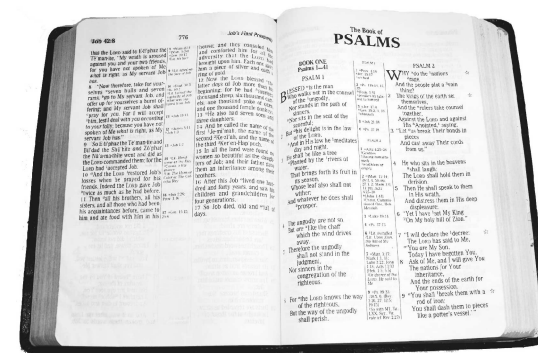


PILGRIM BIBLE NOTES

God's holy Word simply explained and applied



April 2016

Bible readings from Acts chapters 17 to 28

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After Acts chapter 28

Paul was imprisoned in his own rented house for two years (28:30). During this time (AD 60–62) he wrote his letters to the Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon and the Philippians. He was released from this imprisonment and was able to continue his missionary work for a year or two before being re-arrested.

William Hendriksen suggests in his commentary on 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus (pages 39–40) that after his release, Paul:–

- Journeyed to Asia Minor, leaving Titus in Crete (Titus 1:5).
- He then went to Colosse as planned (Philemon 22) and then to Ephesus, where he was joined by Timothy who had been at Philippi (Philippians 2:19–23).
- Paul left Timothy at Ephesus to go to Philippi as previously planned (Philippians 2:24; – though he was hoping to return to Ephesus; 1 Timothy 3:14–15). While in Philippi, Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy and also to Titus (approximately AD 63).
- He went from Philippi to Nicopolis to spend the winter and was joined there by Titus (Titus 3:12).
- He may have visited Asia Minor again and even Spain before his final imprisonment (cp. 2 Timothy 4:13; Romans 15:24). Paul wrote his second letter to Timothy from prison, shortly before he was executed.

Teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ

Three days after his arrival in Rome, Paul called the leaders of the Jews to meet him (17). He explained that though he was not guilty of any offence against the Jews or their customs, he had been treated as a criminal who should be put to death. He was in Rome because he had been compelled to appeal to Caesar. He was in chains *for the hope of Israel* (20; this is a reference to the Messiah; cp. Jeremiah 14:8). The hope of Israel does not lie in a future restoration of the nation to spiritual and political greatness, but in Christ, who alone saves from sins. In Christ, both Jew and Gentile are one; there is no difference; they both know a circumcision of the heart (Romans 2:28–29; Galatians 3:26–29). The church is *‘the Israel of God’* (Galatians 6:16).

The Jews in Rome were not aware of the charges against Paul but they arranged another meeting with him to hear about *this sect ... spoken against everywhere* (22). At this meeting, Paul *explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus ... from morning until evening*. Some were convinced but others did not believe (23–24). The apostle quoted from the prophet Isaiah to warn them about spiritual blindness and hardness of heart. He pointed out that salvation had been sent also to the Gentiles who were responding to the message of the gospel (25–29). However much God may be pleased to bless our witness, there will always be some who will reject the message of the gospel. We must persevere like Paul and never allow discouragement to silence us.

Though Paul was under house-arrest, he continued to serve the Lord, *preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ* (31; cp. Philippians 1:12–14). **He so loved Christ, he so loved people and wanted to win them to his Saviour, that he could not help but declare the gospel to sinners. Is it any wonder that God greatly blessed him and used him?**

They received the word ... and searched the Scriptures daily

Travelling teachers were often invited to speak at local synagogues and Paul used this custom to bring the gospel to the Jews. He travelled with Silas and Timothy from Philippi to Thessalonica where he went into the synagogue *and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures* (2). He explained and demonstrated that Jesus is the Christ (the promised Messiah) whose suffering, death and resurrection had been prophesied (3). Some of the Jews and many Greeks, including some of the leading women of the city, were persuaded by Paul’s reasoning from the Scriptures.

The unbelieving Jews stirred up some of the louts from the market place and led a mob to attack the house of Jason where the apostles were lodging. They did not succeed in finding Paul, but they dragged Jason and some of his fellow-Christians before the rulers of the city accusing them of turning the world upside down and of proclaiming another king, Jesus (6–7). Today much of the professing church has compromised with the world and has little zeal for King Jesus. Is it any wonder that we make little impact upon the godless world around us? The Thessalonians received the Word in much affliction but they became examples to other believers throughout Macedonia and Greece. They sounded forth the Word of the Lord, knowing that it works effectively in those who believe (1 Thessalonians 1:6–8; 2:13).

Paul and Silas left Thessalonica by night and went to Berea and they went into the synagogue where the Jews were more open to receive the teaching of the Scriptures concerning Jesus. *They received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily* (10–11). **Do you love God’s Word enough to take time to read it and learn from it or do you skip through your reading as quickly as possible?** There were again many conversions to Christ in Berea but unbelieving Jews came from Thessalonica to stir up further trouble. Paul was obliged to depart immediately, leaving behind Silas and Timothy (12–15).

His spirit was provoked within him

Paul travelled south to Athens where he waited for Silas and Timothy to join him (14–15). The city was renowned for its magnificent buildings, for its culture, its philosophy and its learning, but it was steeped in spiritual ignorance. Less than one hundred years after Paul was in Athens, a traveller named Pausanias wrote six volumes of detailed description of the land of Greece, with Athens taking up far more pages than any other city or region of Greece. Pausanias was captivated with the architecture and artistic splendour of the Greek capital. He was impressed by its temples, shrines and statues to all the gods. In fact Athens had more idols than the rest of Greece put together. They even had an altar inscribed, *To the unknown God* to cover any other god of whom they were ignorant (23).

Athens made quite a different impression on Paul than it did on the majority of its visitors. *Now while Paul waited for them* (Silas and Timothy) *at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols* (16). Our English word ‘paroxysm’ is derived from the Greek word translated ‘*provoked*’. A ‘paroxysm’ is a fit of deep passion or of acute pain. The apostle was set on edge, stirred up by the spiritual darkness of the city. What did he do? He went into the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews who needed to know that Jesus was the Messiah promised in their Scriptures and that he died for sinners and rose from the dead the third day. Paul also went into the market-place every day to reason with the people who were so steeped in idolatry and superstition (17).

How do you react when you visit our cities and see the vast crowds of people? Do you feel moved with compassion for them and yearn to see them saved? Are you *provoked within* yourself when you see so many given over to materialism and superstition, who have been so deceived by Satan, that they have no idea that they are on the high road to hell? How about those with whom you work or see every day? **Are you driven to your knees to pray for them? Do you speak to anyone to share the glorious good news of the gospel of Christ?**

When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage

The Romans escorting Paul and other prisoners spent the winter in Malta before continuing their journey to Rome. They boarded a ship for Italy which landed at Syracuse in Sicily, staying there for three days. Circling the island, they reached Rhegium on the southern tip of Italy and the next day came off the ship at Puteoli further along the west coast of Italy (11–13).

When he arrived in Italy, Paul and his companions *found brethren* at Puteoli. We saw in our reading from Acts 21:1–14 (see notes for 13 April) that Paul always sought out Christian fellowship on his travels. The centurion, Julius, continued to give Paul *liberty to go to his friends and receive care* (27:3) and the apostle was allowed to stay seven days with those Christians (14). When believers in Rome heard that Paul was heading for their city, some travelled the 43 miles to Appii Forum to meet him, others, the 33 miles to the Three Inns. The apostle knew many of the Christians in Rome, including Aquila and Priscilla who had worked with him (Romans 16:3–16). Though the Romans had good roads, they did not have the modern transport that we take so much for granted. Those believers were eager to see Paul and thought nothing of making the journey to see him. This token of love and concern was a great encouragement to the apostle. *When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage* (15).

All Christians need to be encouraged, even leaders like Paul! A thoughtful and kind deed, an encouraging letter, e-mail or phone-call may mean very much to a hard-pressed believer. In what way do you seek to encourage others?

*Give me a faithful heart,
Likeness to thee,
That each departing day
Henceforth may see
Some work of love begun,
Some deed of kindness done,
Some wanderer sought and won,
Something for thee.* (Sylvanus O. Phelps)

He ... suffered no harm

Paul was no stranger to shipwreck, and peril had been his constant companion. He had written to the Corinthians more than ten years before this, ‘*Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and day I have been in the deep*’ (2 Corinthians 11:25–26). In all these dangers he knew the presence, encouragement and help of God.

The people of Malta showed *unusual kindness* to Paul and those who were shipwrecked with him (2). The bedraggled survivors received more help than they could have dared expect. Satan again sought to kill Paul through the snake-bite but the amazed islanders thought he was a god when he *suffered no harm* (5–6).

Publius, one of the leaders of the people, also treated Paul and his companions kindly (7). The apostle prayed for his father who was healed of his fever and dysentery (8). We can be sure that Paul not only healed the sick, but also preached the gospel during his three month stay on the island (7–11). The people he met there would never be the same again!

Luke writes concerning the grateful people, *They honoured us in many ways; and when we departed, they provided such things as were necessary* (10). It is interesting to note that Paul was quite happy to receive honour from the people. Jehovah’s Witnesses refuse to celebrate birthdays because ‘they exalt the creature, making him the centre of attention rather than the Creator.’ (‘THE TRUTH THAT LEADS TO ETERNAL LIFE’, page 146). What faulty reasoning! They would have had problems with Paul.

Satan will always seek to attack us if we are walking with God. Haven’t you noticed this as you have read the book of Acts? Attacks, difficulties and suffering, but God always triumphs over the enemy of our souls. In Malta, Paul received *unusual kindness ... suffered no harm and was honoured ... in many ways*. **When God is for us and with us, what have we to fear (Hebrews 13:5–6)?**

The unknown God

Some of Athens' philosophers heard Paul preaching in the market-place and were quite scornful of him and his preaching of Jesus and the resurrection. They were curious about other teachings and were open to hear *some new thing* (21). They invited Paul to address the Areopagus, the council named after the place where those legislating on religion and morals met. These people prided themselves in their learning and wisdom. They met under the shadow of the great Parthenon which was the temple to the goddess of wisdom, Athene, after whom the city was named.

Paul had seen their altar *TO THE UNKNOWN GOD* (23) and he proclaimed some essential truths that the Athenians needed to know about the God they did not know. He told them that:

- God made the world and everything in it (24).
- He is the Lord over all the universe (24).
- Temples cannot contain God, for he is everywhere (24,27).
- He sustains his creation (25).
- He is absolutely sovereign in all his purposes (26).
- Idolatry is a denial of God (29).
- God commands all men everywhere to repent (30).
- He will judge the world through the Lord Jesus whom he raised from the dead (31).

Some mocked Paul, some promised to hear him again, but others believed, including Dionysius, one of the philosophers of the Areopagus, and a woman named Damaris (34). **The true and living God is unknown to millions in our land.** Some are sophisticated, cultured and articulate (like the philosophers of Athens), others boast no great education and many are poor and unemployed. They have one thing in common – they are lost, without God and without hope. We may be mocked when we witness to those around us, but there will also be encouragements. Let us persevere in prayer for the lost and look for every opportunity to make the gospel known to them. **We have the message that they need.**

I have many people in this city

Paul left Athens, the cultural capital of Greece, for Corinth, the commercial capital (1). Corinth was 40 miles to the west of Athens and was located on a narrow strip of land which linked the province of Achaia with the rest of Greece. The city had become a very important trading centre and at the time of Paul's visit had a population of half a million people. Athens was full of idols but Corinth was full of immorality, and was notorious throughout the ancient world for its debauched and sleazy way of life.

Roman emperor, Claudius, had driven the Jews from Rome shortly before Paul arrived in Corinth in AD 51/52. Aquila and his wife Priscilla had been among those expelled but the Lord used this adverse circumstance to bring them into contact with Paul at Corinth. The couple were to become very close and special friends of Paul (2–3; cp. Romans 16:3–5).

Despite the opposition of the Jews, Crispus the ruler of the synagogue and many other Corinthians were saved (6–8). The Lord spoke to Paul in a vision at night, reassuring him and urging him to persevere in the face of opposition. The Lord told him, '*I have many people in this city*' (9–10). Paul was encouraged and he remained in Corinth for eighteen months, teaching the Word of God (11). God had choice vessels to pluck from Corinth's cesspool of wickedness (cp. 1 Corinthians 6:9–11: '*And such were some of you*').

The fact that God predestined men and women to salvation before he made the world does not hinder the work of evangelism, but rather enhances it. This truth has encouraged many thousands since Paul's day, among them great Christians such as John Calvin, David Brainerd, George Whitefield, William Carey and C.H. Spurgeon. We do not know who the elect are among those with whom we meet day by day. Let us persevere in our evangelism, trusting that God has *many people* where we live, who are presently indifferent to the gospel. What joy we have when God saves precious souls (see Psalm 126:5–6).

Take heart, men, for I believe God

Paul knew that God wanted him to go to Rome (24) and so did Satan, who did everything he could to frustrate God's purpose. The voyage was beset from the beginning by high winds and dangerous seas (4,7–10). The ship had left Fair Havens to sail to a sheltered port further along the coast of Crete (see map, page 30) and conditions appeared favourable at first (13). A terrifying storm arose soon afterwards, which became so severe and prolonged that any hope of survival was lost (20).

An angel visited Paul at night and assured him, telling him that he must be brought before Caesar and that God would preserve the lives of all who were sailing with him. Paul told of the angel's visit and of his message from God. He then said, '*Take heart, men, for I believe God.*' He reassured them that they would all survive when the ship ran aground (20–25).

Paul belonged to God and served him (23). **When we belong to God, no harm can come to us except by his permission. Even in the most distressing times, we know that nothing can separate us from his love (Romans 8:35–39).** Have you been beset by fear or anxious thoughts? Make those cares an opportunity for prayer and do not fear. God will bring you through!

*Begone, unbelief! My Saviour is near
And for my relief will surely appear.
By prayer let me wrestle and he will perform;
With Christ in the vessel I smile at the storm.*

(John Newton)

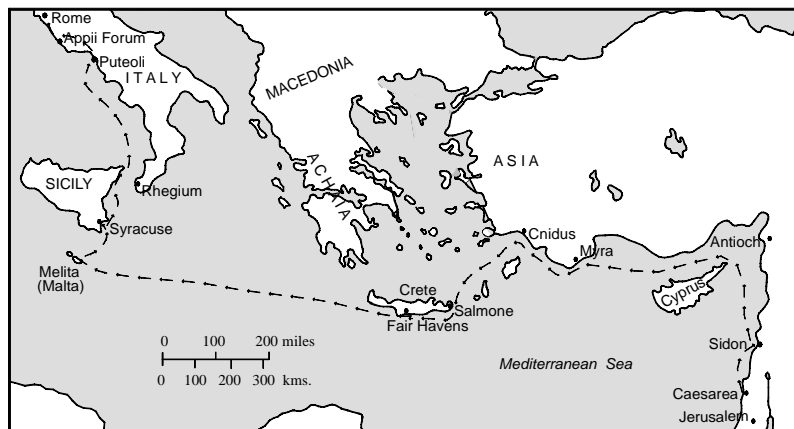
Satan seemed to be winning and was bent on Paul's destruction even after he survived the shipwreck. The soldiers wanted to kill all the prisoners (including Paul), to prevent any attempt to escape. The centurion, wanting to save Paul, rejected their plan, and ordered that all who could swim should jump overboard to reach land (42–43). **Never forget that the devil can only do what God permits him to do.**

Julius treated Paul kindly

Paul had appealed to Caesar to obtain justice and he had to go to Rome (25:11–12). He was accompanied by Luke (note ‘we’ in verse 1) and Aristarchus, a member of the church at Thessalonica (2). Aristarchus was a loyal friend to Paul and had remained with him through dangerous times (cp. 19:29). The apostle describes him as his ‘fellow labourer’ and as his ‘fellow prisoner’ (Philemon 24; Colossians 4:10).

God has his ways of encouraging us and he even uses unbelievers to that end. The Roman centurion *Julius treated Paul kindly and gave him liberty to go to his friends (at Sidon) and receive care* (3). Though he was a prisoner the apostle had a remarkable amount of liberty. The Lord encouraged Joseph in a similar manner when he was in prison. God was with him and *gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison* (Genesis 39:21). **We sometimes need the favour of unbelievers but we do not need to compromise our message to gain such favour because the Lord is able to make them treat us kindly. How wonderful to know and to belong to such a God!**

Sailing conditions became increasingly dangerous but the centurion was determined to continue the journey despite Paul’s warning of impending disaster (4–12).

Paul’s journey to Rome (Acts chapters 27 & 28)*I will return again to you, God willing*

Today’s reading covers the final stage of Paul’s second missionary journey and the beginning of his third. Jewish opposition to the preaching of the gospel had previously taken the form of stirring up mob violence or seeking to have the apostles punished by the civil magistrate. The Corinthian Jews went a step further. They went to the higher court of the provincial magistrate, accusing Paul of propagating a religion not allowed by Roman law. Gallio, the proconsul, concluded that Paul’s message was a form of Judaism (which was protected by Roman law). He told Paul’s accusers that he had no interest in intervening in a Jewish religious dispute, and he drove them out of the court. Following Gallio’s snub to the Jews, the Gentile crowd assaulted Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, *but Gallio took no notice of these things* (12–17).

Paul left Corinth and set sail for Syria. Cenchrea is just a few miles from Corinth and while there, he took a vow and had his head shaved (18; cp. 21:23–24). Priscilla and Aquila were with the apostle on his journey and he left them at Ephesus. While there, Paul visited the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews who asked him to stay longer, but he did not consent. He was determined to be at Jerusalem for the *feast* (probably the Passover). He promised to return to them, *God willing* (19–21). **We must always have a submissive attitude to the will of God.** We ought to say, ‘*If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that*’ when making our plans (James 4:14–15; cp. 1 Corinthians 4:19; 16:7).

After Paul landed at Caesarea, he went up to greet the church (at Jerusalem) before going to his home church in Antioch. He spent some time there before beginning his third missionary journey. He visited the churches in Galatia and Phrygia to strengthen the disciples (22–23; see map with notes for 28 March). Paul was not only a great missionary and evangelist. He also had the heart of a concerned pastor (cp. 2 Corinthians 11:28).

They took him aside

Aquila and his wife Priscilla were God's instruments to point Apollos to a clearer understanding of Christ and we can learn much from the way they dealt with this man. Apollos was an eloquent and fervent preacher, well-versed in the Old Testament Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord (the teaching of the Lord Jesus as known by the twelve disciples before the death and resurrection of Christ). He spoke and taught accurately the things he knew, though he only knew repentance and baptism as taught by John the Baptist (24–25). He did not know that the Holy Spirit had been poured out on believers nor of Christian baptism (cp. 19:1–7).

Aquila and Priscilla heard him preaching in the synagogue and recognised that his message lacked the gospel of Christ as taught by the apostles. They did not rudely accost him to put him right. *They took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately* (26). Apollos was convinced and later went to Corinth where he was used of God. There, *he greatly helped* the believers and proved to the Jews *from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ* (24–28).

Apollos was probably helped as much by the kindness of Aquila and Priscilla as by their better understanding of Scripture. **We must not write off those who are untaught or ignorant, but seek to help them by being Christlike in our attitude towards them.** Thomas Scott (1747–1821) was the curate in John Newton's neighbouring parish. He was opposed to Newton's evangelical faith but was eventually won to Christ through Newton's godliness and patience. Scott was soon preaching in Newton's pulpit in Olney and he was used by God to write a commentary on the whole Bible. He tells his story in an autobiography, 'THE FORCE OF TRUTH' which is still available (published by Banner of Truth Trust). The great Baptist missionary, William Carey wrote of him, 'If there be anything of the Word of God in my soul, I owe much of it to his preaching.'

You almost persuade me to become a Christian

We are repeating yesterday's reading to focus upon the word '*persuade*'. Paul was not put off by the scorn of Festus and he went on to challenge Agrippa (27). The king said, '*You almost persuade me to become a Christian*' (28). The apostle reasoned with his hearers and sought to persuade them to come to Christ for salvation. Persuasion is essential in preaching and in witnessing. This concerns me very much because there are some whose 'preaching' lacks any element of persuasion. They ramble on while their hearers understandably wander in their thoughts. Others are very orthodox and ordered in their presentation; they have excellent material in their sermons, but they appear to be detached from their message and do little to persuade their hearers.

Our preaching and witnessing must be soaked in prayer, and come from a heart throbbing with love for God and for those who are lost, if we are to persuade unbelievers that our message is true and relevant (see notes for 7 April on Acts 19:8–10). Paul was in chains, but he was more concerned for the salvation of his hearers than his own needs as a prisoner (29).

Agrippa's words, '*You almost persuade me to become a Christian*' show that he obviously felt the strength of Paul's persuasion (28). He was not persuaded enough, however, to accept the cost of submitting to the lordship of Christ. He stood up and called a halt to the proceedings and later concluded that Paul had done nothing worthy of death or imprisonment (31–32).

I know of men and women who have attended church for many years and have heard the finest preachers but they remain in their sins and they are lost. If you are not a Christian, I urge you to seek the Lord with all your heart. You can have no hope for the future if you do not enjoy peace with God. **It is not good enough to be almost persuaded! You must be fully persuaded and committed to Christ. Where do you stand?**

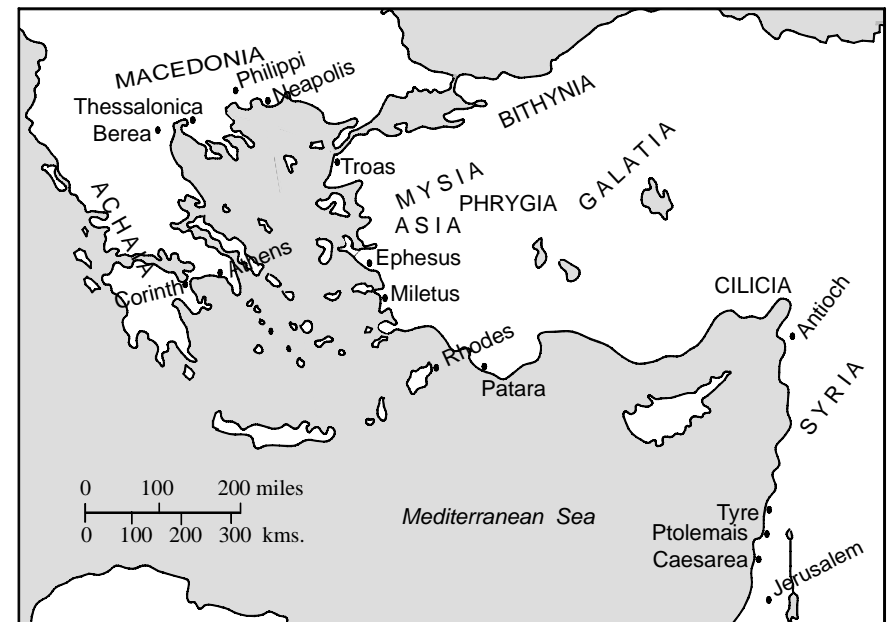
This thing was not done in a corner

Shortly before his death, Paul wrote to Timothy, ‘Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel, for which I suffer trouble as an evil-doer, even to the point of chains; but the word of God is not chained’ (2 Timothy 2:8–9). The truth of these words is illustrated in our reading. Paul was bound with chains, but the Word of God flowed out of his mouth as he presented the gospel to the most distinguished company in the land (29).

Festus recognised that Paul was not a fool, but a very learned man. When he heard the apostle speak of the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ, however, he interrupted him. He said that *much learning* was driving Paul mad but God’s servant responded by stating that he spoke *the words of truth and reason* (24–25). Paul was not mad because Festus was having problems with the challenge of the gospel. He told the governor that King Agrippa was fully aware of the impact of the Christian message on many thousands of Jews who had heard it and had followed Christ. *This thing was not done in a corner* (26).

We are sometimes accused of being ignorant or stupid because we believe that the Bible is true, that God created the world in six days, that we are all sinners who need to be saved from coming judgment, that the Lord Jesus died to bear the punishment of sinners, and that he rose from the grave. The gospel is foolishness to the unbeliever, but *the foolishness of God is wiser than men* (1 Corinthians 1:23–25). Their hearts are darkened and they are spiritually ignorant (Romans 1:21; Ephesians 4:17–19). **Do not allow yourself to be intimidated into silence by scoffers, but speak words of truth and reason. Pray that the Holy Spirit will enlighten them so that they will come to faith in Christ. Pray that God will be pleased to use your witness as you depend upon him.**

Paul’s Third Missionary Journey (Acts 18:23 to 21:17)



1. Paul leaves Antioch for his third missionary journey, travelling to Galatia and Phrygia where he strengthens all the disciples (18:23).
2. He travels on to Ephesus, where he spends three years in evangelism and teaching (19:1–41 (cp. 20:31)).
3. Paul sends Timothy and Erastus into Macedonia (Acts 19:22).
4. Following the riot in Ephesus, Paul leaves to go to Macedonia (20:1–3).
5. After staying three months in Greece, Paul travels from Philippi to Troas (20:4–5)
6. Paul and his companions spend seven days in Troas, before leaving for Miletus (20:5–16).
7. After meeting the Ephesian church elders in Miletus, Paul sails for Tyre (20:17 to 21:3).
8. The apostle and his companions spend seven days in Tyre before boarding their ship for the last leg of their journey. They travel on to Ptolemais and Caesarea, and then to Jerusalem (21:4–15).

Reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom

Paul travelled from Galatia and Phrygia and came to Ephesus where he was to remain for three years (20:31). In Ephesus, he met twelve disciples of John the Baptist. John had taught the people about the Holy Spirit (cp. Matthew 3:11) but these men were vague in their understanding about him. Paul told them about the Lord Jesus of whom John had spoken, and they were baptized in his name, receiving the Holy Spirit. Paul laid hands on them so that they received supernatural spiritual sign gifts (1–7). These signs were the evidence of apostolic ministry (2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:3–4). They ceased with the passing of the apostles and are not available today.

About eighteen months had passed since the apostle had promised the Jews in Ephesus that he would return to them (18:19–21). He now returned to the synagogue, *and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God* (8). Some believed but others were hardened and Paul withdrew from them. He then reasoned every day for two years in the school (the lecture-room) of Tyrannus (9). Notice the word *‘reasoning’* in verses 8 and 9. **True Christian teaching does not by-pass the human mind. True preaching and teaching not only stirs the heart but also makes us think and it persuades us.**

The Word of the Lord was heard over all the province of Asia at this time (9–10). Paul’s method was to reason and to persuade from the Scriptures. He did not seek to communicate the gospel through drama (which was very popular in those days), but through the preaching of God’s Word. Let me ask you who are preachers, ‘How are you communicating truth to your hearers? How much persuasion is there in your preaching? Are you really concerned for the plight of those who are lost? Seek at all times, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to proclaim the gospel with urgency and persuasion (cp. 2 Corinthians 5:11).’ Richard Baxter, the great 17th century pastor declared, ‘I preached as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men.’

I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision

Agrippa was an expert in Jewish affairs (3) but Paul fearlessly challenged him as he testified and preached the Word of God. He asked Agrippa, *‘Why should it be thought incredible by you that God raises the dead?’* (8). The resurrection of the Lord Jesus is not a message to be reserved for Easter; it should be our constant theme and a source of great rejoicing.

Paul went on to relate to his distinguished audience how the risen Christ had appeared to him and had completely transformed his life. The Greek word ‘apostolos’ means ‘one who is sent forth.’ A person who represented the Sanhedrin on a mission was known as the ‘apostolos’ of the Sanhedrin. Paul had begun his journey to Damascus as an apostle of the Sanhedrin, but ended it as an apostle of Christ (9–18). Paul was able to say, *‘I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision’* (19). He again proclaimed that Jesus died and rose from the dead (22–23) and that men *should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance* (20).

What does it mean to be a Christian, to belong to Christ? It means that God has opened our eyes to see the truth about himself and about ourselves. It means that we have been delivered from the power of Satan and have received forgiveness of sins. It means that we have an inheritance reserved in heaven for us (18; cp. 1 Peter 1:4). Think about these things and lift up your heart in gratitude and joyful praise to God. If you are not a Christian, come to the Lord Jesus Christ and ask him to save you. He will accept you if you turn from your sinful ways and trust in him.

Paul could not remain silent about the great truths of the gospel. He was not disobedient to the heavenly vision. Christian, how is it with you? How motivated are you to tell others about Christ and to support Christian missionaries with your prayers and your money?

Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive

Herod Agrippa II was the son of Agrippa I, who had James, the brother of John, killed (12:1–2), and great-grandson of Herod the Great who had sought to kill the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 2:13). He paid a courtesy visit to the new governor, accompanied by his sister Bernice (13); Drusilla, wife of Felix was their sister (24:24). Bernice lived with her brother after she was widowed and after the break-up of her second marriage.

Paul's appeal to Caesar left Festus with a problem. He was required under Roman law to send a written account of the charges against Paul, but he did not possess any convincing evidence. He enlisted the help of Agrippa who had an intimate knowledge of the Jewish faith and culture (26–27). Festus may have had problems in understanding the Jew's case against Paul but he was left in no doubt concerning Paul's message about Christ. *Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive* (19). Paul spoke plainly so that unbelievers could clearly understand what he was saying. Let us tell people that the Lord Jesus died and rose from the dead. Let us tell them why he died and that one day he will return to judge everyone who has ever lived. Let us challenge them with their need to repent of their sin and to trust in God.

Paul was about to speak to his most distinguished audience – the governor, King Agrippa and his sister, high-ranking army officers and the most prominent men of the city (23). They were sinners with the same spiritual needs as every other human being. Only the gospel which Paul proclaimed could meet their needs. **The message has not changed; our God has not changed! Those we meet day by day are sinners who need to hear the gospel. How great is our desire to tell them about our glorious Lord and Saviour?**

So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed

Ephesus was the most important city in the Roman province of Asia (now western Turkey). It was a great trading centre and place of pilgrimage to the shrine of the goddess Diana. The city was also a centre of superstition and much occult activity. *God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul*. Handkerchiefs or aprons which had been in contact with his body were placed on the sick who were then healed or delivered from evil spirits (11–12). Some claim to do the same thing today, but their so-called 'blessed cloths' promote superstition and raise false hopes.

Some itinerant Jewish exorcists observed the power of the Lord Jesus when they heard Paul preach and cast out evil spirits. They took it upon themselves to use the name of Jesus in their exorcism. Seven sons of a Jewish chief priest were among these itinerant healers. They attempted to cast out a demon in the name of Jesus. This evil spirit knew of Jesus and his power and recognised that these men were not servants of Christ. The possessed man attacked the would-be exorcists and tore off their clothes and wounded them before they fled from his house. Jews and Gentiles in Ephesus were filled with fear and magnified the name of the Lord Jesus when they heard of this incident (13–17).

Many of the new believers in Ephesus confessed their past sins. Those who had been involved in occult practices brought their books which taught these evil things, to be burned (18–19). They were very valuable and could have been re-sold, but the only fit place for them was the bonfire. I remember visiting a new believer when I saw a statue of Buddha on his shelf. I pointed out that it must be destroyed, even though it had been given to him by his young son when he was interested in eastern religions. He destroyed the image after I left his house. We must not hold on to items associated with false religion or the occult when we come to faith in Christ! *So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed* (20). **Let us pray that God's Word will grow mightily and prevail in our neighbourhood and throughout the rest of the world.**

There arose a great commotion about the Way

Paul planned to leave Ephesus and go to Greece, visiting churches in Macedonia and Achaia before going to Jerusalem. He also desired to visit Rome after that. He sent Timothy and Erastus to Macedonia while he remained in the province of Asia (21–22).

Ephesus, the centre of the worship of the fertility goddess Diana, was to witness a mighty advance of the gospel, which spread throughout the region. The temple dedicated to Diana (Greek name is ‘Artemis’) contained a meteorite which was revered as an image of the goddess which had been sent from heaven; the temple was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and was the largest building in the old Greek empire.

The Word of God prevailed over occult practices and idolatry (19, 26–27) to such an extent that it threatened the livelihood of the Ephesian silversmiths who made and sold images of the goddess Diana. *There arose a great commotion about the Way* which was instigated by these silversmiths (23). They stirred up a mob against Paul in which there was much confusion. Two of Paul’s companions were seized by the angry mob which chanted for two hours, ‘*Great is Diana of the Ephesians*’ (34). Paul wanted to address the angry crowd but he heeded the pleading of his friends not to do so (24–31). The town clerk told the crowd that they would be in danger of having to account to the Roman authorities if they persisted in their disorderly conduct. He pointed out that if Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen had a case against anyone, they could pursue it through the courts of law. They were persuaded and dispersed peacefully (35–41).

The early Christians were known as belonging to ‘*the Way*’ (9,23; cp. 9:2; 24:22). They taught that there is only one way to God the Father – through the Lord Jesus Christ (4:12; cp. John 14:6; 1 Timothy 2:5). **All religions do not lead to God! To believe that they do is to be in spiritual darkness and great error.** No other gospel is acceptable (cp. Galatians 1:6–9). Let us be faithful in pointing people to the Lord Jesus.

Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favour

Paul had been a prisoner for two years when Felix was recalled to Rome (24:27). He was succeeded by Porcius Festus. Three days after his arrival in Caesarea, the new governor went to Jerusalem to meet the leaders of the Jews (1–2). They sought to have Paul brought to Jerusalem with a view to standing trial but their real intention was to lie in wait and to kill Paul as he was escorted from Caesarea. Festus told them that they should first send representatives to Caesarea where they would be able to present their case against Paul (3–5).

Festus remained in Jerusalem for ten days before returning to Caesarea. He heard the charges against the apostle the day following his return. Paul’s opponents laid many serious complaints against him which they were unable to prove (6–7). They repeated their charges of heresy, sacrilege and sedition which Paul strongly denied (8; cp. 24:5–6). *Festus, wanting to do the Jews a favour*, asked Paul if he would be willing to go up to Jerusalem to be tried.

Paul knew his fellow-countrymen better than Festus. He was aware that they would attempt to kill him if he travelled to Jerusalem and he exercised his right as a Roman citizen and appealed to Caesar (9–11). This meant that he would have to go to Rome for the personal decision of the emperor upon his case. Paul should not have been obliged to resort to such an appeal because Festus knew that he was innocent (10).

Festus wanted to please the Jews in order to obtain their cooperation. Christians are different! We have no need to fear wicked men nor to pander to their evil ways. *The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD shall be safe* (Proverbs 29:25). **We will not be cowardly men-pleasers if we fear God (Colossians 3:22).**

Felix was afraid

Felix postponed making any decision about Paul until he had seen Lysias the commander but he allowed the apostle to have visits from his friends (22–23). The Roman governor was living in an adulterous relationship with Drusilla, the daughter of Herod Agrippa I (whom an angel of God had struck down in judgment; 12:23). Paul did not water down his message when Felix later sent for him to hear more *concerning the faith in Christ* (24). *He reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come* with this wicked man. His powerful witness had such an effect, that *Felix was afraid* (25). Felix needed to know about a righteous God who was offended by his sin, and who would surely judge him.

The Roman answered Paul, ‘*Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you.*’ Though he was filled with fear, Felix was more interested in obtaining a bribe from Paul rather than obtaining peace with God (26). If your heart is not right in the sight of God, do not wait for a convenient time to come to Christ. The Lord may not grant you a convenient time. *Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation* (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Secular historians inform us that Felix was recalled to Rome by the emperor Nero in AD 59 after the Jews had complained about Roman atrocities. He was disgraced and probably escaped execution through the influence of his brother Pallas, who was a favourite of Nero. Though Felix knew Paul to be innocent, he left him in prison to avoid further problems with the Jews (27); this gesture did him no good at all. **Felix saw the gospel as bad news because it made him feel uncomfortable. For those who repent of their sin, however, the gospel is the most wonderful news, offering free forgiveness, peace with God, eternal life and everlasting joy!**

He ... encouraged them with many words

Paul travelled from Ephesus to visit the churches in Macedonia where he *encouraged them with many words* (1–2). He was concerned to strengthen them and to build them up in the faith (cp. 15:41; 18:23). Paul was more than a great evangelist; he was also a faithful pastor and teacher of the Word of God (27, 31–32). As we read of Paul’s ministry, we will see that there is a repeated emphasis on the teaching of God’s Word. We all need the *comfort* (encouragement) *of the Scriptures* (Romans 15:4) but we must know our Bibles if we are to encourage ourselves and one another!

Paul then travelled south from Macedonia to Greece where he spent three months mainly at Corinth. While there, he wrote his letter to the Romans (cp. Romans 15:25–26). He changed his plan to sail from Corinth to Jerusalem because of a Jewish plot against him and returned through Macedonia to Troas (3–6). Paul had organised a collection for the poor Christians at Jerusalem and some of the men from the donating churches went with Paul to take their gift (24:17; Romans 15:25–27; 1 Corinthians 16:1–5). Luke, whom God inspired to write the Acts of the Apostles, joined Paul at Philippi (notice the change to ‘us’ and ‘we’ (5–6).

The early church met on the first day of the week to worship God and to break bread, meeting around the Lord’s Table. The early Christians called the first day of the week, ‘The Lord’s Day’ (7; cp. 1 Corinthians 16:2; Revelation 1:10). **Do you love to gather with the people of God each Lord’s Day in order to worship God and to hear his Word being preached?** Paul preached until midnight at Troas and a young man named Eutychus sank into a deep sleep during the meeting. He fell to his death from his precarious seat but Paul embraced his lifeless body to raise him from the dead. The happy church listened as Paul *talked a long while, even till daybreak* (8–12). He would have been encouraging them *with many words!*

Nor do I count my life dear to myself

Paul wanted to be in Jerusalem for the day of Pentecost and did not have time to visit Ephesus (13–16). When he arrived at Miletus, he sent for the elders of the Ephesian church and reminded them of his life and ministry among them (17–36). We tend to think of the success of the apostle in planting many churches and of the thousands saved through his ministry but there was a price to pay. This faithful man had humbly served the Lord *with many tears and trials* through opposition to his ministry by unbelieving Jews (19).

The apostle had kept back nothing in his ministry that was helpful but had proclaimed it publicly and from house to house (20). He speaks of two vital elements in his preaching of which he had testified:

- *Repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ* (21). We are all sinners and sin is rebellion against God. Repentance must involve sorrow for sin and confession to God. We cannot be saved unless we repent of our sin. Our trust must be in the Lord Jesus.
- *The gospel of the grace of God* (23–24). Grace is favour bestowed upon us that we do not deserve. The free and sovereign grace of God is a glorious theme. Let us proclaim it and rejoice in it.

Paul was full of foreboding about his visit to Jerusalem. He felt compelled to go there though the Holy Spirit had warned him that imprisonment and trouble lay ahead of him. He told the Ephesian elders, *‘But none of these things move me, nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy’* (24). Paul here describes the Christian life as a *‘race’* which he was determined to finish with joy (cp. 2 Timothy 4:7). He had a different set of values to the world around him. Not for him a half-hearted devotion to Christ! He had sacrificed his own self-interests for those of his Lord and Saviour. His main aim in life was to live for Christ (Philippians 1:21). **If you are self-centred, if you are not prepared to obey the Word of God whatever the cost to yourself, it is because you do count your life dear to yourself.**

A conscience without offence toward God and men

Ananias the high priest came to Caesarea with a delegation to give evidence against Paul before the Roman governor. Felix was a cruel tyrant but he would not have been convinced by the nauseating flattery of the orator Tertullus (1–4). The orator accused Paul of being a troublemaker and of desecrating the temple and he even accused the Roman commander Lysias, of *great violence* (5–7).

Paul’s sincerity in answering his accusers vividly contrasted with their hypocrisy. He told Felix that he had come to Jerusalem twelve days earlier to worship God and to bring alms and offerings. The charges against him of troublemaking were quite untrue. He had not disputed with anyone in the temple, nor was he guilty of inciting crowds in Jerusalem or in the synagogues. There was no sign of trouble when he had been seen in the temple by some Jews from Asia. He challenged his accusers to prove their case against him (17–20).

Paul did confess to worshipping God as a Christian, *according to the Way which they call a sect* and to his belief in *a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust* (14–15). Every person who has ever lived will be raised at the second coming of Christ to be judged by God. This is an essential Christian teaching and those who deny it are not genuine believers in Christ.

Paul stated, *‘I myself always strive to have a conscience without offence toward God and men’* (16). Man’s conscience has been affected by Adam’s fall into sin; it can be hardened so that it does not trouble us when we sin (cp. 1 Timothy 4:2). Our consciences are purged when we are saved (Hebrews 9:14) but we must regulate them by the Word of God. **Let us always strive ‘to have a conscience without offence toward God and men.’ It is an evidence of true godliness.**

The Lord stood by him

The Holy Spirit had repeatedly warned Paul on his third missionary journey *that chains and tribulations* awaited him (20:23). Why did God allow Paul to suffer so much? He not only allowed these things to come upon the apostle but also ordained them to happen (9:15–16). It is a mistake to imagine that God keeps bad things from happening to the believer. The Christian knows, however, that God helps him to face life's trials and difficulties. We see from our reading today how the Lord cared for Paul and that he is in control of every situation.

Paul was a great Christian but he was human. He would have felt the pressure and weariness of false accusation, riot and mob-violence and needed to be encouraged. The night following his rescue from the mob, *the Lord stood by him and said, 'Be of good cheer, Paul'* (11). God promised that just as he had testified for him in Jerusalem, so he would also bear witness in Rome. **When we are under pressure, we must never forget that God is with us. He always stands by us and he will never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).**

The next day, more than forty fanatical Jews vowed that they would neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul. They had devised a scheme in which the Roman commander would be asked to send Paul to the Sanhedrin for further questioning. They would then ambush him together with his escort and kill him (12–15). God has his own ways of protecting his servants. Paul's nephew heard of the plot and reported it to him. When the commander heard the young man's story, he sent the apostle to Caesarea at 9 o'clock in the evening, escorted by four hundred and seventy soldiers (16–23).

God used a young man to thwart the satanically inspired plot against Paul. *The Lord stood by him.* Christian, are you facing difficulties and pressures that are dragging you down? Do you feel that you are unable to cope? Remember, the Lord stands by **you**, and cast *all your care upon him, for he cares for you* (1 Peter 5:7).

Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock

Paul was able to testify to the Ephesian elders that he was innocent of the blood of all men because he had not *shunned to declare ... the whole counsel of God* (26–27). He had been fearless in his preaching and would never compromise his message to please men. If any of his hearers went to a Christless eternity, they could never blame Paul for not warning them of the consequences of rejecting the gospel.

Elders have an awesome responsibility to God for the well-being of every church member and they must give account for their souls (Hebrews 13:17). The Holy Spirit makes them overseers to shepherd the church of God. The apostle urged these elders, *'Therefore, take heed to yourselves and to all the flock'* (28). Paul warned them that *'savage wolves'* would come into the church to attack the flock (29; cp. Matthew 7:15–20). They must watch because some of their own number would depart from the truth and divide the church (30–31). **These are frightening warnings! If Satan could cause havoc in a church built on three years of Paul's ministry, let us not imagine that we will be immune from the attacks of the devil.** Seek to be built up by the Word of God's grace; it will help protect you from *'savage wolves'* (32). Your pastor and church leaders are special targets for Satan's attacks. How should you pray for them?

- That God will keep them pure in doctrine and life.
- That they will have God-given wisdom and discernment.
- That they will stand firm in the face of discouragement or temptation to compromise.

Paul reminded the elders of his own example among them and told them that they must support the weak, for the Lord Jesus had said, *'It is more blessed to give than to receive'* (33–35). Have you discovered this to be true in your own experience, or are you more interested in taking than in giving? Paul knew that he would not see these men again and he knelt down and prayed with them all. There were many tears as they parted (25,37–38).

The will of the Lord be done

Paul loved to be with the Lord's people. His ship was delayed at Tyre while her cargo was being unloaded so he found believers in the port and stayed with them seven days. The children would never forget the time when they and their parents knelt on the beach and prayed with Paul and his companions (1–6). The missionaries then stayed with Christian leaders at Ptolemais, and arriving at Caesarea the following day, they stayed with Philip the evangelist (1–10). Do you seek out other believers when you are on holiday or away on business? Are you interested enough to learn about churches you visit so that you can encourage them and pray for them. You will need to find out what good churches there are in the area you are visiting before you leave home.

The Holy Spirit again warned Paul both at Tyre and at Caesarea that he would be arrested and imprisoned if he went to Jerusalem (4, 11). Was he disobeying God in his determination to go there? Such a thought is out of the question for Paul was always careful to obey the leading of the Holy Spirit (see 16:6–7; 20:22–23). The Christians at Caesarea wrongly interpreted the Spirit's warnings as a direction that he should not go to Jerusalem. He answered, *'What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart?'* (12–13). He was sure that it was God's will for him to go there and this was later confirmed. God was leading him through Jerusalem to Rome (23:11).

Paul and the Christians at Caesarea were submissive to the will of God and said, *'The will of the Lord be done'* (14). **There are times when we have to make costly choices in obedience to the Lord which may be painful to our closest friends as well as to ourselves.** Are you rebelling against the will of God in some area of your life? Repent of your sin and humbly submit to him saying, *'The will of the Lord be done.'*

Let us not fight against God

The Roman commander summoned the chief priests and the Sanhedrin (the ruling religious council) to come to him the next day to present their case against Paul. Jewish historian Josephus observed that Ananias the high priest was a very wicked man. He showed his true colours as soon as Paul began his defence, ordering those who stood by him (probably temple soldiers) to strike the apostle in the mouth. Paul warned Ananias that God would strike him because he was seeking to condemn him according to the law while breaking the law himself. Paul had been away from Jerusalem for some years and so did not realise that he was denouncing the high priest. He apologised because it was contrary to the law to speak evil of rulers (1–5). *'Whitewashed wall'* was a way of describing a hypocrite. The tombs hewn in the rocky hillsides of Judea were often painted with whitewash on the outside. They glistened in the sun, but inside them were the rotting corpses of the dead.

When Paul stated, *'I am a Pharisee'* (6), he was pointing out his orthodoxy as a Jew and his belief in the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees held strongly to this truth which was denied by the Sadducees. The two groups on the Sanhedrin then engaged in an unholy squabble in which the Pharisees expressed their support for Paul. The so-called religious court then behaved like a violent mob and the Romans again rescued Paul from his enemies (7–10).

The Pharisees on the council warned the high priest and his fellow-Sadducees, *'Let us not fight against God'* (9). Ananias continued to ignore this advice and Paul's words, *'God will strike you'* (3) proved to be prophetic. In AD 66, Ananias was assassinated by Jewish zealots because of his pro-Roman sympathies. When rulers *take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed* (the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ) *he who sits in the heavens shall laugh* (Psalm 2:2,4). ***If God is for us, who can be against us?*** (Romans 8:31).

And they listened to him until this word ...

Paul told the crowd how God had spoken to him when he was praying in the temple and told him to go to the Gentiles (17–21). The very mention of the fact that he, a Jew, had gone to the Gentiles, was enough to enrage the crowd so that they shouted him down. *And they listened to him until this word* (22). Those who are blinded by prejudice will not listen to sense and reason. We must not despair, however, for the Holy Spirit is able to bring fanatics to repentance; Paul himself was once a fanatic.

The Roman commander gave orders for Paul to be brought into the barracks to be scourged. He could not understand why the crowd were filled with such hatred for the apostle and hoped to elicit a confession of some wrongdoing from him. Scourging was a terrible punishment in which the victim was flayed with a multi-thonged whip. The thongs were knotted with pieces of metal or bone which tore apart the flesh of the victim. Paul rightly insisted on his rights as a Roman citizen who was not to be scourged without a fair trial and guilty verdict (25–29). It is important to understand that ‘turning the other cheek’ does not mean that we have to accept injustice when there are lawful processes that we are able to use to defend ourselves.

The commander’s attitude to Paul changed as soon as he found that the apostle was a Roman citizen and he was afraid because he had him bound with straps and was ready to scourge him. He had paid a great price to purchase his citizenship but Paul had been a citizen from birth. **Roman citizenship carried great privileges but every Christian is far more privileged.** We are citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20) and this citizenship has been purchased for us at great cost. The Lord Jesus gave his life on the cross to save us and to make us his own (1 Corinthians 6:20). We have access to his throne of grace to *obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need* (Hebrews 4:16). Let us come to him and bring our needs with confidence. He loves us and he is not deaf to our cries!

You see, brother

Paul and his companions met with James and the elders of the church in Jerusalem the day following their arrival in the city. Paul gave them a detailed report of God’s blessing upon his ministry among the Gentiles. *They glorified the Lord* for all that he had done through the missionaries but they had reservations. They feared that Paul’s work among the Gentiles could cause problems with legalistic Jewish Christians. They said, ‘*You see, brother*’ and went on to explain their problem (20). Many thousands of Jews had embraced the Christian faith but had held on to their zeal for the ritual and ceremony associated with the law. These people had heard rumours that Paul was teaching Jewish Christians to forsake the law of Moses and all their cherished traditions (21). It does not appear that they had checked the reliability of these reports.

Paul’s ministry had been greatly blessed by God and he had with him representatives from those churches consisting of Jewish and Gentile believers. They had brought with them gifts to support the poor Christians in Jerusalem having given at great cost to themselves (cp. 2 Corinthians 8:1–5). One can only wonder what they thought of the attitude of the Jerusalem church leaders towards Paul.

Paul was not given an opportunity to answer the malicious rumours, because the leadership of the church had already devised a plan for him to prove that he followed the rules and kept the law (24). The apostle had made it quite clear to the Galatians, that we are not justified by keeping the law, but by faith in Christ (Galatians 2:16). He was willing however, to forgo his liberty to win the Jews to Christ (1 Corinthians 9:19–22). He was a most gracious man and agreed to comply with their plan. **The Jerusalem church leaders’ plan calmed what could have become a very divisive situation.** Some Christians have scruples that are based on a misunderstanding of Scripture. We must be gracious towards them but beware of allowing them to bring us into barrenness and bondage.

Away with him!

Paul went along with the request of the Jerusalem elders and submitted to Jewish purification ceremonies with four men from the church. From this time everything seemed to go wrong. The apostle was seen by some of his Jewish enemies from the province of Asia in the temple as he was ending his purification ritual. They wrongly assumed that he had taken Trophimus, a Gentile Christian, into the temple (which was out of bounds to Gentiles). They stirred up the crowd and he was dragged out of the temple (26–30). The angry mob set upon Paul and would have killed him but for the intervention of Roman soldiers who took him into custody. Paul was taken prisoner just as the Holy Spirit had warned, but the Lord was working out his purposes through these events.

There was such a commotion that the Roman commander could not ascertain the reason behind the attack on the apostle (31–38). The Jews were motivated by such hatred for Paul that they cried out, ‘*Away with him!*’ (36). They were not prepared to listen to his message and some of them may have been among those who used similar words against the Lord Jesus, ‘*Away with him! Crucify him!*’ (John 19:15).

If we behave like those Jews who attacked Paul and reject the Lord Jesus now, we should not be surprised when he rejects us on the great day of judgment. He will then say, ‘*Depart from me, you cursed into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels*’ (Matthew 25:41). **There is no neutral ground with the gospel. We are either for Christ and the message of the gospel, or against.** Have you welcomed Christ into your life as your Saviour and Lord? If you have not, I urge you to do so now, before it is too late.

Paul asked the Roman commander, ‘*May I speak to you?*’ The Roman agreed, asking the apostle if he was the Egyptian who had led an insurrection. Paul denied this, telling him that he was a Jew, a citizen from Tarsus. He then asked for permission to address the crowd and his request was granted (37–40).

Why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized

Paul had been accused of being an enemy of the Jews (21:28) and he was determined to refute this lie. He spoke to the people in Hebrew and this helped calm them. Paul affirmed his own Jewish pedigree saying, ‘*I am indeed a Jew.*’ He told them of his training in Jerusalem at the feet of the great teacher Gamaliel and of his own zeal in persecuting Christians (1–5).

What accounted for the change that transformed this zealous Jew who hated Christians, into someone who propagated the faith that he once so vehemently despised? Paul told them how the risen Lord Jesus Christ had met with him while he was on an errand of persecution and had turned his life around. He recalled how he had been struck with blindness by the blazing light from heaven and how he had heard the voice of the Lord Jesus. He then asked him, ‘*What shall I do, Lord?*’ He recalled that he had been told to go on to Damascus where he would be told what to do. He told them how Ananias who was highly respected by the Jewish community in Damascus had been sent to him by God (6–12).

Ananias had first prayed for him that he would receive his sight and went on to tell him how God had chosen him to *know his will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of his mouth*. Paul would be a witness to all that he had seen and heard (13–14). He related some details in his testimony which are not recorded in Acts chapter 9, and he spoke of his return to Jerusalem where he went into the temple to pray. The Lord had warned him to leave the city and told him that he would be sent to the Gentiles.

Ananias then asked Paul, ‘*Why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized*’ (16). Though baptism is not essential to salvation, it is commanded by the Lord (2:38; Matthew 28:19). **Have you been baptized? If you love the Lord, you will gladly obey him.**