

STUDY NOTES

Lesson 8: Acts 21, 22, 23, 24

*Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints,
is this grace given,
that I should preach among the Gentiles
the unsearchable riches of Christ.” Ephesians 3:8*

ACTS 21: BOUND IN THE SPIRIT TO JERUSALEM

Chapter 21 begins by recounting more farewells as Paul makes his way down the Eastern coastline of the Mediterranean toward Jerusalem by ship. They stop at the city of Tyre to unload cargo and Paul meets with local members of the church. The text notes that these disciples “said through the Spirit, that he should not go up to Jerusalem.”

Not deterred, Paul goes on his way to Caesarea, the major port city for Jerusalem. He stays for a while with Phillip, who you may remember from Acts 6 and 8, was one of the Seven chosen to help the apostles in Jerusalem and who also took the gospel to Samaria. While in Phillip's home, a man named Agabus, known for his gift of prophecy, comes to see Paul, and rather dramatically takes Paul's girdle (or sash) and binds his hands and feet with it. By now, all eyes are upon him, and he announces solemnly that in like manner Paul will be bound and taken prisoner by the Jews at Jerusalem and delivered to the Gentiles. Of course, his friends had now heard this same message before, and begged him not to go to Jerusalem.

Some are puzzled by the seeming contradiction implied by Acts 21:4 compared with Acts 20:22 and Acts 21:14. How could certain disciples tell Paul “through the spirit” that he should *not* go to Jerusalem. Yet Paul himself says that he goes “bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem.” Of course, there could be a translation error. But there is another possibility. The Spirit of God may communicate with us through feelings and impressions, but it is often by the benefit of our experience receiving the impressions and guidance of the Holy Ghost that we learn to correctly interpret what we receive. For example, one could receive a feeling of heavy sadness and foreboding concerning Paul's trip to Jerusalem and assume that meant he should not go there.

One man described his feelings when he pled with the Lord for his older brother who was ill with cancer. While praying he received an overwhelming feeling of peace and love. Assuming (that most dangerous of words) that these feelings meant everything was going to be ok, he told his four inactive siblings that their brother was going to be healed. When he died 6 months later, all four were scornful of their younger brother's revelation. He related how aware he now was that all revelation must both be correctly received and correctly interpreted—a lesson to us all.

A COLLISION COURSE

Once in Jerusalem Paul reports the successes of his Gentile mission to James and other leaders. His report is received enthusiastically but it is obvious that the perspective in Jerusalem is fundamentally different from that in the mission field. The Jerusalem brethren report their own successes—thousands of Jewish believers have accepted Christ and they are all still “zealous” keepers of the Jewish law and traditions. To these people, they have not left their Jewishness at all, simply put the capstone on it by accepting Jesus as the Messiah. These believers are scandalized by reports that Paul has been recommending to new Jewish converts that there is no need to circumcise their infants. Prove to these brethren that you are really still a Jew, they tell Paul, by purifying yourself in the temple with some men who are going there to complete vows they have made.

You can see why this would have been important to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. The more orthodox they seemed to the Jews in the surrounding community, the less likely they were to end

up as martyrs. Paul is truly between a rock and a hard place here. But in a spirit of true humility he agrees to the suggestion of the leaders of the Jerusalem church. He seems to be reconciled to whatever may lie ahead, having been prepared by the Spirit. This puts him on a collision course with the Jews who have been hearing rumors that Paul is a force attempting to destroy Judaism. On the seventh day in the temple Paul is spotted by some Jews from Asia who raise a hue and cry against him.

Paul would have been beaten to death then and there by the angry mob if he had not been rescued by the Roman chief captain and his band of soldiers. As he is being let away to the Roman fort, he asks the captain for an opportunity to speak to the crowd. Surprised by the request and by being addressed in the Greek language, the captain agrees and the crowd quiets down in anticipation.

PAUL'S FIRST DEFENSE

Chapter 22 contains the first of five “defenses” by Paul, some only a few verses long, others more lengthy speeches. In this first defense, made to the Jews on “Temple Square,” Paul recounts his experience on the Damascus Road when he encountered the risen Lord. Everything in Paul’s life as an apostle really began at this moment, when the Lord radically transformed his life. His life had one destination before, and a new one after. So complete was this change that Paul stands as a model of one who has been reborn to a new life.

Paul then goes on to recount a second vision that he had while in Jerusalem. In his vision the Lord appears to him and tells him that the Jews will reject his testimony and that he should leave Jerusalem and the Lord would thereafter send him to the Gentiles. Merely speaking the word Gentiles was like throwing a bomb into the crowd. “Away with this fellow for he is not fit to live!”

THE THREE R'S OF TRUTH INSURANCE

How incredibly strong is the hold a false idea can have upon the mind. The idea that the Jews were God’s chosen people had become the strongest religious idea held by the people. This translated into a kind of religious superiority complex. “We are God’s chosen—we are obviously superior—we are not supposed to associate with and become contaminated by the rest of the nations.” For Paul to say what he did sounded to his hearers as if he were saying that the Messiah had chosen the unclean Gentile nations over the pure Jewish people. This was unthinkable! To them it seemed to tear down the very foundation of the Jewish religion—their privileged position as the Lord’s chosen people.

Christ had told his disciples “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” (John 8:32) It is a choice blessing to be able to live free of the bondage of false ideas. There is only one way to this freedom. It is by knowing, or being in a relationship with Truth himself, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is The Truth, and The Way. To be able to be led by Him and receive revelation from Him is the only sure way to live free of the web of lies Satan has established in this earth. It is not even enough to establish your life on former revelations, for this is what the Jews had done. But Living Truth is able to protect us from such errors. This is why Jesus told the Saints in our dispensation to “Look unto me in every thought. Doubt not; fear not.” (D&C 6:36)

Having a personal sense that Jesus Christ knows you as an individual and that it is Christ himself you are serving goes hand in hand with the blessing of following the counsel of the scriptures and the living prophets. This three-way protection will insure that a person retains their hold on the iron rod that eventually will lead them to the Tree of Life. It is Reading the scriptures, Relying on the prophet and Relationship with your Savior—the three “R’s”—that provide our Truth insurance.

PAUL BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN—DEFENSE TWO

When Paul is rescued by the guards, he is forced to play the Roman citizen card to save himself from the horrible practice of interrogation by scourging (whipping). Instead the chief captain sets up a hearing with the Jewish Sanhedrin, or governing council, to try and determine what Paul is guilty of.

Acts 23 presents Paul’s second defense, to the Sanhedrin. Paul wisely divides the group, setting Pharisees with their belief in angels and a resurrection against the Sadducees, who believe in neither. When the two groups begin to fight with each other the chief captain removes Paul from the fray and

takes him to the safety of the castle. It is on this night that Paul has yet another vision of the Master, who tells him not to be afraid, and that Paul will testify of Christ in Rome.

Chapter 23 ends with the story of more than forty men who take a vow not to eat or drink until Paul is dead. But God's providence is shown once again for Paul's nephew happens to overhear their plans. This young man goes to Paul with his news, who sends him to report it to the captain. When the captain realizes that Paul's life is in danger, he sends him by nightfall under heavy guard, to Caesarea, to the governor of that province, a man named Felix. Felix would have been the highest authority in the country, and so Paul finds himself a prisoner, safe for the time being from his enemies.

PAUL'S DEFENSE BEFORE FELIX—DEFENSE THREE

Acts 24 is a short chapter consisting of Paul's third defense, as he presents his case before Felix and the lawyer (orator) named Tertullus, that the chief priests have sent as their representative. The two charges they present are sedition and profaning the temple by bringing a gentile into its precincts. Paul is quick to show how baseless these charges are, stating plainly that he never disputed with any man either in the temple or in any synagogues nor tried to raise up the people. He related what he was doing when they found him in the temple, having come to Jerusalem to bring alms and to purify himself according to Jewish law. Where, he says, are the Jews from Asia who originally complained? Why didn't they come to state their case if they had one? Then he suggests again that it is his belief that a man had been resurrected that led to his being charged.

Felix is wise enough to discern that there is no real case against Paul. He sends his accusers away saying that he is going to have to talk to Lysais, the chief captain at the temple mount, before he can figure this matter out. He seems interested in Paul, who was an educated man and undoubtedly an interesting conversationalist. Happy to have such an interesting individual at hand, he engages him in discussions on matters of "righteousness, temperance, and the judgment to come."

Perhaps he got more than he bargained for, apparently hearing things that made him uncomfortable, even making him "tremble." Thus he abruptly ends his talks with Paul, not willing to take any action that might lead him into further truth and disappointed that Paul never offered him a bribe. Paul is left in this sort of stalemate for two years, under arrest but without sufficient cause to convict him of anything. Yet Felix does not release him because the governor wanted to "do the Jews a favor." In other words, he retained him for a political purpose.

THE PURPOSE OF PAUL'S LIFE

Now is a good time to step back from the character of Paul and contemplate what an amazing man he truly was. You and I have goals for our lives. We make at least tentative plans for our futures. We hope to work in a certain career or make sure our children marry well or plan to have a comfortable retirement. We think about providing physically and spiritually for our families. Paul made no such plans. His family consisted of the Lord and the converts he had made. It is unlikely his own family had much contact with him; the reference to his sister's son in chapter 23 is the only mention of Paul's family in Acts. Whatever life and plans he had once had, had now been swallowed up in the new life he had since becoming Christ's "slave," as he calls himself.

Paul's plan for the future consisted in giving himself totally into the hands of the Lord to do whatever He wanted him to do for the establishing of the gospel. Paul saw himself as a man brought back from the dead, testifying that Christ "made alive [all] who were dead in trespasses and sins, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind....But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." (Ephesians 2:1-7) Paul's response to this Love was to love in return. This love of the Savior was truly what defined his life and what makes him such an inspiring example for us today.