

June 28, 2020

TRIALS, TRANSFORMATION, AND THE TRIUMPH OF THE GOSPEL

Acts 21:17-23:35

*(15 of 17 in a series through Acts)*

Do you remember how Nathan the prophet dealt so masterfully with King David after David had committed adultery and murder? Nathan lured him in by telling him a story about someone else doing an act that was selfish, greedy, and grotesque; got David to pronounce judgment; and then turned the judgment back on David, telling him, “You are the man” (2 Samuel 12:7)? I want to attempt something like that this morning. Well now, I guess if you announce your intentions to do something like that up front, it’s a bit harder to pull off. You definitely lose the element of surprise. Then again, I’m not trying to be clever but to take advantage of the reality that it is oftentimes easier to see realities and apply truths in others’ lives than it is to see those realities or apply those truths in our own. In my years as a pastor, I’ve seen some of the most servant-minded believers lament that they weren’t as service-oriented as other believers and some of the most fruit-bearing children of God feel hopeless and unassured of their relationship with the Lord, while being eager to (rightly) lavish that assurance on others. I don’t know why this is a reality, but it certainly is, and I want to try to take advantage of it. So here’s what I’m going to do. I’m going to note some realities about Paul and his relationship with the Lord, and then—when you are hopefully fully bought in to seeing these things in Paul—I want to turn around and tell you that these are true of you as well. And by doing so, I hope to lure you into a life of deeper assurance and of deeper obedience before our Lord.

Let me describe for you first, though, what’s going on in our text. We’ve just come out of a portion of about eight-and-a-half chapters of Luke providing details of Paul’s three missionary journeys. We looked at that lengthy section over three sermons that still had us taking 2-3 chapters at a time. Well, now, over these last eight chapters Luke is going to provide details of five legal trials that Paul faced. Two of these are before Jewish crowds (22-23), the third and fourth before Felix and Festus (who are Roman appointed governors in Judea, 24-25), and the fifth is before Agrippa (26). Today we’re going to look at the first two of these trials and the setting that brought them on.

Our text begins (in 21:17) with Paul arriving at Jerusalem. You may remember from the last time we were in Acts that the Spirit had made it very clear that Paul was going to suffer affliction and be imprisoned in Jerusalem, but Paul had stated his willingness not only to suffer but to die, if necessary, for the sake of Christ. Well, now we’re here. He’s arrived at Jerusalem, and that suffering and imprisonment is about to take place. Luke starts the story with Paul arriving at Jerusalem and talking with James, and it is this conversation that reveals the first characteristic in Paul that I want to highlight: Paul’s sacrificial love for the church.

**Paul’s sacrificial love for the church**

In Paul's conversation with James, James points out that there are "many thousands" of Jews who have become Christians, and they still attempting to carry out many aspects of the law. In other words, they're circumcising their children, obeying the food laws, and walking according to other customs of the law. Now, the reality is, as a believer, you're free to do that. If you want to take every Saturday to devote to rest or circumcise your children or eat lamb on the night of Passover once a year or avoid eating bacon, you're completely free to do that. You're also free *not* to do it—but you're free to do it. And these Jewish believers had decided they wanted to do that.

But, James tells Paul, they'd heard that Paul is telling Jewish Christians "to forsake Moses, . . . not to circumcise their children or walk according to [the] customs [of the law]" (21:21). Now, again, that isn't true. Paul was simply reiterating that we're free to do those things or not to do those things. He'll write, for example, in Romans 14 that the one who observes a certain day as special and the one who observes all days just alike are both completely fine. So, James then makes a request of Paul. He notes that there were four men among them who had taken a vow—probably the Nazarite vow described in Numbers 6:1-21—and were getting close to the conclusion of the vow. Now, what this entailed was a vow to commit oneself to the Lord in a special way, and during the time of this vow the man would not cut his hair. At the conclusion of this vow, the man would go to the temple, offer numerous sacrifices—lambs, a ram, bread, grain, wafers, oil, and drink—and then shave his head. Well, apparently these men were about a week away from the time of their vow ending.

Meanwhile, in Numbers 19 there is also a purification ritual that was to be performed by someone who had become unclean, where the individual would perform a couple of washings and be deemed clean on the seventh day. James's request, then, is that Paul perform the week-long purification ritual that would coincide with the ending of these men's vow, and then accompany them to the temple, and pay for all their expenses. That way, the Jewish believers would know that Paul is by no means telling people that they must not obey the law of Moses.

Now, James brings up their decision in Acts 15 that no one is required to obey the law in order to be saved in order to reiterate that obeying the law of Moses is not required, but this is nonetheless the sacrificial act he was asking Paul to make in love. And Luke tells us, "Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them" (21:26). In other words, Paul was happy to demonstrate his love for his brothers in Christ, even at great cost to himself, something I'll come back to at the end of the sermon. Second, we see Paul's relentless drive to proclaim the gospel.

### **Paul's relentless drive to proclaim the gospel**

Once Paul entered the temple, voices of opposition to Paul begin to make themselves heard. Here's what Luke writes: "When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, 'Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the

law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place” (21:27-28). Although Luke notes that Paul actually had *not* brought a Gentile into the temple, adding, “For they had previously seen Triphimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple” (21:29), but of course that was a wrong assumption.

Nonetheless, the city was stirred up, the people grabbed Paul, and dragged him out of the temple and were ready to kill him when the Romans soldiers got news of this and rescued Paul, arresting him in order to see what he had done to cause this outbreak of violence. But before they hauled Paul away—in effect saving him from death at the hands of the mob—Paul made a request. He said to the soldiers, “I beg you, permit me to speak to the people” (21:39).

Now why? I mean, he would likely have been killed if the soldiers had not intervened, and now he wants to run the risk of turning and addressing the crowd again? To say what? Well, what he shares in chapter 22 is his own testimony of Christ saving him, but ultimately he’s simply sharing that so that again he might bear witness to Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and our hope for forgiveness of sins and eternal life through faith in him. It’s clearly for the sake of the hearers applying it to themselves that Paul quotes the words of Ananias to him in 22:16, “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins; calling on his name.” Paul had an unrelenting drive to bear witness to Christ, to speak the gospel. I almost wrote “at every opportunity,” but the reality is that he didn’t just take opportunities that were available to him; he *created* opportunities, even as we see him stopping the Roman soldiers so that he might bear witness to Christ once more. So, first, we see his sacrificial love for the church, and then we see his unrelenting drive to proclaim the gospel. Third, we see Paul’s protection and care under the Lord’s hand.

### **Paul’s protection and care under the Lord’s hand**

This is probably the clearest reality that we see in these first two trials of Paul. We’ve already seen the first. As the Jews in the temple saw Paul and began to attack him, we read in 21:31-32, “And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.” How did word come to the tribune? We don’t know. We simply know that it was good that it did because Luke explicitly mentions that the crowd was seeking to kill him.

Let’s look at another situation. Remember how Paul had asked the soldiers to let him address the Jewish crowd in the temple? Well, they were all quietly listening to Paul until he mentioned that God had sent him to bear witness to the Gentiles and bring them into the church. Then Luke says that “they raised their voices and said, ‘Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live’” (22:22). And I don’t think I have to tell you that that it’s hard to execute justice as human beings when the mob is shouting and he’s already been declared worthy of death in their minds. So the Roman soldiers brought him to the barracks and ordered him to be “examined by flogging” (22:24). Now, let me explain what flogging is. It involved

beating a prisoner with whips “consisting of leather thongs, weighted with rough pieces of metal or bone, and attached to a stout wooden handle. If a man did not actually die under the scourge (which frequently happened), he would certainly be crippled for life.”<sup>1</sup> Paul had done nothing wrong, yet he was going to be “examined by flogging,” all to satisfy the angry mob.

Yet, providentially, he isn’t flogged. Rather, we read in 22:25-29, “But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, ‘Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?’ When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, ‘What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen.’ So the tribune came and said to him, ‘Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?’ And he said, ‘Yes.’ The tribune answered, ‘I bought this citizenship for a large sum.’ Paul said, ‘But I am a citizen by birth.’ So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him” (which was illegal to do).

But these aren’t the only times Paul escapes from what looks like certain death. In chapter 23 Paul is brought before the Jewish council, including the high priest, to stand trial. Paul soon realizes at this moment that the Jewish crowd is made up of Pharisees and Sadducees, two religious groups who had their own disagreements. One disagreement in particular was over the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees held to the reality that the dead would be raised, and the Sadducees denied it. So, Paul brings up this issue, noting, “It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial” (23:7) because he was proclaiming Jesus as raised from the dead.

And so the groups start arguing with each other instead of Paul, but then the argument becomes violent. And so we read, “And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks” (23:10). Once again, Paul escapes with his life. And let me show you one final example of this.

The day after this violent outburst in the Jewish court Luke tells us that “the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul” (23:12). And there were more than forty of them, so it seems likely they would have been able to succeed. Their plan was for the chief priests and elders to get the tribune to bring Paul down once more, and they would ambush them and kill Paul. But look at this note in 23:16, “Now the son of Paul’s sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul.” Paul then told the soldier, who told the tribune, who took had an army of men escort Paul safely to the governor, Felix, so that he might stand trial there.

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<sup>1</sup>John Stott, *Acts, The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1990), 349. Stott is actually drawing from F. F. Bruce.

Now, you could look at all of these circumstances and say, “Man, wasn’t Paul lucky?” Word happened to get to the tribune that he was being attacked in the temple. Paul happened to be born as Roman citizen. The tribune happened to act quickly enough when the mob turned violent. And Paul’s nephew happened to hear the plan of ambush and was able to bypass it. But we know none of these things just *happened* to take place. In fact, Luke tells us that after one of these times when Paul escaped with his life “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’” (23:11). Do you see? Paul’s life (and death) were completely in the Lord’s hands. The Lord Jesus wanted him to live until he could testify in Rome, and nothing was going to thwart the Lord’s plans for Paul.

Now, here’s what I want to argue. We should rightly be amazed at Paul’s willingness to sacrifice himself in love for his brothers and sisters in Christ. People are by nature selfish and not sacrificial. And on this occasion Paul was willing to bring great cost to himself simply to minister to some people who had believed lies about him. Isn’t it in those particular circumstances that we can feel our backs bow up? But Paul used this as an opportunity to sacrifice himself in order to help the church continue to walk forward in unity.

And we should be amazed at his unrelenting drive to preach the gospel. This wasn’t a situation of Paul taking the easy opportunities that came to him but of him looking to see if there might be any way he could share the gospel. We see in the book of Philippians that even as he is imprisoned, he rejoices in that it provides an opportunity to share the gospel with the guards.

But our amazement shouldn’t translate into seeing Paul as some kind of super Christian who obeys Christ in ways we could never achieve. The reason Paul could sacrificially love and have an unrelenting drive to bear witness to Christ is because the Lord Jesus Christ called him to himself on the road to Damascus, gave him a new heart, and put the Holy Spirit within him so that his desires were shaped and changed. And you know what’s true of you? The Lord has called you to himself, given you a new heart, and put his Holy Spirit within you so that your desires are being shaped and changed. There’s nothing that keeps us from walking in sacrificial love and bearing witness to Jesus. In fact, this is just normal Christianity. This is what it’s supposed to look like.

And even Paul’s protection and care under the Lord’s hand is not an odd exception. We don’t have the promise that we’ll make it to the next city, like Paul had. But we do know that our sovereign God is in control of the world, turns even the hearts of kings whichever way he desires, is present with us (pursuing us with goodness and mercy – Psalm 23), and is working every detail of our existence in this world for our good. So, if I might paraphrase Nathan to David, “You are this man.” There’s nothing that keeps us from loving God and obeying him in the manner that we see Paul doing in these chapters under the Lord’s providential care. So let us commit to a regular renewal of our minds so that we might walk in obedience to the one who lived, died, and was raised for us. Amen.