

8 Acts 21-22- 23

21:5–6. And when our days there were ended. After the week’s stay the band of missionaries resume their **journey** southward by boat. **All** the local disciples, **women and children included** (indicating the entire community’s love that Paul enjoyed), make the same reverent and affectionate gestures as the Ephesians at Miletus. They escort the team **out of the city** and, **kneeling on the beach to pray**, bid **farewell**. The community in Tyre remains an inspiring example of Christian hospitality and love.¹

21:7–8. When we had finished. Paul and his team, including Luke, continue southward along the Mediterranean coast, visiting the local Christian community at each port. Finally they arrive in the Holy Land at **Caesarea**, the endpoint of their sea voyage. Here they visit **Philip the evangelist**, last mentioned in chapter 8. This is the only time Luke uses the title “evangelist,” though it is quite appropriate for Philip’s ministry to the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch. In Paul’s Letters, evangelists are included in a list of church ministries (Eph 4:11), and Timothy is told to “perform the work of an evangelist” as part of his responsibility as pastor (2 Tim 4:5). Philip is also **one of the Seven** ordained to ministry in Acts 6:1–6, whom later tradition identifies as deacons.

21:9. He had four virgin/unmarried daughters. Luke notes that Philip’s four daughters were virgins (*parthenoi*), possibly consecrated as such (see 1 Cor. 7:25–40), and had received the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:9).² This was perhaps to illustrate the literal fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy quoted by Peter

¹ Kurz, W. S. (2013). *Acts of the Apostles*. (P. S. Williamson & M. Healy, Eds.) (p. 318-341). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

² Pimentel, S. (2005). [*Envoy of the Messiah: On Acts of the Apostles 16–28*](#) (p. 50). Emmaus Road Publishing.

at Pentecost: “Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17). Paul strongly promotes this gift in 1 Corinthians: “Strive eagerly for the spiritual gifts, above all that you may prophesy” (1 Cor 14:1; see also vv. 2–5).

21:10-11. And while we were staying. After a few days, the prophet Agabus, who had long before predicted the famine of AD 44–46 in Judea (Acts 11:28), arrived in Caesarea (Acts 21:10). Upon meeting the missionaries among the disciples, Agabus “took Paul’s belt/girdle and bound his own feet and hands,” performing a symbolic act in the manner of the Hebrew prophets (see Isaiah 20:2–4; Jer. 19:10–11; 27:2, 12; Ezek. 4:1–3). He then interpreted the symbolic action for all assembled with a formal prophetic oracle: “Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this girdle’ ” (Acts 21:11). Agabus further declared that these Jews shall “deliver him [Paul] into the hands of the Gentiles,” echoing Jesus’ predictions of His own Passion (cf. Lk. 9:44; 18:32). (**Ibid.**)

21:14. He would not be dissuaded. The response, “**The Lord’s will be done,**” echoes Jesus’ response to the Father in Gethsemane (Luke 22:42). As much as they love Paul, the community recognizes Christ’s claim on his life.

21:15–26. And went up to Jerusalem. Paul and his companions are welcomed by James (probably the relative of our Lord), the head of the church of Jerusalem in those years (cf. 12:17; 15:13; 1 Cor 15:7; Gal 1:19), and by the elders who were his aides in the government and spiritual care of the community. Since Luke usually distinguishes between elders and apostles, the other apostles, including Peter, may well have left the Holy City by this time. Those in charge of the church in Jerusalem are delighted to hear about the

abundant fruit of Paul's apostolate (v. 20), but they are also aware of rumors circulating about him (v. 21).³

21:23–24. Do therefore what we tell you. James warns Paul that because of the false rumors, these Jewish disciples will be suspicious of him. James, as leader of the mother church, advises Paul to counteract the false report by means of a public act of Jewish piety. Paul is to take **four men who have taken a vow**, probably as Nazirites (Num 6:1–21), **and purify yourself with them**. What precisely Paul was expected to do is not quite clear. While Paul himself had previously taken a Nazirite vow (Acts 18:18), this temple purification was probably with water (Num 19:12) and may have been related to his returning to the holy city of Jerusalem after time spent in Gentile lands. (On the other hand, Palestinian Jews commonly engaged in ritual purification before entering the temple (John 11:55), and archaeologists have unearthed extensive purification facilities in Jerusalem.)⁴

James also advises Paul to pay the expenses that would enable these men to fulfill their vow. The costs associated with a Nazirite vow were high and it was considered an act of Jewish piety to help the Nazirite by covering the cost of their vow. (Numbers 6:14–15 prescribes the offering of a lamb, a ewe lamb, a ram, and a basket of bran cakes mixed with oil, along with other grain offerings and libations.) James assumes that Paul has financial resources at his disposal from his own earnings (see 20:34–35) or from the churches he established.

James's reason for asking Paul to do this is to demonstrate publicly that he himself continues to live **in observance of the law**, even though he does not

³ [*The Navarre Bible: New Testament*](#) (pp. 530–531). (2008). Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers.

⁴ This could be the case if the later regulation in the Mishnah (*Oholot* 2:3) was in force at this time (see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Anchor Bible 31 [New York: Doubleday, 1998], 694).

require Gentile followers of Jesus to become Jews through circumcision and observance of the Mosaic law. Concerning this passage, St. Augustine explains that by performing ceremonies that he was rumored to condemn, Paul would affirm two things: “that the Jewish Christians were not to be prevented from observing these obligations as if they were wrong and that the Gentiles were not to be forced to observe them as if they were necessary.”(Augustine, *Letters* 82, in ACCS 264) (**Ibid.** Kurz pp. 322-323)

21:26. Paul heeds James’s advice. **After purifying himself** by the customary Jewish bathing rituals, he enters **the temple**. He notifies the authorities **of the day when the purification** of the four men will **be completed** and **the offering made for each of them**. Unfortunately, his action will be seriously misunderstood.

21:28. **He has defiled this holy place.** The accusations are that Paul is **teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place**, similar to the Sanhedrin’s charges against Stephen (Acts 6:11–14). Worse, they charge that Paul has **brought Greeks into the temple**, a sacrilege that ritually **defiled** the temple and was recognized even by Rome as a capital offense. Archaeologists have recovered two of the signs posted on a barrier that surrounded the inner courts of the temple, signs bearing this message in Greek: “No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Anyone who is caught trespassing will bear personal responsibility for his ensuing death.” (**Ibid.** Kurz p. 326)

21:37–38. The **cohort commander** assumes that Paul must be the **Egyptian** revolutionary who tried to capture Jerusalem with **four thousand assassins**, literally, “knife-wielders.” But when **Paul** unexpectedly addresses him in **Greek**, the commander realizes that Paul is not that fugitive. According to the Jewish historian Josephus, in AD 54 (about three years before this incident in Acts 21) an Egyptian false prophet gathered an army on the Mount of Olives,

telling them that at his command the walls of Jerusalem would fall flat. When the promised miracle did not happen, the Romans killed many of his followers, though the Egyptian escaped. (*Ibid.* Kurz p. 327)

21:40. In the Hebrew language. This must mean Aramaic, the language which, after the return of the Jews from the Babylonian captivity, gradually came into general use, due to the influence of the Persian Empire.

22:6–8. Paul reports that as he neared **Damascus**, he was halted by a **great light from the sky**, so that he **fell to the ground**. A voice said, “**Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?**” Paul did not know to whom the voice belonged. The answer, “**I am Jesus the Nazorean whom you are persecuting,**” indicates that Jesus identifies his persecuted followers with himself: in persecuting Christians, Paul is persecuting *Jesus*. This union of Christians with Christ is the basis of Paul’s theology of the Church as the body of Christ (see 1 Cor 12:27).

22:18. Make haste. Paul’s vision on the road and later the commission by the Lord Jesus in the temple recall the prophet Isaiah’s vision and commission by the Lord God in the temple (Isaiah 6:1–10). Earlier, Paul had identified himself with the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah (Acts 13:47, citing Isa 49:6). In this vision, Jesus gives directions to his servant concerning his mission: “**Leave Jerusalem at once, because they will not accept your testimony about me.**” Jesus does not explain why Paul’s testimony would be unacceptable whereas that of other apostles like Peter was accepted by many Jerusalem Jews (Acts 2:41). As we have seen, Paul, like Stephen (6:8–10), would be especially effective in debating and refuting Jews (9:20–23) and would evoke a similarly violent response.

22:19–21. They themselves know. This is not just a statement of puzzlement over why some Jews will reject his testimony. The objection is rhetorically very effective. It invites his listeners to bear witness to his former sincerity as

a persecutor of the Christians. If they do so, they should also be willing to grant the sincerity of his new experience and perspective.⁵

22:22–24. I will send you far away to the Gentiles. Just as the citizens of Nazareth listened to Jesus until he spoke about the prophets Elijah and Elisha’s ministering to Gentiles rather than Jews (Luke 4:22–29), the Jewish crowd here listens to Paul **until he said this**.

By now the crowd is so out of control the **cohort commander** has Paul brought inside to be **interrogated under the lash** so he might discover **the reason** for this **outcry**. Such interrogation under torture was illegal for Roman citizens, but the officer is unaware of Paul’s status.

22:25–29. Is it lawful for you? At the last moment, **Paul** challenges the **centurion on duty** about the legality of scourging a **Roman citizen** who **has not been tried**. The law protected citizens from interrogation under torture or beatings and without trial (Acts 16:37–38) and gave them the right to appeal to the supreme tribunal at Rome (Acts 25:11–12). (*Ibid.* Kurz pp. 333) Fearing punishment for mistreating a Roman citizen, the commander and cohort now treat Paul with kid gloves.

23:1. Paul begins his defense asserting that he has **conducted himself with a perfectly clear conscience**. Paul’s writings confirm that he placed a high value on preserving a good conscience (1 Cor 8:7–12; 2 Cor 1:12; 1 Tim 1:5, 19; 3:9).

23:2. The high priest commanded. Ananias orders that Paul be struck, possibly because he cannot answer what Paul says or because he feels personally offended.

⁵ Johnson, L. T. (1992). *The Acts of the Apostles* (D. J. Harrington, Ed.; Vol. 5, p. 390). The Liturgical Press.

23:3. God shall strike you. Paul does not say this in annoyance with his treatment. His words are a deliberate prophecy of the fate that awaits Ananias. Josephus tells us that Ananias was an arrogant and hot-tempered man. In 66AD he was assassinated by Jews in revolt against Rome. (cf. *Jewish Antiquities*, 20, 199).⁶

23:4–5. I did not know. The fact that Paul didn't realize Ananias was high priest is certainly possible, since Paul had not resided in Jerusalem for many years. Interestingly, some scholars interpret Paul's words to imply an ironic observation that Ananias certainly had not acted like a high priest. In any case, Paul acknowledges that Scripture says not to **curse a ruler** of Israel (Exodus 22:27), so he is implicitly apologizing.

23:6–9. With respect to the resurrection. Recognizing that he will not get a fair hearing in this forum, Paul cleverly turns the attention of the **Sanhedrin** away from himself by instigating a controversy between the rival parties of Sadducees and Pharisees over their differing views of the resurrection.

The result of Paul's clever tactic is a **great uproar**, in which **scribes, who belong to the Pharisee party** insist there is **nothing wrong** with Paul, although they fail to mention Paul's main contention, that *Jesus* has been raised from the dead. As part of his strategy to divide the Sanhedrin, Paul had referred to Jesus' resurrection only indirectly, asserting that he was "on trial for hope in the resurrection of the dead" (v. 6). The Pharisees acknowledge a possibility that the Sadducees would not accept: "**Suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?**"

23:16–22. Now the son of Paul's sister, who apparently lives in Jerusalem, somehow gets wind of the ambush. One way the Lord protects his servants from harm is to expose the plots of their enemies (Acts 9:23–25; see 1 Sam

⁶ [*The Acts of the Apostles*](#) (pp. 172–173). (2005) Four Courts Press; Scepter Publishers.

19:1–2; Jer 11:18–19). As happened to Jesus in his public ministry (Luke 4:29–30; 13:31–32), no harm will come to Paul until he has completed the mission that God has entrusted to him. Since Paul is in protective custody rather than imprisoned for a crime, his family members have access to him, and the resourceful nephew is able to report the plot to Paul, who in turn sees that his military custodians are informed.

Going Deeper

Evangelizing in a Democratic Society - A Reflection

Paul's recourse to the legal rights available to him sets a useful example for contemporary Christians who encounter discrimination, persecution, or even court trials, imprisonment, and martyrdom. Although Paul was aware of the possibility that eventually he would die a martyr's violent death, like St. Thomas More he utilized every available legal recourse to avoid that end to his earthly ministry as long as he was able. He used the rights of his Roman citizenship to ensure that witness to Jesus would reach as far as Rome, the center of the empire.

Citizens of democratic nations today also need to avail themselves of every political and legal remedy to fight for religious freedom and for the rights of those who cannot defend themselves: the unborn, disabled, sick, and elderly. They need to protect pastors, educators, and parents against laws that would limit the teaching of Catholic sexual morality. They have to resist government injustice against the powerless and coercive laws that mandate cooperation in evils like abortion.... As Paul did not hesitate to use Roman law to protect his Christian mission, neither should we be reluctant to use the laws of our country to protect our freedom to spread the gospel and to defend the human rights of all. (**Ibid.** Kurz pp 340-341)

23:25–30. And he wrote a letter to this effect. This letter from Claudius Lysias is the only secular letter recorded in the New Testament. Lysias gives the governor a brief report on the detainee. He bends the facts a little in that he does not mention that at an early stage he planned to have Paul scourged: significantly the letter only mentions the Jews' religious accusation that Paul was speaking against the Law (cf. 21:28) and does not give weight to the charge that Paul brought Gentiles into the temple (cf. 21:28b). (**Ibid.** Scepter pp. 175-176)