

The Resurrection **ON TRIAL**



Acts 21-28 Bible Studies

Paul: A Man on the Move

Acts 21:1- 28:31

The Acts of the Apostles

Acts tells the story of how the early church got the Gospel from Jerusalem, Capital of Jewry, to Rome, Capital of the world. Our Acts passages will also tell us of Paul, a key figure in this saga and of the (Holy) Spirit of mission who compelled him and others to keep carrying the good news towards 'the ends of the earth'. Although not mentioned in Acts it seems clear that Luke, the 'beloved physician' was Paul's missionary companion and the recorder of the story. Like Luke's first book - his Gospel - it was addressed to Theophilus, possibly Luke's patron, who might have financed the publication of his work. Together the two books tell us first how Jesus *began* to work and then how he *continued* his work in Gospel outreach and the transformation of lives.

In our passages (chapters 21 to 28) we meet Paul in Jerusalem, see him arrested there and defending himself before a hostile crowd. We see him then before the Jewish chief priest and at the Sanhedrin (the major Jewish court). We hear of a plot to kill Paul and of his rescue by a Roman Centurion. We read of Paul on trial before Felix, the Governor and of his appeal (as a Roman citizen) to Caesar which would ensure his journey to Rome. Paul then had a moving opportunity of explaining to King Agrippa how Christ had met and transformed a persecutor into an Apostle. Now there could be no other course but to set sail for Rome (including an exciting shipwreck). Paul, the man on the move was almost in sight of his iconic missionary destination.

Study 1 – Acts 21:1-22:29

Paul and the crisis in the Holy City

Introductory Comment

Paul, like his Master before him, was resolute in his decision to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51) despite the opposition he would meet there (21:12-14). In Caesarea a local prophet named Agabus had warned him of how the Jerusalem Jews would have him bound and handed over to the Romans (Acts 21:10). Paul longed to see Jewish and Gentile Christians find their deep unity with each other in Christ and his heart broke often over his countrymen's resistance to the Gospel (Romans 9:2).

Structure

21:1-16 – The journey to Jerusalem

21:27-36 – Pauls' arrest

21:37-22:29 – Paul's defence

Discussion starter

Have you ever had to do something which was risky but necessary? What made you do it?

The Jerusalem church was glad to see Paul but warned him of what some church members were accusing him (21:20,21).

1. Why do you think these people thought that? What do you think his defence might be?

2. What was the church leaders' advice to Paul (21:22-25)? When he agreed to do this (21:26) did he compromise his principles (see Galatians 3:1-3)?

3. Why were the Jewish Christian so lenient with the Gentile believers (21:25) and so strict among themselves? Are there times when we should be more flexible with other Christians? If so when?

What about us?

How can we discern the difference between that which is cultural and that which is Biblical? Can you think of any examples?

4. Why do you think the Jews were so sensitive about Gentiles entering their temple (21:28 – see also Acts 6:13)? What did Jesus mean when he said he would replace the temple for Christian believers (John 2:20-22)?
5. The Romans rescued Paul from the hostile Jews (21:31-36). What good things did Paul say about the Gentile government and its authority (Romans 13:1-7)?

What about us?

Jesus said 'give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's (Luke 20:25). What are the signs that Caesar has begun to take over God's authority? Give examples.

Paul had a chance to answer the Jews' accusations (22:1 ff.) His defence was his personal testimony.

6. Why is testimony such an effective way to present the Gospel?

7. Paul's Roman citizenship was sometimes very useful (22:25-29 – see also Acts 16:37). What are the marks of good Christian citizenship – 1 Peter 2:13-17)?

Close in prayer: In a time of prayer let us remember those who to-day face persecution and perhaps imprisonment. Let us ask God to protect and preserve them and use their testimony to his glory.

Study 2 – Acts 22:30 -23:35

Paul has a close escape

Introductory comment

The Jewish Sanhedrin was the Supreme Court in ancient Israel. It was comprised of 70 men, plus the High priest and other priests, scribes and elders. It had its own police force which could arrest people (as it did Jesus) and it heard both civil and criminal cases, but without power to execute people. The Roman commander who had rescued Paul from the mob, was obviously anxious because Paul was a Roman citizen; he also did not feel competent to sort out the religious accusations brought against him so took Paul to the Sanhedrin.

Structure

Acts 22:30 – 23:10 - Paul before the Sanhedrin

Acts 23:11- 35 - Paul transferred to Caesarea

Discussion starter

Have you ever seen or been involved in any sort of religious controversy. What was the issue at stake and how was it resolved?

Paul, in protesting his innocence, perhaps naturally lost his cool with the unlawful treatment he was given at the Sanhedrin but later apologised (23:1-5).

1. Do you think Paul was inwardly moved to apologise by the attitudes he taught in (say) Colossians 3:12-14?

When Paul openly declared himself a Pharisee and thus a believer in the resurrection of the dead he knew that the Pharisees and Sadducees present would disagree with each other (23:6)? The dispute became so vigorous that the Roman commander, scared by what was happening, had to step in and rescue Paul again.

2. Was Paul being cunning or strategic in provoking the argument?

3. Paul's vision on the following night assured him that he would eventually make it to Rome (23:11), though it would not be the way he had planned. Have such amendments to your plans ever happened in your life and how have you coped with them? Give examples.

What about us?

What are the major principles involved in us finding God's will for our lives? How has this worked out for you?

Those opposed to Paul were out to do away with him. A dangerous group of men swore an oath to have him recalled to the Sanhedrin giving them the opportunity to ambush and kill him but their plan was thwarted (23:12-22).

4. What can make a religion dangerous and even violent? What gives rise to fanaticism (see 1 Corinthians 13:3)?

It was necessary to remove Paul from danger and from Jerusalem. So the Tribune, Claudius Lysias decided to take him to Caesarea secretly by night guarded by many soldiers (23:23-30). Paul would then be in the care of Governor Felix.

5. How did the early Christians feel about such government authorities – see 1 Peter 2:13-17)?

What about us?

We live in much more democratic times than Paul and we have more say in those who govern us. What are some guiding principles for Christian citizens today in their attitude to governments?

6. Paul would now depend on a fair trial from Felix who was hated by the Jews and whose region was marked by lawlessness and revolts. What sort of character should we hope for in our judges and magistrates and how should we pray for them?

Close in prayer: Let us pray for those in prison and all chaplains who serve them. Let us remember all those in places where people suffer persecution and harassment and let us ask God to protect and preserve them.

Study 3 – Acts 24:1-27

Paul scares Felix

Introductory comment

Governor Felix, as a freedman, was promoted to an unusually high position. He sought to improve his position by marrying Drusilla, the daughter of Herod Agrippa, but since the Jews hated him, his reign was marked by civil unrest. Tacitus, the Roman historian said of Festus that ‘he exercised the power of a king with the heart of a slave’. It was now before this man that Paul was to be tried.

Structure

Acts 24:1 – 21 - Paul defends himself

Acts 24:22 – 27 - Felix procrastinates

Discussion starter

‘It’s not fair’ is a common complaint of children and also some adults. Have you found yourself in that situation and what did you do about it?

The High priest came to Caesarea to accuse Paul. However to strengthen the case an attorney named Tertullus was hired. He was probably an Hellenic Jew fluent in Greek which would impress Felix. Tertullus tried to flatter the Governor and then he accused Paul of being an agitator and a profaner of the Temple in Jerusalem (24:1-9).

1. When accused of something when should we demand justice or when simply follow Jesus’ example of trusting God to clear us (see 1 Peter 2:20 – 23)?

Paul acknowledges the fact that Felix had been in Palestine long enough to understand a case of this kind. Paul admits that he is a 'follower of the Way' i.e. a Christian but insists that this was in accord with the Bible (Old Testament) which his accusers should accept, including the resurrection hope (24:10 – 16).

2. It is sadly possible to be a Bible reader and miss the point of its message (John 5:39)? How can we avoid this?

3. Paul said that he was cleared before the Sanhedrin and that he had 'shouted' his belief in the resurrection (24:17 – 21). Is our belief in the resurrection our best defence against those who belittle our faith?

What about us?

What should our attitude and manner be when defending the faith – see 1 Peter 3:15 – 16?

Governor Felix was obviously a master of delay and procrastination. He knew something of the Christian faith (the 'Way') but whether or not that influenced him is not clear. Felix would wait for Tribune Lysias to come, Paul would be kept in custody (though visited by friends). Felix interviewed Paul from time to time but should have released him (24:22,23)

4. Have you ever been frustrated by delay (or delaying tactics) and what is the answer to such frustration – see Colossians 1:11, 3:12?

5. The Governor and his wife sent for Paul and asked him to discuss the Christian faith. Paul characteristically did not hold back and so declared God's demands and the judgement to come that Felix was scared and terminated the discussion (24:24,25). When the opportunities arises how does Christ fulfil his promise to us in Matthew 10:18-20)? Give some examples.

What about us?

Is there some way we can foster more opportunities for faith-sharing? How should we pray for such situations?

6. Felix was not only a procrastinator, he was a schemer and an illegal opportunist on the lookout for bribes (24:27). Thus Paul's case languished till Felix was replaced by Festus. Once again Paul's plans to go to Rome were interrupted. Have you experienced disappointments like this and what helped you cope with it?

Close in prayer: pray that God will make us patient and compassionate in our dealing with other people and that we will know how to endure disappointments with grace and dignity.

Study 4 – Acts 25 and 26

Paul puts pressure on Agrippa

Introductory comment

Felix was replaced by Porcius Festus who appears to be a good ruler. He tried to restore order in Palestine but died after a short time. Immediately after taking up office he went to Jerusalem to discuss with the authorities any matters that needed attention. The Sanhedrin members took advantage of this and immediately reopened their case against Paul. They wanted him returned to Jerusalem where the case might be put in Jewish hands again.

Structure

25:1-12 - Paul before Festus

25:13-27 - Paul before Festus and Agrippa

Discussion starter

Can you see God's hand in history? Give examples.

1. Festus refused the Jews request but said that some Jewish leaders could also come to Caesarea (25:1-5). Does God sometimes use secular authorities to aid Christian believers? Can you see this working out in society today?
2. In Caesarea Festus immediately held court and heard the Jew's insubstantial charges against Paul (25:6, 7). What is the best Christian reaction to unjust treatment or false accusations? Is there a way to 'silence' unfair criticism – see 1 Peter 2:15?

3. Why were the Jews so sensitive in matters concerning the law or the temple (25:8 - see also Acts 6:13)? Why did Paul also mention 'Caesar' in his defence?

What about us?

Do you think that Christians, Christianity and the church often get unfair treatment in the media? Is there anything we can do about this?

Though Paul should have been released, Festus saw a political advantage in ingratiating himself with the Jews. Perhaps, also with respect for Paul's Roman citizenship he asked him whether he was 'willing' to go to Jerusalem. But Paul, knowing that this would put him at a disadvantage and in danger, refused on the grounds that he had not contravened Roman law. Festus answered 'You have appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you will go!' (25:9-12).

4. In tricky situations how can we be as shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16)? – Give some examples.

Paul's affairs were further confused by the arrival of King Agrippa and his younger sister Bernice. As a petty king Agrippa was probably anxious to meet and perhaps impress the new proconsul. Festus, confused by the Jews' religious protests, may have hoped for some assistance from Agrippa as titular head of the Jewish church (25:12 – 18).

5. What are some ways of helping people who are confused about our faith as Christians? What does it mean to give a 'reason' for our Christian hope (1 Peter 3:15)?

6. Festus, meticulous in administration, needed to prepare a written statement to accompany Paul on his way to Rome and the Emperor (25:25-27). As voters who elect good government how can we ensure that our rulers are just and upright in their policies and values?

7. The Jews accusations had now apparently focused on Jesus and the resurrection (25:19). Is it a wise way of approach to people to ask them Jesus' own question in Mark 8:27-29?

Close in Prayer: Pray for our government and its ministers, their policies and programmes, asking that they show justice and mercy to all. Let us also pray for the governments in which our missionaries are working; let us ask that they be given wisdom and grace in their civil relationships and in their guidance of those that they serve.

Study 5: Acts 27 – 28:10

Paul is nearly washed up

Introductory comment

After several trials and speeches in Jerusalem Luke concludes his Acts story with the rather exciting sea voyage from Palestine to Italy. Paul is in many ways the hero of the story, warning the sailors, guiding them to rescue and demonstrating the strong element of God's guidance and protection. Paul's confidence obviously derives from his trust in a God who could allow people to find themselves in deepest need before delivering them. Also the voyage is one of the 'we' sections of Acts thus showing that Luke was also present with Paul in these adventures

Structure

27:1- 20 - Paul in the storm

27:21- 44 - Escape at sea

28:1-10 - Ashore on Malta

Discussion Starter

Why do exciting stories capture our interest and do we learn anything from them?

Paul – a man on the move – is now aboard ship (27:1 – 12) under the surveillance of a Centurion named Julius. Small vessels like this one obviously worked their way from harbour to harbour along the coast until they reached their destination. It was now late in the year and the wintry conditions made it risky for sea travel. Paul and his Roman guards changed ship at Myra, but were making slow headway against strong winds until they reached Fair Havens. At this point the Centurion in charge of Paul, being concerned at the loss of time, made a rash decision. Backed by the pilot and the ship's owner, he decided that they should move on to find a better harbour. Paul did not agree with this decision.

1. Why do you think Paul warned that this was a dangerous decision? Was it common sense or divine revelation?

The gentle south wind with which they began their journey suddenly turned into a raging hurricane and they were so in danger of shipwreck that they even gave up hope of being saved (27:13 – 20).

2. When Paul was in danger on another occasion he found it a learning experience. Read 2 Corinthians 1:8 – 11 - What did he learn from it?

What about us?

What have you learned from times of difficulty or even danger? Have such times sometimes been beneficial?

The desperate sailors, in fear of shipwreck, tried secretly to launch the lifeboats but Paul warned the Centurion that this would be suicidal (27:27 – 32) and the Centurion cut the ropes. Paul then, just before daylight, urged the ship's company to eat something assuring them that they would be kept safe (27:33 – 38).

3. Do you think that Paul's conviction that he would see Rome gave him the confidence to make such a bold prediction – see Acts 19:21 and 23:11)?

The shipwreck is vividly described by the eyewitness (Luke) and it is concise, direct and virile (27:39 – 44). All on board got safe ashore, all prisoners, including Paul, were spared execution and a new chapter opened for them on Malta where, thankfully, they were treated with 'unusual kindness'. (28:2). Paul's survival of an attack by a poisonous snake made the superstitious islanders think him a god (28:3-6).

4. How do you think Paul would have dealt with such a tricky situation? What would you have advised him to do or say?

5. Paul being involved in the healing of the father of the chief official on the island created a mass movement of sick islanders seeking healing (28:9, 10). How do you think Paul would have coped with that? How might he have balanced this with preaching the Gospel?

What about us?

Do you think that some form of healing ministry helps to establish a Christian community?

6. Why do you think Luke told this exciting sea story? Was it to teach us anything and, if so, what?

Close in Prayer: Pray for our missionaries who sometimes have to face difficult and dangerous situations. Ask God to protect them and use them wisely and well

Study 7 – Acts 28:11-31

Paul Arrives!

Introductory comment

After spending three months in Malta waiting for the weather to make navigation possible the Centurion Julius engaged an Alexandrian ship, also wintering in Malta. Eventually a favourable wind took them to Puteoli on the bay of Naples where Paul was met by 'brothers' who had heard that he was coming to Rome. Arriving in the city itself Paul began to live under 'house arrest' guarded by a soldier.

Structure

28:11 – 16 - Rome at last

28:17 – 31 - Paul and the Jews in Rome

Conversation Starter

Have you ever had to live in circumstances which you felt less than ideal? How did you cope with this?

1. These Roman churches which Paul met had probably been founded by refugees and nameless missionaries. Long before this Paul, in writing to them, said how he had looked forward to meeting and having mutual ministry with them. Read Romans 1:11-13: What sort of thing do you think he planned to give them and what did he expect to receive from them?

2. In Romans 15:21 - 33 Paul informed the Roman Christians of his plan to visit them while passing on to other mission fields. What else did he share with them in his letter? Does it tell us anything about the need of prayer for missionaries?

What about us?

What are some of the practical ways by which we can be involved with missionaries and the worldwide outreach of the Gospel?

3. It is believed that the Epistle to the Hebrews was written to Christians in Rome. Many of them were obviously Jewish and were often tempted to give up on their new faith and return to Judaism. In Hebrews 10:24, 25 what does the writer want to influence his readers to do?

4. How can we 'spur' people in the right direction? What is the right direction?

Paul always began his ministry by preaching first to Jews and although he was prevented from attending a synagogue he was able to call Jewish leaders to his house. There were many Jews in Rome e.g. at least nine synagogues and when Emperor Claudius tried to expel them from Rome their numbers were so great that he failed to do so. Paul also had personal reason for meeting with the Jews because his case before Caesar had been instigated by Jews; had his accusers also arrived in Rome or had local Jews been deputed to continue the case. The Local Jews said that they had not been so advised (28:17 – 22).

5. Paul then got his chance to preach to the Jews. He spoke of the Kingdom of God and of Jesus fulfilling what was said in Moses and the prophets. What parts of the Old Testament do you think he might have cited?

6. When some Jews believed and others did not there was a dispute and Paul quoted Isaiah 6:9, 10 to emphasise their spiritual blindness (28:23 – 28). Paul said that this justified his decision to go now and preach to Gentiles. Is there a time when it is right to give up on hard heartedness?

7. Paul now had two full years of ministry in Rome and many came to hear him preach. In what way does this 'end' of the story fulfil Jesus' command in Acts 1:8

What about us?

Are we aware of being part of the continuing story of Acts and do we see it in our daily Christians lives?

Close in Prayer



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