

Lesson 30: Acts 21:17-23:11 The Gospel's Respect for Conscience

Introduction

Paul has arrived in Jerusalem. He is not beloved by all Christians. He is hated by many Jews. His desire is Christian unity. And he knows that real Christian unity must be grounded in a common core of shared belief. This second movement of Acts part VI provides more support for the defense of Paul and his Gospel. We see in Paul flexibility in things that are not essential and immovability in things that are essential. He will engage in religious ceremony that he does not believe necessary for salvation to show that he is not advocating the elimination of Jewish tradition. At the same time, he will not back down from a mob when the question of faith in Jesus Christ is at stake.

We are following the same structure as the first movement with a danger avoided, a misconception corrected, and a defense given. As in the last movement, the defense given is lengthy, covering three distinct reports.

The danger avoided in this movement parallels the danger avoided in the previous movement. There Paul escaped a mob of pagans angered by the charge Paul was preaching against Artemis and dishonored her famed temple in Ephesus. In this movement Paul will be rescued from a mob of Jews angered by the charge Paul was preaching against Moses and defiled God's holy Temple in Jerusalem. This is Acts 21:17-30.

Danger Avoided: The Mob in Jerusalem (21:17-36)

¹⁷ After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. ¹⁸ And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. ¹⁹ 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.

There is more than one misconception about Paul in this section. This is one of them. The misconception that a lot of these Christian believers have about Paul. We notice the reception Paul received from the leaders in Jerusalem, from James and the elders. Luke tells us all the elders were present as Paul told what God had been doing among the Gentiles. And they glorified God. They rejoiced. They are praising. They are excited by the stories of salvation that Paul is sharing. There is no misunderstanding with the leaders.

But they know their own people, and they know false rumors have been going on. And this has to do with Christian brothers and sisters. We are not talking right now about unbelieving Jews. The majority of Jewish Christians are still zealous for the Law. They have not fully, theologically unpacked the implication that Jesus is the end of the Law. At the Council of Jerusalem in chapter 15, Jewish leaders rejected circumcision, food laws, and any ceremonial requirement as necessary for answering the first question of Covenant, "What justifies a person before God?" So that decision has been made at the top. And their decision affirmed the Gospel claim that you are forgiven fully by what Jesus did. You cannot add to that. You are justified 100% by grace through faith.

There is, however, a second question of Covenant, "How then shall we live, having been fully accepted by grace into relationship with God?" That question is messier. We are not called to live up to a standard of acceptance. We are all called to live according to God's vision of what true life is. We are called to show our love through obedience to His will. The Mosaic Covenant was God's will for those who lived before Jesus. That Covenant has ended for Jew and Gentile. Now God's will for obedient behavior from His followers is expressed in the New Covenant.

The commitment of Jewish believers to the Old Testament Scriptures is commendable. They are committed to Scripture, and their commitment to the Law is a valuable witness to nonbelieving Jews. But in their Jewish culture, they have not been challenged to work out the implication of freedom that comes along with the New Covenant. And it has so much to do with how we were brought up in our religious environment, in our cultural environment, to understand what it means to walk with God. If everybody drinks grape juice for the Lord's Supper in your church, and in your city, and in your region, and it's just a thing people do, great, no problem. But as soon as you introduce a European into the conversation, somebody is going to have to ask, "Why don't we drink wine? What is this value that we have?"

Living as a believer in a society that recognizes Old Testament ceremony as the right way to honor God, where everybody kind of has this general belief to be spiritual, everybody knows you keep Sabbath, you keep food laws, you keep sacrifices, everybody does that, Christian or non-Christian, everybody, whether they do it or not, everybody knows that's what you're supposed to do, and having no alternatives; you know, these are all Jews, pretty much in Judea, so we don't have a strong community of believing Gentiles who are rocking the boat. We are saying, "You know what? We need to go back and to think what it really means that Jesus is the end of the Law." They don't have that. And so, they don't understand the context that Paul operates in. They haven't been challenged to work out some of the implications of their own faith. Their cultural isolationism makes them susceptible to rumors about Paul. And knowing this, the elders tell Paul,

"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."

And we know the accusations are not true. We even have this interesting example of Paul requiring Timothy to be circumcised Paul to join in with his missionary band. It's not required for salvation. It's not even required for the second question of Covenant. Timothy doesn't have to be circumcised, but Paul knows it will become an issue. And so, he does encourage Timothy to be circumcised. So, we know Paul is not going around, telling Jewish parents not to circumcise their children. He has taught Jews they are saved by grace apart from the Law. But he is not telling to abandon their customs. In fact, Paul just wrote a long letter to the Romans at the end of his last missionary journey before he headed to Jerusalem, so it's just a matter of weeks since he wrote it, in which he addressed this issue. In Romans 14 and 15, Paul addresses the Jewish position that believers must follow certain food laws and must observe certain days. As an issue of the second question of Covenant, some are saying, "We need to be doing these things. Not to be saved, not the first question, but as the second question, to honor God we need to be doing these things." And Paul, in Romans 14, he calls that position, "the weak position." He also refers to the view of other believers that the Gospel set us free from the requirement of Old Covenant ritual practices. Paul expresses that as his own view. And he calls that, "the strong position." But instead of telling the weak to just stop it, stop what you're doing, don't do these things, Paul provides three principles to help both sides live in acceptance with one another. First, you are all ultimately accountable to God. So, stop judging each other. These are not moral issues. These are issues of ritual and ceremony, and what you feel is right in your walk with God. Second, if you do recognize your freedom in the Gospel from these Covenantal practices, do not become a stumbling block to those who do not. Do not drive them away by your disagreement with their position and do not tempt them to do something they understand as sin. Don't be a stumbling block. And finally, third thing, each one of you should act out of faith. If you believe something is sin, do not do that thing. You can ask God to help you understand better His will, and maybe you'll come to a point where you'll realize, "You know, it's not really a sin to eat shrimp, or drink this wine, or eat meat in the market, even though it might have been sacrificed to an idol. I don't believe in that anyway. It's okay." But as you are in the process of coming to understand, act according to your current understanding of the will of God. If you think it's a sin, don't do it. Act by faith.

Having just written these things to the Romans before setting sail to Jerusalem, it is very interesting to get an example here in Acts of Paul practicing what he preached. He told the Romans, do not be a stumbling block when it comes to non-essentials that are not a clear moral issue. You are free not to do these things. But you are also free in the Gospel to do them if you find yourself in a situation where it would be wise and loving to do attend Temple ceremony, you are free to do that in the Gospel. It is not sin. Paul finds himself in that kind of situation. Verses 22-26,

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 so 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.

Paul recognizes a value in spiritual disciplines. In 18:18 Luke told us Paul had his hair cut because he was keeping a vow. That was a matter of Paul’s personal relationship with God, not a ritual ceremony he was bound to observe. And Paul can approach this request in a similar way. He can offer this behavior, this vow to God, and he can give worship through it. He is not advocating the necessity of Mosaic Law. He is not even saying that Jews ought to keep these customs. He is recognizing the importance of these customs to thousands of Jewish believers, and he is recognizing the symbolic importance this act provides by showing he is not against Moses. His behavior could certainly be misinterpreted by Jewish believers to support their own theology. That is one of the problems with trying not to be a stumbling block. You can do what you can do, but ultimately other people bear responsibility for how they interpret what you do. And you cannot control that.

In this case, Paul is acting out of love for fellow believers, and he is not re-establishing Temple worship, this is an act of love in his freedom in the Gospel to do this thing. And he is also acting out of his goal to promote Christian unity between Jew and Gentile. That is why he is here in Jerusalem. That is why he brought the money as a gift from the Gentiles, to show good will to Jewish brothers and sisters. If Christian unity will cost some money, and some time, and require giving up some personal freedom to perform a ceremony as in this instance, that’s not too big of a price for Paul in promoting unity in the essentials of the Gospel. We can do these non-essential things if that will help us to come together in the essentials. And Paul is willing to pay the price, even without a guarantee that his gesture will be well received. And that is love. You do what you can do but you can’t guarantee how the other person is going to receive you. So, Paul is going to try.

We never will know how well his gesture was received by Jewish believers. Things took an ugly turn when non-believing Jews from the province of Asia confronted Paul in the temple as he was concluding the ceremony. Verses 27-36,

²⁷ When the seven days were almost over, the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, *began* to stir up all the crowd 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 Then all the city was provoked, and the people rushed together, and taking hold of Paul they dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut. ³¹ 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 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 because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. ³⁵ When he got to the stairs, he was carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob; ³⁶ for the multitude of the people kept following them, shouting, "Away with him!"

The men who raise the cry against Paul are not from Jerusalem. They are from Asia. We do not know if they were from Ephesus or another place in Asia. We have already seen in our story how Paul was pushed out of the Ephesian synagogue because of heavy opposition to his message and how he took up teaching in the lecture halls of Tyrannus. These men have some experience with Paul in Asia. And they testify falsely to his teaching, claiming he preaches against the Jews, and the Law, and the Temple, you know, everywhere he goes. It is a false testimony, though perhaps how they understand Paul from their conservative Jewish perspective, it's accurate in their mind. They have these assumptions about who Paul is and the implications of his teaching. A Gospel that sets up a spiritual reign of the Messiah rather than a physical one, that proclaims Jesus to be the end of the Law, and that opens the door for all people to enter without regard to Temple ritual and sacrifice, that Gospel may very well feel to them like a message hostile to Jewish identity, hostile to the Law, hostile to the Temple. The charges do place Paul in the company of Stephen and Jesus before him, who were both charged the same, with teaching against the Law, teaching against the Temple. It's a misunderstanding of Christian teaching of this understanding of continuity from Old Covenant to New Covenant.

The thought that Paul would bring Trophimus into the Temple shows how much his opponents' religious zeal prevents them from rightly assessing Paul's character or his message. They are not being fair to him at all. They do not get him at all. And in their prejudice and hatred, they imagine behavior that is actually unthinkable for Paul. In his love for the Temple and in his love for the Jewish people he would never use his Gospel freedom to bring Gentiles in and defile the Temple. But that charge, true or false, is a very provocative charge and it's enough to stir up wrath among many gathered in the Temple. Like a spark struck in a dry pine forest, the flames catch immediately and quickly spread from the Temple and out, into the city.

And this rioting mob, they drag Paul out of the inner court of the Temple, where he had gone to offer sacrifice for himself and the young men. And they pull into the outer court with the intent of killing him. And we will see later in Paul's own words that he is reminded of something very similar that happened twenty-seven years earlier when another man had been dragged out by the mob, but at that point, Paul was part of the mob. And held the coats of men that were similar to these as they picked up stones to murder Stephen. And now they plan to kill Paul. They are beating him. And maybe the tradition of death by stoning creates enough of delay for the Roman soldiers to intervene. It does a little explanation to show how they got there so quickly.

The Roman governor over Judea did not live in Jerusalem. His provincial headquarters were situated in Caesarea. That's why we are going to spend a lot of time there in the next few chapters. It is a majority Gentile city with a good coastal port more suited to an elite Roman community than Jerusalem was. So, the governor is not here, but a military battalion is garrisoned in Jerusalem to keep things under control. You are probably quite familiar with the term, "centurion," that is one we hear a lot in the Bible. It is an officer over a hundred. My Bible translates the officer present as, "commander." "Tribune" is another translation you sometimes get. The actual Greek word is, "chiliarch." So, as a centurion is a commander of a hundred, a chiliarch is a commander over a thousand. Though the typical battalion, or cohort, was never at full strength. It's usually more 600-800 soldiers.

So, these Romans are stationed in Jerusalem. They are stationed in the center of Jerusalem, in the Antonia Fortress; a fortress that was named after Mark Antony. And it was built into the wall of the

Temple's outer court. I mean, they are right here, near the center of action. So the soldiers only need a few minutes down two flights of stairs to get from their barracks to the Temple's outer court, where Paul is being beaten.

And the alertness and close proximity of the soldiers have saved his life. The soldiers stopped the beating. Due to the intensity, and noise, and confusion of the mob, the commander quickly removes him. And they start going back up the stairs, into the fortress, to the barracks, so that the commander can make further investigation.

We will find out that the commander has already made some quick assumptions about Paul. And of course, he would. Rushing into this flared up Jerusalem mob his adrenaline would have been pumping, and he is at full awareness, and his mind is rushing around, trying to assess the situation. You know, what's going on here? How much force do I need to use? I don't want to make things worse, but I am willing to if I need to.

And the assumptions the commander makes, that is going to bring up our misconception that needs to be corrected, which is the second part of our structure for these movements in Acts part VI. The misconception and correction are both recorded in chapter 21:37-39.

Misconception Corrected: The Commander's View (21:37-39)

³⁷ 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."

Okay, what is this? Four thousand assassins? Beaten, bruised and bloodied, Paul regained his composure quickly and addressed the commander with this request as he is being carried up, dragged up the stairs, and we get the misconception and the correction at the same time. Because when he hears Paul speaking, he gives us the misconception. "So 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? You're not that guy?" The commander had made a guess about who Paul might be and it sounds like a pretty outlandish guess. You know, where is this coming from? But he did not make it up out of nowhere. He refers to a contemporary troublemaker who could reasonably be responsible for such a disturbance like this. F.F. Bruce provides this background in his commentary.

Some three years previously, an Egyptian adventurer appeared in Jerusalem, claiming to be a prophet, and led a large band of followers out to the Mount of Olives. There he told them to wait until, at his word of command, the walls of the city would fall flat; then they would march in, overthrow the Roman garrison, and take possession of the place. But Felix, procurator of Judaea, sent a body of troops against them; they killed several and took others prisoner.⁵⁶ The Egyptian himself discreetly disappeared. Those whom he had duped would cherish no friendly feelings toward him. Now, thought the tribune, the impostor had reappeared and the people were venting their rage on him.¹

So that's the misconception. The correction of this misconception comes before the commander has even voiced his thoughts when Paul made his request in well-accented Greek. And his choice of language challenged the commander's false assumption. I often wonder if the commander's surprise at Paul's well-spoken Greek kind of threw him off enough to explain why he lets Paul speak to the crowd. Maybe he reasons too quickly that the mob has made a mistake, too, you know, they think he is somebody that he is obviously not somebody and they just need to let him speak. And so I'll let him speak and he'll explain who he is, and that will settle things.

¹ F. F. Bruce. *The Book of the Acts*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 412.

Moving now to Paul's speech before the mob, we enter into the defense section of our movement. Paul's speech will be the first of three approaches the commander uses to get to the bottom of things. Along with Paul's own testimony, the commander will attempt torture as another way to get to the truth, and then he will turn to an inquiry before the Sanhedrin, hoping that at some point he is going to find out what is going on with this riot and who Paul is. And the investigation really works as a defense for Paul, because at each point Paul is going to be shown innocent of any civil or criminal charges.

We begin with Paul's own testimony to the crowd of how he came to be a witness for Jesus Christ. It is not going to satisfy the mob or the commander really, but it is golden for us. It is wonderful to hear Paul's testimony. And as you listen to his testimony, notice the simple three-part division of his life before meeting Jesus, how he met Jesus, and after meeting Jesus. And also notice how he contextualizes his own story for this particular audience. This is Acts 21:40-22:22.

Defense Given: The Commander's Investigation (21:40-23:11)

Explanation From Paul (21:40-22:22)

⁴⁰ 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, 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 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 But it happened 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 are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.' ⁹ And those who were with me saw 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, 'Get up 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 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 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 'Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name.'

¹⁷ "It happened 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 You. ²⁰ 'And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him.' ²¹ And He said to me, 'Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.' "

²² 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!”

The text begins, “Brethren and Fathers, hear my defense, which I now offer to you.” Paul is giving a defense. That is the assumption we are using for the end of each movement in Acts part VI. Here the text says that explicitly. Paul speaks in the Hebrew dialect. That would be a Hebrew version of Aramaic, the mother tongue of Jews from Judea. Paul does not speak in Greek for the Roman Commander. He wants to speak to the heart of the crowd. And if you want people to listen to you, if you speak their language, they are much more likely to listen. And the crowd quiets down and he is able to get his defense in the form of personal testimony.

We have already gone through Paul’s history. Some in chapter 9. That was from the author’s perspective, not from Paul’s personal perspective. It wasn’t first-person. We will get another version of Paul’s first-person perspective in chapter 26, when he speaks to King Agrippa. Both of Paul’s personal testimonies are contextualized to his audience, so we get additional details that Luke did not include with his introduction of Paul.

Paul’s life before meeting Jesus

For example, considering Paul’s life before meeting Jesus, we find out here that even though he was born in Tarsus, he was brought up in Jerusalem and educated under Gamaliel, the most famous Rabbi of the day. And Gamaliel was so well esteemed, he is referred to with respect in both the Mishna and the Talmud, the two most important Rabbinic texts apart from the Old Testament. We met Gamaliel and saw his wisdom in chapter 5 when he cautioned the Sanhedrin to let the Apostles go. You know, they’re of God! Don’t stand in the way!

Paul’s mention of growing up in Jerusalem and studying under Gamaliel is relevant to this crowd of zealous Jews. He has better credentials than the Jews of Asia who have made accusations. He goes on to emphasize that he was raised according to the strictness of the Law, and that is certainly believable if he studied as a disciple under a Rabbi like Gamaliel. His background contradicts the charge that he would so blatantly break the Law by bringing a Gentile into the Temple.

He suggests personal similarity between himself and the crowd. “I was zealous just as you all here today.” And he means that literally. His life was not the life of a passive religious scholar. He burned with the righteousness of his cause. And he was willing to go to great effort to stamp out Christianity. Just as these are ready to put him to death, in his former life, he “persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons.”

He even went so far as to get official letters to go to Damascus and bring Christians back to Jerusalem for punishment. That is who Paul was. He tells it in a way that relates to who this audience is. Then he explains how he met Jesus.

How Paul met Jesus

Jesus manifests himself to Paul, bathing him in this very bright light, and Jesus speaks out of the light. And don’t worry about comparing your conversion story to Paul. Very few people have such a dramatic conversion story as he did, at least in the literal sense. And it is not surprising, Paul is pretty unique. He is the thirteenth Apostle, one untimely born. It shouldn’t bother us that he has this amazing story. But as amazing as the story is, all who believe in Jesus Christ share the underlying reality of this experience. This physically happened to Paul, this light. And the light itself is a metaphor, it’s symbolic of a spiritual experience. Every true believer was walking in darkness until Jesus Christ has made the light of His presence shine in their soul. You cannot see Jesus if He doesn’t turn the light on. If he doesn’t give you eyes to see and ears to hear, you would not have understood the Gospel, or received the Gospel if Jesus hadn’t met you and done something inside of you. So here with Paul it’s something outside and inside.

Paul shares with this crowd the question that Jesus asked him, “Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Paul makes the right response to this question. It is the right response whenever a person is

confronted by God. He asks, "Who are you Lord? I need to know who you are." I am reminded of Moses standing before the fire of the burning bush. There is some similarity there. And Moses wants to know, "What is your name, Lord?" That's the most important question any of us can pursue. "Who are you, Lord? What is your name?"

When Paul asked that question, Jesus answered very specifically for that moment, "I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting." Paul's personal story, you know, what happened to him, is both a rebuke and an invitation to the mob. You think you are persecuting me. You've dragged me out of the Temple. You are beating me. You are not. This is what I found out. You are persecuting Jesus, who is so much more than you believe Him to be.

In chapter 5, Luke told us the men with Paul "heard the sound, but saw no one (Acts 5:7)." Luke didn't say there they saw nothing. He says they saw no one. Paul says here they saw the light and heard the sound, but they did not understand. Again, his personal story is relevant to this crowd. Some of the older, he calls them, "brothers and fathers," some of those fathers very well may have seen Jesus, the light of the world. They may have heard Him speak. They saw the light, they heard the sound, but just as the men who had been with Paul on the road to Damascus, they did not understand. This rebuke is not direct. It is Paul's story, and he is telling it from first person. But it is there for those who have ears to hear. And for those who do not, it is still his own explanation of what happened to him. It still stands as his personal witness, as his personal defense.

Paul then asks a second question of Jesus, "What shall I do?" And put those two together, that's a great pair of questions, "Who are you Lord?" and, "What shall I do?" That's a question for every day of your life. "Lord, show me who you are today. Show me what I am to do today."

The most immediate step for Paul, what he was supposed to do right away, was to go find a guy named, Ananias, because this is how God works. God uses the body of Christ to bring other people into relationship with Him. Meeting Jesus Christ was something very personal for Paul, but it was not going to be something private. God wanted to link Paul to Ananias. He wanted Ananias to help Paul, and then to introduce Paul into the community of believers in Damascus. This is God's standard strategy. The critical act of coming to know Jesus is something God does inside of us. The process God uses to bring about and then to build on that critical act includes people, the body of Christ, someone who gets witnessed, people that help us.

And usually, that's the way it works. We hear the Gospel from a human witness, a person. Paul first heard directly from Jesus. And that can still happen nowadays through a dream or some solitary experience. But God does not then send Paul out into the wilderness where he will receive more explanation in isolation. Paul is not directed to a hermit's cave. He is directed to Ananias whom Paul describes as "a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, *and* well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there." So, Ananias served an important, human role in helping Paul meet Jesus.

Reference to Ananias is also an important point in Paul's defense. He offers Ananias as a credible character witness described in a way that would be meaningful to this crowd as a man "devout by the standard of the Law." Christians believe in a fulfilled Law. That does not mean Christians are disrespectful of the Law or that they might not even be devout in their keeping of the Law. Ananias is one such man. He is an example of a Christian who honors the Law as Paul does.

Paul is not going to give the meaning of what has happened in his own words. He is going to let Ananias do that. He is going to quote Ananias. And Ananias had a word for Paul, "This is what has happened to you, Paul. And this is God's commission for you, Paul. And this is God's invitation for you, Paul." So, this is what God has done for you. The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will (1), to see the Righteous One (2), and to hear an utterance from His mouth (3). And this is what happened to you. This is the God of our fathers, Paul. Jesus is the Righteous One, Paul. Let me help you understand this. You have been given this opportunity to know, to see, and to hear. And let me tell you why, Paul. The reason this has happened to you is so that you will be a witness to all men. God has a plan for you. That's the commission. Finally, Ananias invites Paul to express his acceptance,

by faith, of this word that he has received; this vision of Jesus of who He is, and this commission from God. He says, "Be baptized and call on his name, and then your sins will be washed away." And of course, we know from Acts and Paul's other teaching that baptism as a work does not wash away sin. But baptism here is this opportunity for Paul to affirm his new faith in Jesus. You know if you have believed. If you receive the name of the One who has appeared to you in light and who has shown Himself to you, and you receive commission to be a witness for His name, if you yield to Jesus and accept His salvation, accept His forgiveness, then your sins are washed away. And you can express your acceptance of that through baptism. It is a right expression of your newfound faith.

This is how Paul met Jesus. Paul continues with a little bit about how his life changed after meeting Jesus.

Paul's life after meeting Jesus

And as with all three versions of his story recorded in Acts, Paul skips ahead quickly from Damascus to Jerusalem. We only hear that he spent a lot of time in Arabia in his letter to the Galatians. Paul is keeping this testimony very brief and wants it to be relevant. God indicated to Paul more than once that he was to be an Apostle to the Gentiles. And at least one of those times God spoke to Paul in a vision. And the circumstances of that vision are very relevant for this audience. The fact that it took place in Jerusalem is very relevant. Even more relevant, it took place while Paul was praying in the Temple. It shows that Paul saw the Temple as a place to worship and he is praying there. He met God there.

And even more relevant, in that vision all those years ago Paul confessed to God his role in the death of Stephen, a man killed by a mob just like this one. Paul said to God, "When the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing by approving, and watching out for the coats of those who were slaying him." Again, Paul's personal testimony, his own sin serves as a rebuke to his former way of life. You know, he was convicted. But it also provides an opportunity of conviction for the crowd in front of him. I was where you are now. I participated in a mob in this Temple against a Christian teacher just as you are doing now. And we killed him. And I was there. And I did that. But I have come to understand that Stephen knew what I did not know. When the heavens opened up, he heard the voice of God, he saw the face of God, and that was real. Stephen was a true witness. Now, I have seen God. I have met Jesus. And this is what he said to me. "Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles."

We do not know the emotion of the crowd up to this point of the speech. I imagine anger was simmering in the hearts of the majority. They don't know where Paul is going to go with this. They don't trust Paul. All of Paul's bridging allusions, the connections to the Law and the Temple may have worked with a more neutral crowd. This crowd was already stirred up with religious hatred. So when Paul got to his commission to go to the Gentiles, they heard rejection of Jewish identity, rejection of Jewish religion, rejection of Jewish culture. Their anger boiled over.

²² 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!"

They shout that he must die. But based on what crime? What has Paul done? Paul's personal testimony is offered to us as the first point in his defense.

It did not, however, clear things up for the commander. He is still left wondering what all the anger is about. What has this Paul done? To get more information, he moves to the second stage of his investigation, examination by scourging. This is in verses 23-29.

Examination by Scourging (22:23-29)

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 But 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 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 The commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" And he said, "Yes."²⁸ 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.

Paul has a habit of not flaunting his Roman citizenship. He holds that card close to his chest until things have really taken a turn for the worst. The strategy of holding on to that knowledge until after the authorities have overstepped their legal boundaries worked out for Paul in Philippi, where he actually was tortured. It works here, too, preventing him from being tortured.

The law requires a Roman trial before scourging a Roman citizen. Paul's Greek language gave him some credibility in the eyes of the commander but not near so much as now when he learns Paul is a Roman citizen by birth. This is legal status. Paul is even able to one-up the commander who was not born a citizen but had to pay for it. Paul's parents or grandparents had at some point acquired citizenship, so that as soon as he was born, he was already a citizen of Rome.

The commander was saved from the grave mistake of beating Paul. And as a result shows Paul an increased level of respect and treatment, though not going as far as setting Paul free. He still does not have an answer to why the riot happened in the first place and whether Paul instigated it. His next idea for investigating the matter is to require the ruling Jewish Council to question Paul.

Luke's summary of the Sanhedrin's inquiry comes in 22:30-23:11. This is our last episode in this movement. As we read the account, remember that the Sanhedrin is not acting here on their own authority. If the Sanhedrin were acting on their own authority, they could conduct a trial and impose sentence. In this case, they are acting in an advisory role for the Roman authority, sort of like a grand jury that has the job of determining whether or not there are adequate charges for a trial. They will advise. It is up to the commander to make a decision. He might set Paul free. He might hand Paul over to the Sanhedrin for trial. Or he might send Paul to the provincial governor for trial. His decision depends on the inquiry. Acts 22:30-23:11.

Investigation before the Sanhedrin (22:30-23:11)

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.

Notice that language, "wishing to know for certain why he had been accused by the Jews." That's the commander's goal in bringing Paul to the Sanhedrin is to answer that question, "what's going on?"

¹ 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 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! Do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?"

Paul's response is fierier than Jesus' response in a similar situation. The same point is scored. Striking Paul is contrary to Jewish law. How can the high priest represent the Law justly if he perverts the Law in the course of his inquiry?

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.' "

Now, I can't imagine that Paul is saying that he does not visually recognize the high priest. I think we have to assume Paul knows who the high priest is. So, what is he saying? You know, when he says, "I

was not aware that he was high priest." I think he may be saying two things at the same time. First, I think he is using sarcasm to point out the unjust behavior of a high priest who would so easily break Jewish law in having Paul struck. This high priest is acting like a Roman ruler. He is even worse than a Roman ruler. So, Paul's language back is sarcasm. "I didn't realize. How could he be the high priest if he orders me to be struck?" And it's enhanced by Paul quoting the Law back to his accusers. The quote he chose suggests a second point. I think Paul is referring to someone else when he says, "You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people." I think that he is implying that the right ruler of Israel is Jesus Christ. He is both King and High Priest. These men are stewards who refused to accept the return of the King and the establishment of a new priesthood. To say, "I was not aware he was high priest" could carry the meaning, "because I recognize another high priest of the order of Melchizedek, Jesus Christ of Nazareth." Anyway, that's what I think Paul meant by that.

⁶ But perceiving that one group 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 As he said this, there occurred 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 occurred 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.

Paul does not see any good reason to allow the leaders of the Sanhedrin to investigate him any further. I believe he fully knew what he was doing by claiming his affiliation with the Pharisees and introducing the question of the resurrection as the primary issue. He successfully divided the Council by reminding the Sadducees and Pharisees of their deep-seated differences and preventing them from having a joint attack on Paul.

So, Paul derailed the investigation. I think he was doing some other things at the same time. He successfully turned the question of inquiry to religious disagreement. And this is a point for the commander. This strategy had already been shown to work in Paul's favor against Jewish opponents when stood before Gallio the governor of Achaia, who rebuked the Jews for bringing Paul to trial, saying,

"If it were a matter of wrong or of vicious crime, O Jews, it would be reasonable for me to put up with you; ¹⁵ but if there are questions about words and names and your own law, look after it yourselves; I am unwilling to be a judge of these matters."

And the commander is going to eventually communicate a similar understanding to Felix, governor of Judea. "I can't figure out any criminal charge against this man Paul.

A second thing Paul has done here is to keep the conversation focused on the critical point of faith that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. And this is my last point for this lesson. Paul did not select the resurrection as the point of debate simply because Pharisees and Sadducees disagree about it. No. The resurrection was a central point of the debate already. It is an essential aspect of Paul's Gospel that he will not let go of. And it is not only the general belief of resurrection that is critical to Paul's Gospel, but the specific belief that Jesus Christ has raised from the dead which is central. The resurrection of Jesus Christ affirms His divine nature and provides a foundation for the Christian's hope in eternal life. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "He was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4)". It's the resurrection that proves that this is the Messiah that you have killed. Paul also wrote to the Corinthians, "if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain (1 Corinthians 15:14)."

If Jesus is not raised from the dead, there is no hope that you will be, either. In providing a defense of Paul, Luke is also providing a defense for the Gospel of Paul. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not

debatable. It is an essential Christian belief. To deny the resurrection of Jesus is to not be Christian. This is one of those essentials on which Paul is immovable. You don't have Christian unity without agreement on this issue. There cannot be Christian unity without agreement on this belief, because if you disagree about this belief, you are rejecting the Christian Gospel.

We end our lesson with the last verse of this movement. It has been two stressful days for Paul, beginning with the danger of the riot, followed up by the misconception of the commander, and then the defense by personal testimony, by the threat of scourging and by an inquiry before the Sanhedrin. Paul survived. But we could understand if he was depleted, and shaken, and worried. Jesus understands and so He appears to Paul. This is our last verse.

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."

Reflection questions

1. Read Acts 21:17-39. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
2. Imagine yourself in Paul's situation when the elders of Jerusalem put to him the request that he participate in a vow in the temple. Would you have participated in the performance of the vow? Why or why not?
3. Would you participate in the religious ceremony of a traditional religion in your culture? Why or why not? How is your situation similar to and different from Paul's situation?
4. Would you describe Paul's speech to the Jerusalem mob as evangelism or as defense (apologetic)?
5. In what way does Paul adapt the details of his conversion for this specific audience?
6. How has the commander misread the situation and how is his misconception corrected?
7. Read Acts 21:40-23:11. What stands out to you as interesting, important, strange or confusing? What questions come to mind?
8. Is Paul's reference to the resurrection at the inquiry before the Sanhedrin a wise move to divide his opponents or a sincere emphasis on the core issue of his message?