

## New Testament Survey

### *Lesson 24*

#### Paul's Arrest

When I was a young lawyer, I was sent to a hearing in Federal Court in Laredo, Texas. I had never been in Laredo before, much less in that court or before the judge. In an uber-nervousness at being late, I showed up to court at least thirty minutes before the judge started hearing cases.

In the courtroom was one fellow, a nice enough guy who was not dressed in a suit like a lawyer. It became apparent to me as we were in the courtroom, that this man was actually accused of something, and had come to defend himself. My thought was that he was likely innocent. He certainly didn't appear to be guilty of anything to me.

Slowly, the courtroom started to fill up with other litigants and lawyers, and my cordial conversations with the nice stranger ended. Promptly at 9:00 a.m., the judge took the bench.

The first case he called was that of my new friend. The judge began,

“Mr. So and So, you are here on a request that I restore your pilot's license so you can fly planes, right?”

The man replied,

“Yes, your honor.”

The judge then countered,

“Here is my concern, I still don't think you are sane, and we can't have insane people flying airplanes in our skies.”

The man countered, “But judge, I am sane now. I really am!”

The judge said, “I know you think so. I read your letter you sent me. But that letter itself troubles me. In the letter, you assert that you are Jesus Christ, and you have copied on the letter both the President of the United States and the Pope. Do you really think the Pope is going to verify that you are Jesus?”

The man said, “Yes!”

As a trial lawyer, I spend a good bit of time in America's courtrooms. While most of my work is not criminal work (I generally prosecute civil wrongs), I have a good measure of exposure to criminal proceedings.

Every criminal situation is different, but there is one consistency that always seems present—the accused wants an acquittal. Most every person facing prosecution is looking for the way to find freedom. Most every time a defendant testifies in court, it is in an effort to be set free.

Today, we study Paul's arrest in Jerusalem that followed his third missionary journey. Reading the account, one thing that strikes me as a lawyer is that Paul never makes an effort to gain his freedom. Paul's speeches are geared toward converting people to Jesus rather than gaining his own release. The study of Paul's arrest and its immediate aftermath is our focus today. Most of this material comes from Luke's history recorded in Acts 21 through 23.

## **PRELUDE TO ARREST**

We finished the last lesson with Paul, Luke and others in Caesarea on their way to Jerusalem with the Gentile contributions for the church there. After staying for a week with Philip the evangelist, the team went up to Jerusalem, some 60 miles inland.

The reception in Jerusalem was warm. We do not know the time of arrival, but Paul and his team waited until the next day to meet with James and the elders. Before going further, we should pause and consider the scene for a moment. First, the James that Paul met was the brother of Jesus (Mt. 13:55), the author of the Epistle of James and the head of the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:13; Gal. 1:9). This is a different James than the apostle James, brother of John and son of Zebedee (Mt. 4:21) who was killed by Herod a decade earlier (Acts 12:1-2). Contemporaries also called Jesus' brother James that Paul met with in Acts 21, "James the Just." He was subsequently martyred for his faith.

Along with James were the elders of the Jerusalem church. These elders and James were mentioned earlier in Acts 15 when the church wrote the letter to the Gentile converts about issues of fellowship and purity. The difference between the Acts 15 letter and Paul's visit is slight, but noteworthy. In Acts 15, we read,

The apostles and elders were gathered together (Acts 15:6).

While here in Acts 21 Luke writes,

James, and all the elders were present (Acts 21:18).

Where were the apostles? Are we to believe Paul came in town and the apostles failed to show up for the fellowship and planning session? Of course not! As Bruce notes,

From the absence of all mention of the Twelve, it is safe to infer that none of them was in Jerusalem at this time.<sup>1</sup>

To locate the Twelve, we get help from other writings of church history. About 100-150 A.D., a work called the *Preaching of Peter* was written. While we do not have that work still today, we have a selection of it quoted by Clement of Alexandria<sup>2</sup> where he states:

Peter says that the Lord said to the apostles: “If anyone of Israel, then, wishes to repent, and by name to believe in God, his sins shall be forgiven him. And after twelve years, go forth into the world, that no one may say, ‘We have not heard.’”<sup>3</sup>

Whether this accurately conveys something Jesus told Peter, we do not know. But even if the statement is apocryphal, it is important as an indication that the twelve left Jerusalem to go to the mission field. This is consistent with Jesus’ instructions to

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you (Mt. 28:18-19).

That the apostles should follow the Lord’s instruction is expected. History notes they did so after a twelve-year time establishing the church in Jerusalem and the surrounding area.

This tradition continued strong in church history as told us by Eusebius (c260 – c340).<sup>4</sup> Eusebius references an earlier Christian writer Apollonius of Ephesus (who wrote between 180 and 210) when writing:

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<sup>1</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Eerdmans 1951) at 391.

<sup>2</sup> We do not know Clement’s birth. He died around 205 A.D. For more on Clement see the

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<sup>3</sup> Clement, *The Stromata*, Bk 6, Ch 5.

<sup>4</sup>See Church History Literacy lesson 20 at <http://www.biblical-literacy.com/lessons/CHL/Handouts/CHL20-Eusebius.pdf>.

He speaks, moreover, of a tradition that the Savior commanded his apostles not to depart from Jerusalem for twelve years.<sup>5</sup>

Again, this is not a certainty, for it is not told us in scripture. Scripture does tell us that Jesus told his apostles,

Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4).

The Eusebius statement may be nothing more than an apocryphal explanation behind an event. But the point is the event—the twelve evidently left Jerusalem after twelve years to evangelize in the world. This timing is consistent with Paul’s return here in Acts 21 and the absence of the apostles (We are over twenty years since Jesus’ ascension into heaven).

Paul met with the elders and James and gave a full report on all that had happened in the mission field among the Gentiles. We can easily see Luke taking notes as he heard more details about what happened to Paul during those times that Luke was not there. As Paul recounted God’s hand among the Ephesians, the sons of Sceva trying to cast out demons in the name of Jesus, the stories of Priscilla and Aquila, the efforts of Apollos, the letter exchange with the Corinthians as Paul worked to bring holiness to their congregation, and more.

When James and the elders heard these stories, they glorified God, understanding that his hand was at work among the Gentiles. The focus of the meeting then turned to the thousands of “believing” or “Messianic” Jews in Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup> These Jews were being told that Paul was teaching Jews outside Judea to forsake the Law of Moses, not to circumcise their sons, and not to follow the Jewish customs. Clearly that was not Paul’s work out in the mission field. In fact, Paul was perfectly content for Jews who believed in Jesus to continue otherwise as they were, so long as they remembered that Jesus had made the only sin-offering that ultimately redeemed the sin of man, and that salvation was by God’s grace through trusting in Jesus, not because of being a Jew or by keeping God’s laws well enough personally (Rom. 14:5-7; Gal. 1:6-9; 6:14-16). So the problem was not what Paul taught, but how to get the word out to the believing Jews in Jerusalem. The elders and James decided that Paul should join forces with four men who had taken a Nazarite vow in a way that showed Paul took his Jewish heritage seriously.

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<sup>5</sup> Eusebius, History of the Church, Bk 5, Ch 18.

<sup>6</sup> The actual Greek is “myriads,” denoting tens of thousands. With the Jewish population between 20,000 and 60,000 in Jerusalem at the time, this reflects the large numbers who had come in for the holidays. Regardless, we are remiss if we fail to note that a huge number of Jews were believers in Jesus.

The Nazarite vow was based on the instructions in Numbers 6:2ff. There, God instructed Moses that those who took a Nazarite vow were to abstain from wine, strong drink, or even grape juice, grapes, or raisins. The hair was to remain uncut; and the person with the vow is to avoid contact with any dead person. Jewish tradition imposed these vows for a period of 30 days, unless the person taking the vow specified a different time period.<sup>7</sup> Once the time of the vow was over, the person was to shave his heads and purify himself before the Jewish Temple authorities.

Paul was told to join efforts with these men in the rite including paying their expenses associated with it. Paul would thus show the community his own willingness to honor the historic laws of Moses. At this point, Paul (without the Gentile Luke, for the “we” verses have changed to “he” and “they”) proceeded as planned. The result, however, was not quite as planned!

## THE RIOT

While Paul was in the Temple, some Jews from Asia (Ephesus and the surrounding areas) recognized Paul and stirred up the Jews against him. They falsely began telling as many as they could that Paul had gone all over teaching against the Temple and the Law of Moses. They also (falsely) stated that Paul had defiled the Temple by bringing Gentiles into the holy areas where they were not allowed.

The Temple had an outer court that allowed Gentiles, but Gentiles were not allowed into the inner court. The first century Jewish historian Josephus (born 37 A.D., died after 100) recorded that that there was a notice at the foot of the stairs into the inner court expressing in Greek that no one but Jews could go further.<sup>8</sup> Josephus further recorded that even Romans could be sentenced to death for violating this law.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “A Nazarite vow for an unspecified period of time is [to apply] for thirty days.” Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: a New Translation* (Yale University Press 1988) at 440 (*Nazir* 6:3).

<sup>8</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War* Bk 6 Ch2:4 quotes the Roman Titus saying, “Have not you, vile wretches that you are, by our permission, put up this partition-wall before your sanctuary? Have not you been allowed...to engrave in Greek...this prohibition, that no foreigner should go beyond that wall?” Josephus continues, “Have we not given you leave to kill such as go beyond it, though he were a Roman?” Trans. William Whitson.

<sup>9</sup> See footnote 7.

We can find a Greek inscribed warning uncovered by archaeologist C. S. Clermont-Ganneau in the Istanbul Archaeology Museum, a photo of which is below. The Greek reads:

“μηθένα ἀλλογενῆ εἰσπορεύεσθαι ἐντὸς τοῦ περὶ τὸ ἱερόν τρυφάκτου καὶ περιβόλου ὃς δ’ ἀνληφθῆ ἑαυτῷ αἴτιος ἔσται διὰ τὸ ἐξακολουθεῖν θάνατον.

K. C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman translate the warning as follows:

No outsider shall enter the protective enclosure around the sanctuary. And whoever is caught will only have himself to blame for the ensuing death.<sup>10</sup>



The accusations against Paul quickly burned through the Jews in the city and a mob scene ensued. Paul was grabbed and pulled from the Temple. The Temple gates were shut and the people prepared to kill Paul.

### PAUL’S ARREST

Word of the riot reached the Roman tribune and he grabbed several hundred soldiers with their centurion leaders and intervened. The tribune had Paul seized and chained. The tribune tried to find out what Paul had done, but the crowd’s

<sup>10</sup> Hanson, K. C., and Douglas E. Oakman. Palastine in the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.

roaring was such that he could never understand a clear answer. The tribune was sending Paul to the barracks and away from the crowd for further questioning when Paul spoke to the tribune in Greek.

The tribune was shocked to hear Paul speak in Greek. He thought Paul was Egyptian. The tribune asked Paul,

Do you know Greek? Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?

Josephus wrote of this Egyptian as a man who came to Jerusalem claiming to be a prophet who led thousands to the Mount of Olives as part of a plan to capture the city of Jerusalem. While the Roman authorities killed many of the rebels, the Egyptian instigator apparently escaped.<sup>11</sup> Josephus dates this around 54 A.D. which means it was near the time Paul was in Jerusalem.

Paul explained that he was not the wanted man. Paul was from Tarsus, the opposite direction of Egypt and was even a citizen of Tarsus. Paul requested permission from the tribune to address the mob that was still assembled. The tribune consented.

Paul hushed the crowd by extending his hand ready to speak. When Paul spoke, he did so in Aramaic, the local tongue of the Hebrew people.<sup>12</sup> Paul gave the assembled people an account of his life, his conversion, and his ministry since that fateful day. The account is one of three that Luke gives us in Acts. Each of the three is consistent in its history, but we see Paul changing the emphasis in each to fit his audience. For example, here Paul emphasizes not the Greek origins in his life, but the Hebrew aspects. It is as if Paul's life were a two-sided coin. At times, he emphasized the description of the head's side; other times he emphasized the tail's side.

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<sup>11</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Bk 2 Ch 13:5,

But there was an Egyptian false prophet that did the Jews more mischief than the former; for he was a cheat, and pretended to be a prophet also, and got together 30,000 men that were deluded by him; these he led around from the wilderness to the mount which was called the Mount of Olives, and was ready to break into Jerusalem by force from that place...The Egyptian ran away, with a few others, while the greatest part of those that were with him were either destroyed or taken alive." Of interest, the tribune references the story as if the Egyptian led 4,000 men. Josephus has the count at 30,000. Most scholars agree the number must have been 4,000. The error by Josephus makes sense when we realize the Greek for 4,000 (Δ) is very similar to the Greek for 30,000 (δαρα Δ).

<sup>12</sup> Scholars now recognize that many in Jerusalem likely spoke Hebrew at this time; however, most accord that the general language of the Jewish people would have been Aramaic.

Paul begins his speech with the statement,

Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you”  
(Acts 22:1).

It is no coincidence that Paul began his speech with the exact same address and words that Stephen did in Acts 7:2. Here in Jerusalem, where Stephen had testified to the saving grace of Jesus before Paul and others several decades earlier stands Paul. Now, Paul was no longer a young man holding the coat of the accusers while they stone Stephen. Paul was the accused, holding the same testimony of the martyr Stephen. This must have echoed somewhere in Paul’s mind because Paul put into his speech the truth of his persecuting the church to the point of death as well as holding the garments of Stephen’s killers.

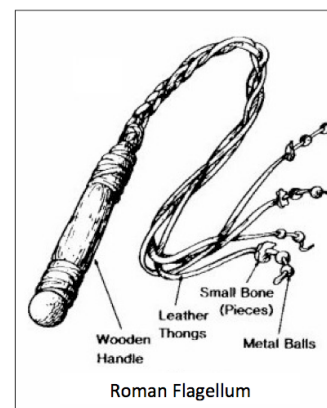
Paul’s “defense” is not even fairly called a defense. For Paul’s purpose here was not to win his liberty; Paul’s purpose was to win people to Christ. Paul might have thought himself the perfect preacher to the Jews. Paul was a Hebrew of Hebrews who had studied under Gamaliel, the most recognized rabbi in Jerusalem. Paul certainly gave it his all as he attempted to proclaim the truth of the gospel.

Once Paul mentioned that God had designed to send him to the Gentiles, the mere mention of Gentiles got the Jewish crowd riled up again. They began shouting again emphasizing their point by throwing dust.

The tribune again intervened and ordered Paul flogged to determine what the story was (No doubt the tribune could not understand Paul’s speech that was in Aramaic). Right before the flogging began, as Paul was stretched out, Paul asked a centurion nearby whether they could flog a Roman citizen. The centurion stopped the proceeding immediately and went straight way to the tribune. When the tribune was told Paul was a Roman citizen, the tribune came to Paul and questioned him on the issue.

We should note here, that this flogging was different than the lashes Paul had received in synagogues earlier. A Roman flogging was a torture technique. It was done with a *flagellum*, a leather whip that had bones and metal built into it. The process killed many and left others maimed.<sup>13</sup>

It was illegal for the tribune to have Paul flogged and so he stopped the torture before it started. The tribune then entered into a discussion with Paul over citizenship. The



<sup>13</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: Acts* (Eerdmans 1988) at 420.



tribune was also a citizen, and had paid a large sum for that title. A number of scholars believe that the tribune was not merely inviting Paul into some “pass-the-time dialogue” about citizenship, but rather was sarcastically suggesting that times must have changed if someone like Paul was able to buy citizenship. No doubt Paul did look pathetic having been manhandled and abused for the last few hours. Paul responded to the tribune that rather than buy his citizenship, Paul was born into it. That was impressive to anyone in the day. The tribune was left in fear over what had already happened to Paul while in custody.

The following day, the tribune took another tack to figuring out Paul and his story. The tribune called a gathering of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, and took Paul to the assembly. This would allow the judgment of Paul in a way that did not violate Paul’s rights as a Roman citizen. Luke painted the picture of Paul before the Sanhedrin, the chief priest, and the council. Paul looked at them intently, and began to explain his position. Again, though, Paul was not trying to establish innocence. Paul was working to proclaim Jesus.

Paul began by setting forth his own clear conscience for the way he had lived. At this, the High Priest Ananias ordered those near Paul to slap him across the face. Such an order, even from the High Priest, violated Jewish law, which prohibited punishment until one was proven guilty. Paul called out the High Priest (not knowing that he was in fact High Priest) exclaiming, “God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall!”<sup>14</sup>

Paul was reprimanded for speaking ill of the High Priest and he apologized, explaining that he was unaware of who had spoken. Paul then shifted his appeal to the group. Paul realized that both Pharisees and Sadducees made up the Sanhedrin. Paul appealed to his own beliefs as a Pharisee, adding that he was at least a second-generation Pharisee. Paul pointed out that at the crux of his faith was the resurrection of the dead (Jesus being the first of many). The issue of resurrection was a core difference between Sadducees and Pharisees and it was as if Paul lit a tinderbox.

The Pharisees came to Paul’s defense believing the Sadducees had no right to assume it impossible that a spirit or angel might speak to Paul. The ensuing ruckus frustrated any hope the tribune had of getting resolution. So he pulled Paul away again by force, and put Paul into the Roman barracks.

That night, as Paul was in Roman custody, God came to him in a special way. Luke recorded,

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<sup>14</sup> Paul was prophetic in this. Jews assassinated Ananias in the revolt of 66 because of pro-Roman policies. He was caught hiding under an aqueduct! (See Josephus, *The Jewish War*, Bk 2, Ch 18:9).

The Lord stood by him and said, ‘Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.’ (Acts 23:11).

## CONCLUSION

Paul had laser beam focus on the Lord and his kingdom. Paul would assert citizenship to stop a torturous beating that could leave him dead, but he never fought for a release from his arrest.

The lawyer in me is still stunned. Most everyone arrested tries for liberty, but not Paul. Paul was intent on something higher and more important. In his imprisonment, we will see as we continue this New Testament survey, Paul was able to minister to many in multiple ways he might have never had otherwise. He wrote letters from prison that gain even more significance because he wrote in bondage. He met people he would not have met otherwise, bringing the gospel to Nero’s own guards. We will continue to see this in the next lesson, as we continue to study Paul’s defense before the Roman authorities.

## POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“They have been told that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses”* (Acts 21:22).

Paul did not teach the Jews to forsake the Law, but neither did he teach them that following the law was a way to earn God’s approval and salvation. Paul understood and taught that man was “saved by grace through faith and not by works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). Yet, that was not to say that Paul taught full disregard of the law as an irrelevancy. On issues of morality (sexual purity, honesty, love of others), Paul taught Jew and Gentile alike to live holy and pure. On issues of culture (food, special days, etc.), Paul taught to live consistent with one’s conscience before God. This is our chore as well. We are to follow God’s commands, knowing they are not lightly given. But we are not to find ourselves bound to the cultural codes that expressed the heart of God to a different day and age. Rather than offer absolutes here, we would urge everyone to study and take good counsel with prayer before God for wisdom.

2. *“Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them”* (Acts 21:26).

Here, we find Paul submitting to his church leadership as well as Jewish ceremonial law in an effort to better take care of his ministry and testimony.

This is classic Paul practicing what he preached. Paul would not only write to others to be a Jew to Jews and a Greek to Greeks. Paul wanted nothing to stand in the way of his effective proclamation of the gospel. (1 Cor. 9:20-21). Do we set our own preferences and desires before the ministry we have to others? We face these issues especially in worship services where some want A and others B. Some have peculiar desires for certain songs or types of prayers. There is freedom in Christ, yet we have to always be most sensitive to our ministry to others.

3. *“The Lord stood by him and said, ‘Take courage...you must testify also in Rome’”* (Acts 23:11).

This needs to be three points for home! First, the Lord stood by Paul. That itself is a month of encouraging messages! When we are beaten, worn out, hitting a brick wall, faced with troubles that are huge, we need to remember, whether we “see it” or not, the Lord will stand by us. That must be our confidence of faith. Knowing it, we must conscientiously decide we will not seek to go outside his will and find another place to stand!

Second, God gave Paul the message Paul needed to hear. Paul had hoped he would go to Rome; it was his hope for years! (Rom. 15:23-24). How wonderful when our hopes and plans line up with God’s call on our lives. Surely that is the reason Jesus taught his followers to pray for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Again though, as with the Lord standing by us in times of difficulty, our challenge is to align our hearts with the will of God!

Third, our home church deacon Ron Waldbillig is also a Gideon who constantly, at home and abroad, gives out free Bibles. Ron relates that in most countries, he is invited into classrooms to give away Bibles, although that is not allowed in the United States. Once in the United States, Ron was standing on the public sidewalks outside a school offering free New Testaments to passing students.

Ron was wrongfully arrested (see the 1<sup>st</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> amendments!), handcuffed, and thrown into the backseat of a patrol car. Here is how Ron related the story to me:

I prayed for my arresting officer as he transported me to the police station. As I awaited booking, I was handcuffed to an 18-year-old offender named Cindy. My 'cuff mate' wept, cursed, and told me she had been arrested for forgery. She was terrified because she knew she was going to jail. I comforted her and gave her a Gideon New Testament. I shared the Gospel with Cindy while we were handcuffed together.

The outcome of my case glorified God. My charges were dismissed and the judge expunged my arrest record. God used this wrongful arrest incident to introduce me to jail ministry. I'm now an Assistant Chaplain in the Harris County Jail. I preach, pray, and witness to a 'congregation' of 10,000 inmates. Last year the local Gideons gave about 100,000 copies of God's Holy Word to the inmates in our county jail.

Like the Apostle Paul, my wrongful arrest ultimately glorified God. I've led numerous murders, rapists, and innocent men to a saving faith in Jesus Christ. I praise God for allowing me to live out the truth of this lesson.