

PAUL'S ARREST IN JERUSALEM

Acts 21:1-23:11

Key Verse: 23:11

“The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, ‘Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.’”

Today's passage is the story of Paul's visit to Jerusalem. We want to learn why Paul wanted to visit Jerusalem before going to Rome. His speech to the Jerusalem crowd was his life testimony based on God's mission for him. Paul's visit to Jerusalem is one of the most important events in New Testament history. Let's see why.

I. Going on to Jerusalem (21:1-36)

First, Paul's determination (21:1-16). It was on the sandy beach of Miletus that Paul's team had a tearful farewell with the Ephesian elders. The farewell was memorable forever, for there were affectionate tears of Christian brethren and the resounding sea waves of Miletus. They came to Tyre, sailing from Miletus to Cos, to Rhodes, and to Patara. Paul's team stayed seven days at Tyre while the ship was unloading its cargo. The disciples, through the Spirit, urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem (21:4).

Nevertheless, Paul's team left and came to Ptolemais, and the next day to Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip, one of the seven deacons (6:5). He had four unmarried daughters who had a gift of prophecy. The brothers in Caesarea were losing their patience at Paul's determination to go to Jerusalem. Agabus, who came down from Judea, took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles'" (11). On hearing this, his people pleaded with Paul not to go to Jerusalem. What they said was all discouraging and scary. But Paul did not change his mind. Look at verse 13. "Then Paul answered, 'Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.'" No one could stop Paul from going to Jerusalem.

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Second, Paul was misunderstood and arrested in Jerusalem (21:17-36). As

soon as Paul's team arrived at Jerusalem they visited James, and all the elders were present. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. When they heard, they praised God. But the leaders of the Jerusalem church were worried about many thousands of Jews who had believed but whose way of thinking was still Judaistic. They thought Gentiles could not be Christians without first becoming Jewish proselytes. Many hated Paul blindly because he preached the gospel to the Gentiles. They twisted his gospel preaching and spread the rumor that he taught all the Jews living among the Gentiles to turn away from the law of Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to Jewish traditions. The Jews who heard this information about Paul misunderstood him greatly, and their pride was hurt. True, Paul had insisted that Jewish law was irrelevant for Gentiles. But he had never attempted to draw Jews away from the customs of their fathers' faith. When Paul obeyed God's will to be a light for the Gentiles, he was greatly misunderstood by his people and was treated like a criminal.

The Jerusalem church leaders asked Paul to demonstrate that he was an observer of the law. They asked him to join four of their men in purification rights by participating with them in shaving his head, and by paying their expenses. Paul agreed (21:20-26). The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. But we will see soon that this political compromise did not work at all. When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, shouting, "Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple area and defiled this holy place" (28). This was not true (29), but the whole city was aroused, and people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple. They were about to kill him. On hearing of this, the commander of the Roman troops at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul (32). The commander came up and arrested Paul and ordered him to be bound with two chains and taken into the barracks. While Paul was carried by the soldiers, the crowd that followed kept shouting, "Away with him!" (36) Paul was arrested like a

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criminal.

II. Paul's testimony to the crowd (21:37-22:29)

Paul was allowed to speak to the crowd. When he spoke in Aramaic they became very quiet. In his testimony we learn several things.

First, Paul persecuted the early Christians. Look at 22:4,5. "I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished." In saying this, Paul wanted to convince the crowd that he too had been Judaistic, with the same ideas as them. But after meeting the Risen Christ Paul realized that he was committing a sin against God because of his Judaism. When Paul realized that his people were repeating the terrible sin he had committed, his heart was broken because of his people's narrow-mindedness. So he had decided to go to Jerusalem to stop his people from committing this same sin in their Judaism. Furthermore, he wanted to help them realize God's purpose for them to be a chosen people and a light for the Gentiles. For this, Paul did not spare even his life.

Second, Paul met the Risen Christ. In verses 6-11 Paul explains how he met the Risen Christ. Through this meeting he realized he had been a spiritually blind man--in fact, his eyes were blinded--and that in his ignorance he was persecuting the Son of God by persecuting his believers.

Third, Paul received the grace of God's forgiveness. Look at verses 12-16. A man named Ananias came to see Paul after his meeting with the Risen Christ. Ananias was highly respected by all the Jews. He stood beside Paul and said, "Brother Saul, receive your sight!" And at that very moment Paul was able to see him (13). Then Ananias said, "The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous one and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard" (14,15). Ananias said, "Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name" (16). By the help of Ananias Paul was baptized and received the grace of God's forgiveness.

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Fourth, Paul heard the Lord's voice. After talking with Ananias Paul returned to Jerusalem. When he was praying at the temple, he fell into a trance "and saw the Lord speaking. 'Quick!' he said to me. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me'" (18). Look at verses 19,20. "'Lord,' I replied, 'these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.'" Paul was pleading with the Risen Christ, that he might somehow stay over in Jerusalem and persuade his people by telling them all the sins he had committed against God. Paul felt like dying when he realized that his people were sinning against God due to their Judaistic ideas just as he had done, not knowing God's great purpose for them to be a light for the Gentiles. Paul was ready to suffer and die if only he could help his people realize their sins as well as God's great and glorious purpose for them. But the Lord said to him in verse 21, "Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles." God did not allow him to help his own people in Jerusalem. God had a greater purpose for him. It was to bring the gospel to the whole world.

What was the response of the crowd to Paul's testimony? As soon as they heard the word "Gentiles" they were disgusted. They hated most that Paul offered God's grace to the Gentiles. They raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!" (22) At this, the commander ordered Paul to be taken into the barracks, flogged and questioned in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?" Then the commander no longer treated him arbitrarily.

In this part we learn about the tragedy of Israel; they did not realize God's great purpose for them to be a light for the Gentiles. They were blinded by their fixed ideas and small desires. After Paul met the Risen Christ, he did not dwell any longer in his own fixed ideas or in his passion and pride. In Galatians 5:24 he said, "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires." He said again in Galatians 2:20, "I have been

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crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Paul lived no more in his fixed idea; he lived in Jesus. He was broken-hearted because of his people's bigotry and ignorance of God's high purpose. He was very sorry that his people were not living up to God's high calling. He decided to risk his life to help his people open their spiritual eyes to see God's great purpose for them (20:22-24; 21:13). This was the reason Paul decided to visit Jerusalem before going to Rome.

III. Paul was tried before the Sanhedrin (22:30-23:11)

The next day, since the commander wanted to find out exactly why Paul was being accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Sanhedrin to assemble. Then he brought Paul and had him stand before them. As we have studied, Paul had been assailed by the crowd. But for the Roman commander's help, Paul would have been killed by them. Paul was fighting all by himself against a frantic crowd of several thousand (21:35,36). He could have been daunted by the peer pressure. But he was not, because he had Jesus' word in his heart. Look at 22:21. "Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'" Let's see how Paul acted before the Sanhedrin.

First, Paul's courage. The Sanhedrin was the Supreme Court of the Jews. There, all the rulers of the Jews gathered in pompous and glamorous robes. They had authority to judge and sentence people. The usual beginning address to the Sanhedrin was, "Most honorable rulers and elders of Israel," with a trembling voice to impress them. Let's see how Paul acted before them. Look at 23:1. "Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, 'My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.'" Paul called them, "My brothers," instead of calling them, "Most Honorable Sirs." Paul was not afraid of them, because he knew what he was doing. At his words the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth (2). Was Paul threatened by the high priest's order? No. Look at verse 3. "Then Paul said to him, 'God will strike you, you whitewashed wall!'" Paul knew it was a crime to speak evil of a ruler of the people. Also, he knew Ananias was the high priest. But he saw that Ananias was a devil in shepherd's clothing. So Paul rebuked him: "You

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whitewashed wall!" It meant, "You corrupted man!" Paul hated God's enemy.

Second, Paul's wisdom. Paul knew that the Sanhedrin consisted of Pharisees and Sadducees. In God's wisdom Paul was inspired to divide them into two parts so that they might argue among themselves. He said, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead" (6b). What happened when he said this? As Paul expected, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all.) (8) They began to fight among themselves, arguing vigorously (9). The dispute became so violent that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks. God was with Paul.

Third, the Lord was with Paul (11). To Paul, trial before the Sanhedrin was a nightmare. The uproar of the people and the falsity of the Sanhedrin members must have gone through his mind like a panorama. Though Paul was a man of God, he was afraid. When he was afraid, the Lord visited him and said (11), "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome." Here we learn that though thousands of people were against Paul, God was with him. God is always with his people. Once Elijah challenged Baal priests and defeated them, demonstrating God's power. He seized 400 prophets of Baal and slaughtered them (1Ki 18:40). After that, he had to run for his life. When he arrived at Beersheba, he was afraid, thinking he was all by himself. He prayed that he might die: "I have had enough, Lord. Take my life" (1Ki 19:4b). God said to him, "Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel..." (1Ki 19:18). Elijah thought he was alone; but he was not. God was with him, and 7,000 remnants of God as well. Though King David was a warrior, he was afraid from time to time. But he believed that God was with him. So he said in Psalm 23:4, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."

The Lord also said to Paul, "Take courage." This exactly means, "Have faith in God." The antonym of faith is fear. God's people must not be slaves of fear. We must fight and defeat fear with faith. This

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is an unavoidable battle for God's people. If Jesus' people give up fighting against Satan's fear, they are no more Jesus' people; they are slaves of Satan. Goliath was the ferocious Philistine champion. He taunted and terrorized the Israelites with fear. But David overcame his intimidation and defeated him in a duel when he had faith in God. Faith is the most potent weapon to overcome all fear.

God also renewed Paul's mission when he was tired. He said to Paul, "You must also testify in Rome." This meant Paul would not die until his mission was completed. So he did not have to worry about his life, because God decided to use him as a witness of Jesus' death and resurrection in Rome also. Likewise we do not have to worry about our lives, because we will not die until we complete God's mission assigned to each of us.

May God give each of us a shepherd's heart like Paul to pray for our own people's spiritual condition. May God help our people realize God's great purpose for this nation to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.