

The Historical Stories of the Acts of the Apostles

Lesson 14 Acts 21:19 – Acts 23:35

Paul makes it to Jerusalem before Pentecost in May of AD 58. In the city, Paul visits with James and the elders on the second day after his arrival. During the visit, Paul explains the successes of his three missionary journeys.

Paul takes a vow – to diffuse the Jewish hatred

Acts 21:19 And after he had greeted them, he *began* to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. **20** And when they heard it they *began* glorifying God; and they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; **21** and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. **22** "What, then, is *to be done*? They will certainly hear that you have come. **23** "Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; **24** take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses in order that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law. **25** "But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication." **26** Then Paul took the men, and the next day, purifying himself along with them, went into the temple, giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them.

The elders in Jerusalem rejoice over Paul's report; however, they are aware of the hatred of the Asian Jews who have not accepted Jesus as their Savior toward him. The elders have devised a scheme that they hope will diffuse that hatred in the temple. The elders want Paul to join four other men who are about to participate in a vow for seven days. Whether this is a Nazarite vow or not, we do not know. What we do know is that the vow begins in the temple and ends there seven days later. The elders hope that Paul's participation in the vow will show his support for the temple and the old Jewish way of life.

The Asian Jews Accuse Paul

Acts 21:27 And when the seven days were almost over, the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, *began* to stir up all the multitude and laid hands on him, **28** crying out, "Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people, and the Law, and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." **29** For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. **30** And all the city was aroused, and the people rushed together; and taking hold of Paul, they dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut.

The five men visit the temple regularly during the observance of their vow. Near the end of the vow, the Jews from Asia recognize Paul and begin to stir up a ruckus. Why are these Jews in Jerusalem? They are there because it is the custom and desire of all Jews to be in Jerusalem for the Pentecost festival. These Jews are fortunate enough to have been able to make the trip that year.

The festival of Pentecost finds its roots in the Exodus and the feast of harvest.¹⁸² Seven complete weeks, or 49 days are counted from the second day after Passover. The 50th day is celebrated as Pentecost.¹⁸³ With the harvest complete, the offering at the celebration includes two loaves of leavened corn bread and the sacrifice of two lambs. The celebration also includes a free will offering given to the temple.¹⁸⁴

At the Pentecost celebration, the city is filled with Jews from all over Asia who have heard Paul preach the gospel day after day in their home country. When Paul leaves Philippi on his way to Jerusalem for Pentecost, he passes by Ephesus so he will not spend time ministering in Asia.¹⁸⁵ When Paul arrives in Miletus, he sends for the elders of Ephesus to come to him.¹⁸⁶ In their meeting he tells of the struggles that face not only him but also the churches in Ephesus and Asia.¹⁸⁷ Paul's friends in the faith had tried to stop him from traveling to Jerusalem, but he knew the trials that awaited him there. Paul had spent three years in Ephesus and literally exhausted all the Jews of Asia who were hardened against his message.

It is evident that Paul struggles with his Christian faith and his former Jewish faith. His participation in the vow suggested by the elders in Jerusalem is senseless. Paul agrees because he cannot fully let go of the Jewish rituals although he never forces them on the Gentiles. His presence in the temple in connection with the vow gives the Jews of Asia the opportunity to recognize him and foment a riot against him. They remove him from the temple and beat him in the street.

The Roman commander rescues Paul

Acts 21:31 And while they were seeking to kill him, a report came up to the commander of the *Roman* cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. **32** And at once he took along *some* 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 up and took hold of him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains; and he *began* asking who he was and what he had done. **34** But among the crowd some were shouting one thing *and* some another, and when he could not find out the facts on account of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. **35** And when he got to the stairs, it so happened that he was carried by the

¹⁸² Exodus 26:15

¹⁸³ Numbers 28:26

¹⁸⁴ Leviticus 23:15-19, Numbers 28:27-29; Deuteronomy 16:9-11

¹⁸⁵ Acts 20:16

¹⁸⁶ Acts 20:17-18

¹⁸⁷ Acts 20:17-35

soldiers because of the violence of the mob; ³⁶for the multitude of the people kept following behind, crying out, "Away with him!"

The commander of the Roman cohort comes to the aid of Paul, removing him from their hands, intending to take him to the barracks.¹⁸⁸ He has mistaken Paul for another man who had led an insurrection four years earlier.

Paul receives permission to speak to the crowd

Acts 21:37 And as Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the commander, "May I say something to you?" And he said, "Do you know Greek?"

38"Then you are not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?" **39**But Paul said, "I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city; and I beg you, allow me to speak to the people." **40**And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the stairs, motioned to the people with his hand; and when there was a great hush, he spoke to them in the Hebrew dialect, saying, ...

As Paul arrives at the stairs of the barracks, he asks permission to speak to the angry crowd that is following them. Surprised that Paul can speak Greek, the commander agrees while at the same time realizing that he is not the Egyptian leader of the Assassins. The historian Josephus wrote of an Egyptian who led a revolt of 4,000 people in Jerusalem in A.D. 54 and then disappeared. The commander, thinking Paul is this rebel, changes his assumption because of Paul's knowledge of Greek. Addressing the crowd, Paul speaks in Hebrew, not Greek.

Paul's testimony

Acts 22:1"Brethren and fathers, hear my defense which I now offer to you." **2**And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew dialect, they became even more quiet; and he said, **3**"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God, just as you all are today. **4**"And I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, **5**as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brethren, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished. **6**"And it came about that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus about noontime, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, **7**and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, '**Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?**' **8**"And I answered, 'Who art Thou, Lord?' And He said to me, '**I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.**' **9**"And those who were with me beheld the light, to be sure, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me. **10**"And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, '**Arise and go on into Damascus; and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.**' **11**"But since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus. **12**"And a certain Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, *and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there,* **13**came to

¹⁸⁸ A cohort of soldiers in 1,000 men.

me, and standing near said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very time I looked up at him. **14**"And he said, 'The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will, and to see the Righteous One, and to hear an utterance from His mouth. **15**'For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard. **16**'And now why do you delay? Arise, and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.' **17**"And it came about when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance, **18**and I saw Him saying to me, '**Make haste, and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.**' **19**"And I said, 'Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in Thee. **20**'And when the blood of Thy witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the cloaks of those who were slaying him.' **21**"And He said to me, '**Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.**' "

Paul, still in chains, uses the elevation of the stairs as an opportunity to deliver his testimony to the crowd. He begins with his birth in Tarsus and quickly presents the highlights of his life. The crowd listens to him without interruption until he mentions his ministry to the Gentiles at which point they turn on him again, seeking his death.

Paul's Roman Citizenship

Acts 22:²²And they listened to him up to this statement, and *then* they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!" **23**And as they were crying out and throwing off their cloaks and tossing dust into the air, **24**the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, stating that he should be examined by scourging so that he might find out the reason why they were shouting against him that way. **25**And when they stretched him out with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?" **26**And when the centurion heard *this*, he went to the commander and told him, saying, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman." **27**And the commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" And he said, "Yes." **28**And the commander answered, "I acquired this citizenship with a large sum of money." And Paul said, "But I was actually born *a citizen*." **29**Therefore those who were about to examine him immediately let go of him; and the commander also was afraid when he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had put him in chains.

It is common in Paul's day for the authorities to try to beat the truth out of someone. Therefore, in the barracks they remove the chains from his hands and tie him with leather straps in a stretched position. Evidently, Paul does not resist until they are ready to flog him, at which point he announces that he is a Roman citizen. As such, he could not be beaten or punished in any way without a proper trial although the Romans could do as they wished with citizens of all the other nations. The soldiers retrieve the commander who is shocked that Paul is a natural born Roman citizen. The next day the commander releases him but keeps him safe in the barracks.

A called meeting

Acts 22:30 But on the next day, wishing to know for certain why he had been accused by the Jews, he released him and ordered the chief priests and all the Council to assemble, and brought Paul down and set him before them. **Acts 23:1** And Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, "Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day." **2** And the high priest Ananias commanded those standing beside him to strike him on the mouth. **3** Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! And do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?" **4** But the bystanders said, "Do you revile God's high priest?" **5** And Paul said, "I was not aware, brethren, that he was high priest; for it is written, 'YOU SHALL NOT SPEAK EVIL OF A RULER OF YOUR PEOPLE.' "¹⁸⁹

On the day that Paul is released, the commander assembles all the Jewish leadership to determine the reason for their accusations and as Paul begins to address the Council by stating his innocence in the sight of God, Ananias interrupts him and Paul fires back with a verbal rebuke. Once Paul discovers that Ananias is the current High Priest, he quickly uses Scripture to correct himself and basically apologizes.

Gamaliel's Tactic

Acts 23:6 But perceiving that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul *began* crying out in the Council, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!" **7** And as he said this, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. **8** For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. **9** And there arose a great uproar; and some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party stood up and *began* to argue heatedly, saying, "We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" **10** And as a great dissension was developing, the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them and ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force, and bring him into the barracks.

Once Paul recognizes that the Council includes both Pharisees and Sadducees, he uses the same debate tactic which his teacher Gamaliel used in Acts 5 while dealing with Peter and the new faith in Christ. The tactic causes such a stir, just as it did with Peter, that the commander rescues Paul from their midst and keeps him safe in the soldiers' barracks.

A Word from the Lord

Acts 23:11 But on the night *immediately* following, the Lord stood at his side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also."

¹⁸⁹ Exodus 22:28

Luke uses one sentence to reveal the will of the Lord for Paul. In the night, the Lord tells Paul that he will witness to the people in Rome. However, it is not Paul's intent to witness in Rome but to fellowship with the people there before going on to Spain. At this point, Paul must have been empowered by the Lord's message which comforts him against all the trials and tribulations he will face until he reaches Rome.

The Lord does not tell Paul that he will see Rome for a good reason. Paul is virtually blind by this time in his life and, for some reason, the Lord has not seen fit to heal him of his thorn in the flesh.¹⁹⁰

The useless oath

Acts 23:12 And when it was day, the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. **13** And there were more than forty who formed this plot. **14** And they came to the chief priests and the elders, and said, "We have bound ourselves under a solemn oath to taste nothing until we have killed Paul. **15** Now, therefore, you and the Council notify the commander to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case by a more thorough investigation; and we for our part are ready to slay him before he comes near *the place*." **16** But the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, and he came and entered the barracks and told Paul. **17** And Paul called one of the centurions to him and said, "Lead this young man to the commander, for he has something to report to him." **18** So he took him and led him to the commander and said, "Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to lead this young man to you since he has something to tell you." **19** And the commander took him by the hand and stepping aside, *began* to inquire of him privately, "What is it that you have to report to me?" **20** And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down tomorrow to the Council, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more thoroughly about him. **21** So do not listen to them, for more than forty of them are lying in wait for him who have bound themselves under a curse not to eat or drink until they slay him; and now they are ready and waiting for the promise from you." **22** Therefore the commander let the young man go, instructing him, "Tell no one that you have notified me of these things." **23** And he called to him two of the centurions, and said, "Get two hundred soldiers ready by the third hour of the night to proceed to Caesarea, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen." **24** They were also to provide mounts to put Paul on and bring him safely to Felix the governor. **25** And he wrote a letter having this form:

26 "Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix, greetings. **27** When this man was arrested by the Jews and was about to be slain by them, I came upon them with the troops and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. **28** And wanting to ascertain the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their Council; **29** and I found him to be accused over questions about their Law, but under no accusation deserving death or imprisonment. **30** And when I was informed that there would be a plot against

¹⁹⁰ Galatians 4:15

the man, I sent him to you at once, also instructing his accusers to bring charges against him before you."

31 So the soldiers, in accordance with their orders, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris. **32** But the next day, leaving the horsemen to go on with him, they returned to the barracks. **33** And when these had come to Caesarea and delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. **34** And when he had read it, he asked from what province he was; and when he learned that he was from Cilicia, **35** he said, "I will give you a hearing after your accusers arrive also," giving orders for him to be kept in Herod's Praetorium.

It is always difficult to keep a secret when large numbers of people are involved in the plans. Such is the case with these 40 men who announce their plan to the Sanhedrin. Their pledge is that they will not taste a bit of food until they have killed Paul with their own hands. When Paul's nephew learns of the plot, he quickly relays the message. We must not forget that Paul is not under arrest at this time, but under safekeeping from the radical Jews of the Sanhedrin Council and Asia.

The commander is afraid for Paul's life and rightly so. Since Paul is a Roman citizen, the commander cannot afford to let him be harmed while in his care. The commander has already heard enough of Paul's faith in Christ and fears that he will be harmed. It is AD 58, and just 22 years before in AD 36, Tiberius Caesar had called Pilate to Rome to explain why Christ had been put to death. Pilate was named procurator in AD 26 and served in that capacity for ten years. The crucifixion of Christ occurred in AD 30 and it is well documented that Pilate served ten years as procurator. Tiberius died in AD 37, so the events leading to Pilate's death occurred in AD 36 – 37. Tiberius Caesar condemned Pilate to die a disgraceful death for allowing Christ to be crucified. Before he could carry out the sentence, Pilate took his own life with a knife and Tiberius stated that Pilate had indeed died a disgraceful death.

The commander wants to be careful with Paul so he orders troops to take him out of the city that night to Caesarea, 70 miles away. The commander, Claudius Lysias, writes a letter to accompany Paul explaining to the governor why he is sending him there. Two hundred soldiers and seventy horsemen as well as two hundred spearman guard Paul and the letter as far as Antipatris, 45 miles from Jerusalem and 25 miles from Caesarea. The following day, the 70 horsemen return to Jerusalem and the remaining 400 soldiers continue their journey to Caesarea with Paul. However, the governor will not hear Paul's case until he has heard the accusations of the High Priest and the councilmen. For five days, Paul stays in Herod's Praetorium, the home of the governor in Caesarea, waiting for the Jews to arrive.

For more information on the death of Pilate see the excerpts in the following footnote.¹⁹¹

¹⁹¹ *The Death of Pilate, Who Condemned Jesus*

From Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. VIII

And when Tiberius Caesar, the emperor of the Romans, was laboring under a grievous disease, and understanding that there was at Jerusalem a certain physician, Jesus by name, who by a single word cured all infirmities, he, not knowing that the Jews and Pilate had put Him to death, ordered a certain friend of his named Volusianus: Go as quickly as possible across the seas; and thou shalt tell Pilate, my servant and friend, to send me this physician, that he may restore me to my former health. And this Volusianus, having heard the emperor's command, immediately departed, and came to Pilate, as he had been commanded. And he related to the same Pilate what had been entrusted to him by Tiberius Caesar, saying: Tiberius Caesar, the emperor of the Romans, thy master, having heard

that in this city there is a physician who by his word alone heals infirmities, begs thee earnestly to send him to him for the curing of his infirmity. Pilate, hearing this, was very much afraid, knowing that through envy he had caused Him to be put to death. Pilate answered the same messenger thus, saying: This man was a malefactor, and a man who drew to himself all the people; so a council of the wise men of the city was held, and I caused him to be crucified. ...

Volusianus therefore came ... to Tiberius the emperor: Jesus, whom thou hast been longing for, Pilate and the Jews have delivered to an unjust death, and have through envy affixed to the gibbet of the cross.

... Pontius Pilate, therefore, by the command of Caesar, is taken and brought through to Rome. Caesar, hearing that Pilate had arrived at Rome, was filled with exceeding fury against him, and caused him to be brought to him...

Then the emperor ordered him to be kept in prison, until he should deliberate in a council of the wise men what ought to be done with him. And a few days after, sentence was therefore passed upon Pilate, that he should be condemned to the most disgraceful death. Pilate, hearing this, killed himself with his own knife, and by such a death ended his life.

When Caesar knew of the death of Pilate, he said: Truly he has died by a most disgraceful death, whom his own hand has not spared. ...