. *Not yet...*

Please turn to Acts 21.

^{NAU} **Acts 21:1** When we had parted from them and had set sail, we ran a straight course to Cos and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara; ² and having found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. ³ When we came in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left, we kept sailing to Syria and landed at Tyre [some 400 miles away]; for there the ship was to unload its cargo. ⁴ After looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem.

We have two choices in interpreting verse 4. Either the Spirit is saying 'don't go to Jerusalem' and Paul is being disobedient; or else the Spirit is warning Paul through these men to expect trouble in Jerusalem. In that case, **THEY** are concluding that Paul should not go. Last week, we read Paul's understanding of it in chapter 20 verses 22-23. He said, "*And now, behold, bound in spirit [or, being in captivity to the Spirit], I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.*" (Act 20:22-23 ^{NAU})

So we see that Paul has been told this same thing by the Spirit – that bonds and afflictions await him – but he was **NEVER** told, and there was **NEVER** a reason, to stay safely at home. It seems clear that what Paul hears through these men is their own conclusion. Paul came to a different conclusion. He isn't trying to divine what

God might have in mind by the trials that await him. He isn't trying to figure out if they are good or bad or whether to avoid them. Rather (*and this is important*), his primary concern is how to respond to such adversity when it arises. For example, when Paul heard reports of a plot against him in Acts 20, he didn't ignore the reports. He acted prudently by choosing a different route to his destination. We'll come back to this idea shortly.

⁵ When our days there were ended, we left and started on our journey, while they all, with wives and children, escorted us until *we were* out of the city. **After kneeling down on the beach and praying**, we said farewell to one another. ⁶ [this is reminiscent of Paul's departure from the Ephesians, isn't it?] **Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home again** [meaning the believers who accompanied Paul out of town]. ⁷ **When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais** [that's about 30 mi. south, halfway to Caesarea], **and after greeting the brethren, we stayed with them for a day**. [Notice Paul has sought out the local body of believers each time to give them encouragement and news – to *fellowship* with them. He's letting them know what God is doing elsewhere].

⁸ **On the next day we left and came to Caesarea** [That's a large coastal city which Herod the Great rebuilt into a jewel of the Roman Empire. It's about 55 miles NW of Jerusalem. You may recall that Peter baptized Cornelius here in **Acts 10**], **and entering the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven** [meaning one of the seven deacons we read about in **Acts 8**], **we stayed with him**. ⁹ **Now this man had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses**. [In **Acts 2**, Peter quoted Joel's prophecy that in these last days, their sons and daughters would prophesy. Well here we see the fulfillment of it, We also see the interconnectedness of the New Testament. It's woven together here in Acts not only by Luke's narrative, but also by the hand of God. These believers cross paths again and again as they lay the foundation of the Church together. *We're beginning to see the pattern of God's tapestry emerge, aren't we?*]

¹⁰ As we were staying there for some days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" Again, he is NOT telling Paul to stay away. He is *confirming* that Paul will go to Jerusalem. The Jews will have him bound, and he will be delivered into the hands of the Gentiles – the Roman soldiers. But how do the others react to this news from the prophet Agabus? ¹² **When we had heard this, we as well as the local residents began begging [Paul] not to go up to Jerusalem**. The "we" is Luke.

This prophecy from Agabus confirms our understanding of verse 4 – those hearing the news from the Spirit concluded on their own that Paul should not go. **The Spirit didn't say that.** By the way, we saw Agabus in **Acts 11** when he predicted the great famine. That prophecy is what prompted Paul to take up a collection at the time to support Jerusalem. This is years later and a *new collection* has been taken up. Last week we saw it is being carried to Jerusalem by men from various Asian and Greek churches. They want to show the solidarity of the Gentile churches with the Jerusalem church. It's a *statement* that they don't represent the *Pauline* churches. Instead, *they represent ONE church*; the Church over which Jesus Christ is their common Head. *Interesting, isn't it?*

¹³ Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to **die** at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." ¹⁴ And since he would not be persuaded, **we fell SILENT**, remarking, **"The will of the Lord be done!"** [Doesn't this sound like Peter imploring Christ not to go to the cross? "May it never be!" he cried. But Christ replied to Peter, "Get behind me Satan!" *Peter was tempting him not to go.* (Mat 16:22-23) Paul is likewise COMPELLED to go to Jerusalem, and likewise he will not be dissuaded.]

¹⁵ After these days we got ready and started on our way up to Jerusalem. ¹⁶ *Some of the disciples from Caesarea also came with us, taking us to Mnason [or Jason] of Cyprus, a disciple of long-standing with whom we were to lodge.* ¹⁷ After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. ¹⁸ And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. [As we learned in Chapter 15, *James the Just*, earthly half-brother of Jesus, is the leader of the church at Jerusalem] ¹⁹ After [*Paul*] had greeted them, he *began* to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

This is a theme in Paul's journeys: he relays what the Spirit is doing through His people to bring about God's will in the world. ***He's not bragging; he's affirming that the Gospel is for the Gentiles too.*** But Paul also uses these affirmations to disarm his opponents. He has come to Jerusalem to deliver the monies collected from the Gentile churches. He is worried that because of local opposition, his service and these gifts may not be acceptable to them. He mentioned it in his letter to the Romans, 15:30-31. He asked them to pray for him, "that I may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints." ^{NKJ} The NLT reads, **Pray also that the believers there will be willing to accept the donation I am taking to Jerusalem.** That translation better conveys the flavor of the conflict here, as we'll see.

Acts 21:20 And when they heard it they *began* glorifying God; and they said to him, [**changing the subject**] "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law;²¹ and they have been told about you, that you are teaching **all the Jews who are among the Gentiles** to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs."²² "What, then, is *to be done*? **THEY** will **certainly** hear that you have come.

This isn't a threat or a criticism. They're just laying out the facts of the situation. They are telling Paul that Christianity is not about the Gentiles only, which is Paul's ministry. Thousands of **Jews** are coming to the faith too – perhaps more of them than the Gentiles. The fact that Paul has been preaching Grace apart from the Law is causing confusion. Jews attending the Gentile churches are hearing a different teaching from Paul than what they hear and see in Jerusalem. Paul doesn't distinguish Jew from Gentile. He teaches both groups the same thing: *that they don't have to atone for sin at the Temple. Christ is their Atonement.*

James and the others are caught between a rock and a hard place. This is a Jewish congregation in a Jewish city. Believing and non-believing Jews alike think that Paul is teaching against the Law and the Temple. They're right. ***But James and the others aren't denying salvation by grace.*** They are simply pointing out that converted Jews still embrace the sacrificial laws. **In these believers' eyes, it is the Law PLUS Christ.** They are appeasing their unbelieving Jewish friends and the Jewish rulers by *acting* Jewish. That's how they survive in a hostile city. They don't want to give the Jews any excuse for retribution. Of course WE TODAY would **never** compromise our beliefs to look like the world around us, **would** we?

Moreover, if James accepts these gifts from the Gentiles, it implies that he supports Paul's teaching. It will look like he's taking sides *against these Jewish believers – endangering their lives.* On the other hand, if James rejects these gifts from the Gentiles, it implies that Gentiles are a separate class of Christians, thus splitting the Church into two camps – *Judaic* and *Pauline*. They're now in a dilemma.

And so they propose that Paul do something which will look to the **Jews** like he is under the Law, and it will look to the **Gentiles** like it is of grace and *not* the Law. Here is their proposition: VERSE 23, "**Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow;** [meaning a Nazarite vow¹] ²⁴ **take them and purify**

¹ See Numbers 6

yourself along with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law.

[Now they will remind Paul of the concession this church made to the Gentiles, affirming that salvation is by grace alone, and not by keeping the Ceremonial Law.] ²⁵ "But concerning the **Gentiles** who have believed, we wrote [*a letter*], having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication."

They're referring to the letter written 7 years earlier (in Acts 15) that the **Gentiles do not have to become Jews first**. They don't need to be circumcized or observe the Law. BUT, they're saying, **JEW**s will **remain** Jews, and they **WILL** obey the Law. PAUL is a JEW and he will **prove** it by observing this Nazarite vow. What may surprise you, is that **Paul agrees to do it**. He's done it before, as in Acts 18:18 where he shaved his head. In fact, having been out of town, Paul *must* purify himself before entering the Temple. But Paul understands that *it is a sign and symbol of his consecration to God, not of his bondage to the Law*. Can you see in Paul what you saw in Jesus when he went to be baptized by John? ¹⁴ **And John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?"** ¹⁵ **But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."** Then he allowed Him. (Mat 3:14-15 NKJ) It wasn't necessary, but it was fitting. It set an example. **Paul is imitating Christ**.

²⁶ Then Paul took the men, and the next day, purifying himself along with them, went into the temple giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them. [So far, so good. But Paul must go to the temple on the 3rd and 7th days as well – putting his life at risk each time. Again we see the image of Christ, who went up to Jerusalem for a week, and entered the Temple courts, putting his life at risk each time. *Paul is literally walking in the steps of Christ as he does all this*. As we saw, Paul is compelled to do this, just as Christ was compelled to go to the cross praying, "Not my will, but Yours." But this isn't **Passover** week, and Paul isn't a sacrifice for sin – this is the **Harvest** Celebration, and Paul has been harvesting the ripened wheat (John 4:35). Paul is not a victim here, no matter what happens, just as Christ was not a victim.]

Verse 27: **When the seven days were almost over, the Jews from Asia**, [these are Paul's enemies, who have travelled from the territory he has been evangelizing – the ones who employed assassins to kill Paul – the ones who have been spreading these rumors about his teaching which believing Jews here in Jerusalem have

heard] The Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, *began* to stir up all the crowd and laid hands on him, ²⁸ crying out, "**Men of Israel, come to our aid!** This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the Law and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." ²⁹ For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. [No Gentile was allowed past the Court of the Gentiles so as to enter the temple. It was a capital offense, *punishable by death*. It said so on the walls.]

³⁰ Then all the city was provoked, and the people rushed together, and taking hold of Paul they dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut. [The Temple Police didn't want any bloodshed to defile the Temple so they sealed off the area – now we know why James and the others were so worried. The least thing might set off a riot, and Paul's appearance in the Temple did the trick. The very thing the church feared has come upon them. ***How will Paul respond?***]

³¹ While they were seeking to kill him, a report came up to the commander of the *Roman* cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. ³² At once he took along *some* soldiers and centurions and ran down to them; and when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. [What Paul was warned about by the Spirit has come upon him.]

³³ Then the commander came up and took hold of him, and ordered [*Paul*] to be bound with two chains [just as Agabus prophesied]; and he *began* asking who he was and what he had done [apparently asking folks in the crowd]. ³⁴ But among the crowd some were shouting one thing *and* some another, and when he could not find out the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. [Jesus said, "Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. (Mat 5:11 ^{NAU}) Well, for Paul, today's the day – even though it's just another day at work.]

This must have looked like the mob surrounding Christ, shouting "Crucify him! Crucify him!" (Lk 23:21) Last week we learned that leaders set a good example, expecting their example to be imitated. Well, Christ set THIS example for Paul. ***And in response, we see Paul's imitation of Christ.*** God placed Paul in these circumstances through a series of events beyond his control. Paul's obligation was not to change those circumstances, nor to avoid their consequences, but to respond to them in Christlike fashion. ***That's what Paul is doing here.***

That's what WE are called to do as well. We may never find ourselves in Paul's position of being arrested for his faith, but we may find ourselves in similar conflicts. How will YOU respond to those circumstances and pressures? How ARE you responding? Do you know Jesus well enough to be able to imitate him in the circumstances of your own life?

We'll stop reading here for today. I want to finish up by briefly explaining Paul's teaching concerning Law and Grace. It has been the source of confusion for two thousand years. As I said, Paul wrote his letter to the Romans at about this time. What he said in that letter may well have been the basis of the accusations made against him – his enemies had written proof of his teaching. Turn to Romans chapter 3. Let's see what Paul wrote to them. **Romans 3:28-31,**

²⁸ For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law ²⁹ Or is God *the God of Jews only?* [Paul was not preaching “lawlessness”, but an end to sacrificial offerings. He's asserting that there is no need to become a Jew in order to receive God's grace. James and the other elders affirmed that in their letter to the Gentiles. ***Christianity is not Judaism plus Christ.*** It is *not* the OLD Covenant with an added provision in Christ. It is an entirely NEW Covenant in Christ's blood. Jesus was the final sacrifice – “once for all” as the writer of Hebrews put it (Heb 10:10).

Paul then asks the Romans, *Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God – who will justify the **circumcised** by faith, and the **un-circumcised** through faith – is ONE.* [Paul is asserting that the New Covenant is a SINGLE comprehensive covenant whose provisions are the **same** for both Jew and Gentile. As he said to the Ephesians, “there is ONE church, ONE Spirit, ONE faith, and ONE God over all.” Jews and Gentiles are justified in the same way, through **faith**. OK. What about the Law? Where does it fit in?] **Verse 31 Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we *establish* the Law – literally, we cause the Law to STAND.**

IF THE WORSHIP TEAM WOULD PLEASE COME FORWARD.

Listen closely. Obedience apart from faith cannot save; but faithful obedience is the **proof** of our salvation by grace, through Jesus Christ. ***We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone – but not by a faith which IS alone, not by a faith stripped of obedience.*** Jesus Christ died to bring us to God, that God's Law might be upheld as just and righteous. And so we have been called to be a holy and righteous people, because God our Father is holy and righteous.

Obeying the Law by faith in Christ is what identifies us as the children of God. Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits." (Mat 7:16 ^{NAU}) Again: By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (Joh 13:35 ^{NIV}) And again, "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. (Joh 15:10 ^{NAU})

THAT is what Paul taught, because THAT is what Christ taught. And in all this, *Paul imitated Christ*, just as we should. In the end, we find that *Paul's accusers were not wrong*. Paul did indeed teach salvation apart from the Law and apart from Temple sacrifices, *but not apart from obedience*.

Yes, we have liberty in Christ; but it is not a license for wrong-doing.

Next week we'll look more at salvation by grace alone.

PRAYER