

Week of August 27 – September 2

Paul Travels to Caesarea (Acts 21:1-14)

This chapter begins with Paul and the apostles traveling through different areas to preach the Word. His disciples warned him through the Holy Spirit that he should not go to Jerusalem. After visiting several cities and arriving in Caesarea, a man who had seven daughters prophesied the same thing – Don't go!

During their stay in Caesarea, a man named Agabus, who also had the gift of prophecy, arrived from Judea and visited them. He took Paul's belt, bound Paul's feet and hands with it, and said, "The Holy Spirit declares, "So shall the owner of this belt be bound by the Jews in Jerusalem and turned over to the Romans." Hearing this, the local believers and his traveling companions begged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. But he said, "Why all this weeping? You're breaking my heart! I'm ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but also to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus." When it was clear that he wouldn't change his mind, they gave up and said, "The will of the Lord be done."

Paul Travels to Jerusalem (Acts 21:15-26)

Shortly afterward, they packed their things and left for Jerusalem. Some disciples from Caesarea accompanied them, and on their arrival in Jerusalem, Paul and his companions were guests at the home of Mnason, one of the early believers, and all the believers at Jerusalem welcomed them.

The next day Paul and his companions met with James and the elders of the Jerusalem church. Paul recounted the many things God had accomplished among the Gentiles through his work. They praised God and said, "You know how many thousands of Jews have also believed, but they're very insistent that Jewish believers must continue to follow the Jewish traditions and customs. The Jewish Christians here at Jerusalem have been told that you are against the laws of Moses, against their Jewish customs, and that you forbid circumcision of their children. Now, what can be done? For they will certainly hear that you have come.

"So, we suggest this: There are four men who are preparing to shave their heads and are under a vow. Go with them to the Temple, purify yourself, and shave your head. Then pay for theirs to be shaved, so everyone will know you approve of this custom for the Hebrew Christians and that you obey the Jewish laws.

"As for the Gentile Christians, we aren't asking them to follow these Jewish customs at all, except for the ones we wrote about: not to eat food offered to idols, not to eat bloody meat, and not to commit fornication."

So, Paul agreed to their request and the next day went with the men to the Temple for the ceremony, publicizing his vow to offer a sacrifice seven days later with the others.

Paul Arrested in Jerusalem (Acts 21:27 - 22:30)

The apostles continued their ministry in Jerusalem, and Paul went to the Temple to preach. He cleansed himself before starting his ministry, but when he was ready to preach, some Jews from Turkey grabbed him and accused him of preaching against the Jewish law and the people, claiming he stirred up trouble. Everyone became angry, and Paul was dragged out of the Temple.

When they tried to kill him, word reached the commander of the Roman garrison that Jerusalem was in an uproar. He quickly ordered out soldiers and officers, and when the mob saw the troops coming, they quit beating Paul. Then the commander arrested him and ordered him bound. The commander asked the crowd who Paul was and what he had done. Some shouted one thing and some another. When he couldn't find out anything in all the uproar and confusion, he ordered Paul to be taken to the armory.

The mob grew so violent that the soldiers lifted Paul to their shoulders to protect him while the crowd followed, shouting, "Away with him, away with him!" As Paul was about to be taken inside, he asked the commander, "May I have a word with you?"

"Do you know Greek?" the commander asked, surprised. "Aren't you that Egyptian who led a rebellion a few years ago and took 4,000 members of the Assassins with him into the desert?"

"No," Paul replied, "I'm a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia. I request permission to talk to these people." The commander agreed, and Paul addressed them in Hebrew.

Paul presented his defense in a public forum, telling them how Jewish he was, that he was born in Tarsus, and grew up in the same city as many of them. He added that he initially persecuted the followers of Christ, imprisoning them and saw many sentenced to death.

Then Paul added, "One time when I was on the road near Damascus, suddenly a very bright light from heaven shined around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' "Who is it speaking to me, sir?" I asked. And he replied, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one you are persecuting.' The men with me saw the light but didn't understand what was said.

"And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'Get up and go to Damascus, and you will be told what awaits you.' I was blinded by the intense light and had to be led into Damascus. A man named Ananias, as godly a man as you could find, came to me and said, 'Brother Paul, receive your sight!' And that very hour I could see!

"Then he told me, 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Messiah and hear him speak. You are to take his message everywhere, telling what you have seen and heard. Go and be baptized and be cleansed from your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.'"

Paul was placed in chains by the Roman guards and was tormented by the crowd, and the Roman guards were ordered to flog him. Paul informed the commander that he was a Roman citizen, that he was born a Roman citizen. The commander became extremely nervous because he had placed a Roman citizen in chains and punished him before he was tried. The Roman commander away took Paul to clarify what the charges were against him. Meanwhile, the Sanhedrin convened, and Paul was told to meet before them so the commander could settle the matter.

The Plot to Kill Paul (Acts 23:1-35)

Paul began: "Brothers, I have always lived before God in all good conscience!" Instantly Ananias the High Priest commanded those close to Paul to slap him on the mouth. Paul said to him, "God shall slap you, you whitewashed wall. What kind of judge are you to break the law yourself by ordering me struck like that?" Those standing near Paul said to him, "Is that the way to talk to God's High Priest?"

"I didn't realize he was the High Priest," Paul replied, "The Scriptures say, 'Never speak evil of any of your rulers.'"

Part of the Council were Sadducees, and some were Pharisees! So, he shouted, "Brothers, I'm a Pharisee, as were all my ancestors! And I'm being tried because I believe in the resurrection of the dead!" The Council was divided right down the middle since the Sadducees say there is no resurrection or angels or even eternal spirit within us, but the Pharisees believe in all of these. An uproar started, and some of the Jewish leaders argued Paul was right. "We see nothing wrong with him. Maybe a spirit or angel spoke to him on the Damascus road."

The shouting grew louder and louder, and the men were tugging at Paul from both sides. Finally, the commander ordered his soldiers to take him away from them by force and bring him back to the armory. That night the Lord stood beside Paul and said, "Don't worry, Paul. Just as you have told the people about Me in Jerusalem, so you must tell about Me in Rome."

The next morning over forty Jews bound themselves by a curse neither to eat nor to drink until Paul was dead! They went to the chief priests and elders and told them what they had done. "Ask the commander to bring Paul back to the Council again," they requested. "Pretend you want to ask a few more questions. We'll kill him on the way." But Paul's nephew heard of the plot and alerted the Roman commander. "Tomorrow," the lad told him, "the Jews are going to ask you to bring Paul before the Council again, pretending they want to get some more information. But don't do it! Men are hiding along the road, ready to jump him and kill him. They've bound themselves under a curse to neither eat nor to drink until he is dead. They are out there now, expecting you to agree to their request."

The commander warned the boy not to tell anyone. Then he said, "Get 200 soldiers ready to leave for Caesarea at nine tonight! Take 200 spearmen and 70 mounted cavalry and give Paul a horse to ride and get him safely to Governor Felix in Caesarea."

The commander wrote a letter to Felix, explaining, "The Jews seized this man and were trying to kill him when I sent the soldiers to rescue him when I learned he was a Roman citizen. Then I took him to their Council to try to find out what he'd done. I discovered it was something about their Jewish beliefs, certainly nothing worthy of imprisonment or death. But when I was informed of a plot to kill him, I decided to send him on to you and will tell his accusers to bring their charges before you."

When they arrived in Caesarea, they presented Paul and the letter to the governor. "I will hear your case fully when your accusers arrive," the governor said and ordered him kept in prison at King Herod's palace.

Paul Tried before Felix (Acts 24:1-27)

Acts 24 begins five days after Paul arrives in Caesarea. He was in Herod's prison when Ananias, the high priest, came to his cell with several elders and Tertullus, a lawyer.

Tertullus addressed Governor Felix, claiming Paul had been a thorn in the side to Jews all over the world, that he is one of the leaders of the followers of Jesus, a cult-like sect called the Nazarenes.

He told how the high priests had stopped Paul from defiling the Temple when a military commander interrupted him and violently took Paul away.

Felix asked Paul to speak. Paul told him he came to Jerusalem to worship, that he had no intention of arguing with anyone or causing trouble. He explained to the governor and those assembled that he worships the God of his fathers.

Felix said he'd ask Lysias, the garrison commander, what happened. He left Paul with a centurion who was instructed to let him have his liberty and allow Paul's acquaintances to visit him.

A few days later, Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was a Jewess. They listened as Paul told them about faith in Christ Jesus. As he reasoned with them about righteousness and self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was terrified. "Go away for now," he replied, "and when I have a more convenient time, I'll call for you again."

Felix hoped that Paul would bribe him, so he sent for him from time to time and talked with him. Two years went by, then Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And since Felix wanted to gain favor with the Jews, he left Paul in chains.

Paul Tried before Festus (Acts 25:1-27)

Festus visited Jerusalem and, while there, the officials and high priest told stories to him about Paul. They were out to kill him and asked Festus to hand over Paul to them. However, Festus refused, wanted to first go to Caesarea to give Paul his chance to tell his side of the story.

In Caesarea, Festus listened to the Jews explain their grievances against Paul. He then called Paul to hear his case. Paul ardently defended his position and swore he had done nothing to offend Caesar or the Jews. He went on to say that if he was guilty as charged, he had no problem with dying. He added that unless his accusers could prove their case, he had no time for their harsh words. Instead, Paul requested to plead his case directly to Caesar.

Festus agreed Paul could stand before Caesar, but it would take some time to make it possible. Meantime, Bernice and King Agrippa visited Caesarea to meet with Festus, who related Paul's story to the king. Paul told about a man named Jesus who had died, but whom Paul insisted was alive. The king was interested to hear this directly from Paul and asked Festus to summon him the next day.

Festus had all the important citizens of Caesarea present as well as all the town's commanders. He fervently defended Paul but stated that since Paul had requested a personal visit with Caesar, he'd write to him on Paul's behalf.

Festus wrote the letter to Caesar so he'd be aware of the circumstances relating to Paul's case before sending the prisoner to him.