

ACTS 21: 15 – 22: 24

PAUL IN THE POWDER KEG!

Where the river meets the sea. Saltwater and freshwater mixing.

Paul and his entourage have now made it to Jerusalem. It appears that they have made it there in time for Pentecost. We aren't told this specifically, but the fact that there is so much activity at the Temple and Jews from Asia have recognized him, leads us to believe that. Paul knew something was going to happen, but I don't know that he was prepared for the reason for what was about to happen. It was just prior to Paul's arrival in Jerusalem that he wrote his letter to the Romans. Many people see this letter as his magnum opus and it probably is. I can imagine Paul having written this, bursting with energy to be able to expound all he had seen, written and experienced to not only the elders, but possibly also to the church at Jerusalem. But that wasn't about to happen. The day after his arrival, he is punched in the gut by what the elders have to say.

15 And after those days we packed and went up to Jerusalem. 16 Also some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us and brought with them a certain Mnason

of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we were to lodge.

17 And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. 18 On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. 19 When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. 20 And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law; 21 but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. 22 What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come. 23 Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. 24 Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law. 25 But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep

themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.”

If you are reading carefully, thoughtfully, you sort of get the idea that the elders were enthralled about what Paul had to say, but that they quickly moved from that to the problem at hand. A problem that they had no doubt been dealing with, hearing rumors of and had been praying they wouldn't have to deal with. Personally, I think they would have been perfectly fine had Paul not gone back to Jerusalem – “outta sight, outta mind.” Now let's put ourselves into their world for a while.

- Pentecost – according to Roman historians, as many as 2 million Jews made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem during the feast. This meant that the city was overrun with people. It would have literally been shoulder to shoulder, wall to wall, everywhere in and around the outskirts of the city. The Temple precincts would have been even worse.
- On top of all this, a Jewish revolt was building. Due to happenings in the region, many thought that the God was sure to restore Israel to the Jews at any time. (Sound familiar?) There was a great deal of civil unrest, but it was even worse during feast days.

- There would have been a larger Roman military presence than normal at this time so as to keep down any unrest from zealots.
- There is no mention of any of the Apostles, other than James. This may be because they were out and about proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom. (Outside of Israel.)
- Add to this what the elders have to say regarding what is being said of Paul. They believe he is a sell-out. And pay attention to whom the elders were referring. They weren't referring to non-believers, they stated that many thousands of Jews had come to faith in Jesus and that they were zealous of the Law. So, Paul doesn't just have to deal with the non-believing Jews, he has to deal with those from within the church.
- What the people were saying wasn't true. What Paul said and what they heard were two different things. (Welcome to my world.)

Paul was being accused, but those within and without the church of telling Jews they no longer had to circumcise their children and that they were to no longer do any of the things that had separated them from the Gentiles. Paul never said that. What he said, consistently, was that none of those things were to be seen as what saved them or brought them into the kingdom of God.

Grace, by faith alone was what saved them, just as it saved the Gentiles. Nevertheless, zeal for the Law was an issue. And it had been ever since the Jerusalem council, where it was decided that the Gentiles didn't have to become Jews in order to be saved. ***25 But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.***

- Jealous Jews: it's too easy for the Gentiles.
- We could lose our exemption.
- Ethnic and cultural differences. (Also, the flesh)
- All these things had been festering for years, especially in Paul's absence where he couldn't defend himself. (Jews coming from Asia, talking to family in Jerusalem.)
- Paul was hoping to temper some of the Gentile issue with the love offering from the Gentile churches. We don't hear what happened regarding the offering. Was it accepted or not? We don't know. The riot took the lead.
- So, after Paul tells the elders all that the Lord had done, they quickly move to their plan to quell the rumors concerning Paul. I'm sure this took the wind out of Paul's sails.

- The plan: Since Paul's devotion to the Law is in question by Judaizers, the elders suggest that he sponsor some men who have taken a vow and that he also take the vow. What does that entail?
- Abstention from meat and wine for 30 days. During this time hair was allowed to grow. Sometimes, the last 7 days had to be spent in entirety in the Temple courts. At the end of the 30 days, certain sacrifices had to be bought and brought: a year – old lamb for a sin offering, a ram for a peace offering, a basket of unleavened bread, cakes of fine flour, a meat offering and a drink offering, their hair was cut and burned on the altar. Also, they couldn't work during this time and had to have a way to provide for their families. Paul's sponsorship meant that he had to cover all these expenses. And Paul goes along with the plan.
- Some think that Paul was compromising his principles and was thus erring, but I believe he was doing what he had always done, "being all things to all people in order to save some."

26 Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at

which time an offering should be made for each one of them.

27 Now when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, 28 crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." 29 (For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.)

30 And all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut. 31 Now as they were seeking to kill him, news came to the commander of the garrison that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. 32 He immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them. And when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. 33 Then the commander came near and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and he asked who he was and what he had done. 34 And some among the multitude cried one thing and some another.

So when he could not ascertain the truth because of the tumult, he commanded him to be taken into the barracks. 35 When he reached the stairs, he had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob. 36 For the multitude of the people followed after, crying out, "Away with him!"

- Paul was spotted and recognized. Accused of taking Trophimus, a Gentile into the Temple. (Sign stated that Gentiles going beyond the Court of the Gentiles would be killed.)
- A riot started. Roman soldiers would be watching from the mezzanine. They have to arrest Paul in order to save him from the crowd.
- Believers, (Judaizers and non-believing Jews were in the midst of this.)
- Doors shut to the Temple. Last time Paul would see the inside of the Temple.

37 Then as Paul was about to be led into the barracks, he said to the commander, "May I speak to you?" He replied, "Can you speak Greek? 38 Are you not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a rebellion and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness?"

39 But Paul said, "I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city; and I implore you, permit me to speak to the people."

40 So when he had given him permission, Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, saying,

Chapter 22

1 "Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now." 2 And when they heard that he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, they kept all the more silent. Then he said: 3 "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today. 4 I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, 5 as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished. 6 "Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me. 7 And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' 8 So I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?'

And He said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.'

9 "And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me. 10 So I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do.' 11 And since I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of those who were with me, I came into Damascus.

12 "Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there, 13 came to me; and he stood and said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that same hour I looked up at him. 14 Then he said, 'The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. 15 For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. 16 And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.'

17 "Now it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance 18 and saw Him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.' 19 So I said, 'Lord, they know

that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. 20 And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’ 21 Then He said to me, ‘Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.’ ”

Paul's Roman Citizenship

22 And they listened to him until this word, and then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!”

- Paul speaks to the guard in Greek. He was thought to have been an Egyptian rabble-rouser who had threatened from the Mt. of Olives to take the Temple in AD 55. The guard is astonished that he speaks good Greek. Paul is allowed to speak.
- He then speaks in Hebrew, (Aramaic) and the people listen.
- Listen to his argument. He seeks to reach common ground. He goes into his zealous defense of the Law and how that didn't change until he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. He also does some name – dropping in order to establish some credibility. He even tells us that Jesus told him that the Jews wouldn't listen to him, so he would be sent to the

Gentiles. They listen until he gets to verse 22. The word Gentiles was the trigger.

- This brings us back to the great disunity in the church. Remember, it wasn't just the un-believing Jews that were after his head. The zealous Judaizers within the church were also after him.
- Paul has to be heartbroken. After all he has done and said, the only thing that is being heard, (that he teaches Jews to forsake their customs) is something he never said. He only taught freedom from the Law. He taught that the Law couldn't save anyone, only the grace of Jesus could do that. The Jews were free to continue their customs as long as they were aware that salvation didn't come through those things. The Gentiles were exempt from these things. They didn't have to become Jews in order to be saved. After all that he had done and said, after all God had done through him, he was still being misunderstood. For a teacher and communicator, that is a bitter pill to swallow.
- Custom and culture are overriding the Gospel of the Kingdom. Does that happen today? Yes, it does. That is a major part of the unrest we see within the church today as politics are dividing believers into different camps.

- Until we see our citizenship in the Kingdom as priority one, as the main thing that unites us, then the Gospel will be placed on the back burner and we will remain divided over cultural issues and political issues.
- I realize that these aren't small issues, but we must begin by seeing other believers on other sides of some of these issues as our brothers and sisters. Until that is done, we can't even have a conversation. And without a conversation, nothing ever gets settled.
- Paul never compromised his principles, whether with Jews or Gentiles. Part of the problem occurs when we attempt to over – simplify things. People are complex. Paul was complex – and his theology could seem complex when his words and deeds were seen and heard with certain presuppositions – cultural and theological presuppositions.
- Where the river meets the sea – Paul and the modern church are in the middle of it.
- The first priority, the Gospel of the Kingdom and all that entails, done in love. Until that happens, there can be no conversation and no solution.
- Pray for the first priority, the conversation and the solution.