

Acts 21–24: Paul's arrest and trials

Last week we travelled with Paul on his second and third missionary journeys, through Thessalonica, Berea and Athens (Acts 17), Corinth (Acts 18), and Ephesus (Acts 19). As he set out for Jerusalem, we heard him deliver his farewell address to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20). Any questions or thoughts on those chapters?

If you think Acts is about how the gospel spread, **why did Luke get sidetracked in the final eight chapters?** Acts 21–28 reads more like a biography of Paul. When he reaches Jerusalem, his own people try to kill him, and the Romans arrest him. He's then a prisoner on remand for years. How does this advance the gospel?

Perhaps we need to reframe Acts as a story of Jesus' authority.

Acts begins with the resurrected Christ speaking about *the kingdom of God* (Acts 1:3). He promised his "christing" (Holy Spirit anointing) to his people, making them the evidence of his kingship that grows from the Old Testament kingdom regions to the extremities of the world (1:8).

Their gospel is that God raised up his Christ as Lord of all (2:36; 4:12; 10:36 etc.). The revelation of the resurrected king transforms an opponent like Paul into his servant: *"This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."* (Acts 9:15-16)

So, Paul's sufferings in Acts 21–28 are not irrelevant. They're part of the kingdom story. Rulers who do not recognize Jesus as Lord oppose the gospel proclamation that Jesus is king.

This confrontation of powers is integral to Luke's entire story:

- **Acts 1–8:** The gospel of King Jesus spreads in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, with resistance from the temple authorities (culminating in Stephen's death).
- **Acts 9–20:** The gospel of King Jesus spreads to the nations, with resistance from Jewish and gentile authorities in every place.
- **Acts 21–28:** Walking in Jesus' steps, Paul suffers at the hands of Jewish and gentile powers, because he proclaims and represents Jesus' kingship.

This is everywhere in Acts. Peter and John were arrested (4:1). Stephen was killed (Acts 7:57). James was executed (12:2). Silas was beaten and jailed (16:22-23). Paul suffers most because he's so vocal in proclaiming Jesus' kingship.

Your thoughts?

Acts 21: Suffering in Jerusalem

Journey to Jerusalem (21:1-16)

The theme of Paul's sufferings escalates as he heads to Jerusalem for the final time. It's similar to how Luke recounted Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem.

When the disciples first recognized *the Christ*, he told them he would be rejected by the Jerusalem authorities (Luke 9:20-21). Moses and Elijah discussed *his departure [exodus]*, which he was about to bring to fulfilment in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31). Jesus *resolutely set out for Jerusalem* (Luke 9:51). His looming death then hangs over everything Jesus says and does on his final journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9–19).

In Acts 19:21, Paul also makes the decision to go up to Jerusalem. He knows he will suffer. He's unclear if he will survive:

Acts 20:22-25 (NIV)

²² “And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am **going to Jerusalem**, not knowing what will happen to me there. ²³ I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. ...

²⁵ “Now I know that none of you ... will ever see me again.”

On the way, *the disciples ... urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem* (21:4).

When they reach the coast of Israel, the warnings escalate:

Acts 21:10-13 (NIV)

¹⁰ A prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ ... He took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, “The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.’ ”

¹² When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul **not to go up to Jerusalem**. ¹³ Then Paul answered, “Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”

Like his Lord, Paul is ready to give his life. It's what Jesus meant when he told us to take up our cross and follow him (Luke 9:23; 14:27).

Suffering in Jerusalem (21:17-40)

They reach Jerusalem (verse 17). Paul is accused of:

teaching all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children (verses 21-22).

The Jerusalem believers advise Paul and his companions to perform the temple purification rites (verse 24), so *the next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them* (verse 26).

It's not enough:

Acts 21:27–36 (NIV)

²⁷ Some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, ²⁸ shouting, “Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place.” ...

³⁰ Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple ... ³¹ While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. ...

³³ The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. ... ³⁵ The violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. ³⁶ The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Get rid of him!"

Do you hear echoes of Jesus' arrest? (Compare Luke 23:1-20.)

The Roman authorities assume Paul must be another messianic pretender, an assassin stirring people up against Rome. They identify him with *the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the wilderness* (verse 38). Josephus provides more detail: in summary, this 'Egyptian false prophet' had led a crowd ... by a circuitous route from the desert to the Mount of Olives with the promise that they would be able to seize the city.¹⁵

Many such "saviours" attempted to rescue Jerusalem by force. Luke calls them *sicarii* —dagger-men (verse 38). This is not Paul's message. Paul convinces the Roman soldiers to let him address the crowd (verse 37-40).

Acts 22: Conflict with Jewish and Roman authorities

Rejected by his own people (22:1-22)

Paul seeks common ground with his own people. Some of them would know his tutor who served on the Sanhedrin council (Acts 5:34). Some may remember Saul seeking authority to imprison anyone who followed "the Nazarene sect" as they called it (24:5).

Acts 22:2-5 (NIV)

Then Paul said, ³ "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. ⁴ I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, ⁵ as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished."

So what changed his mind? Paul recounts how he met the resurrected Christ on the way to Damascus (verses 6-16, compare Acts 9:1-19).

But Paul's own people did not accept him, since they did not accept the Lord he represents (Acts 9:23).

Acts 22:17-22 (NIV)

¹⁷ "When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance ¹⁸ and saw the Lord speaking to me. 'Quick!' he said. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because the people here will not accept your testimony about me.'

¹⁵ Summary of *Wars* 2.261-263 and *Antiquities* 20.169-172 in James Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 289–290.

¹⁹ “ ‘Lord,’ I replied, ‘these people know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. ²⁰ And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’

²¹ “Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’ ”

²² The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, “Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live!”

What was it that upset them? They could not handle the message that God was calling **other nations** into covenant relationship in Christ the king. That’s offensive to those who consider themselves to be God’s chosen people. The mob judges him as *unfit to live* (verse 22), just as they did to Jesus (Luke 23:21).

Rescued by Rome (22:23-29)

So, the Roman government saves Paul from the people called to be God’s kingdom:

Acts 22:23-24a (NIV)

²³ As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, ²⁴ the commander ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks.

It was to save lives and limit violence that God permitted human government in the first place (Genesis 9:5-6), but it’s tragic when the world’s government system is better than the people who are supposed to be under God’s leadership.

So, is human government better? Not really. Governments give rights to their own people, but they use torture to gain information from others:

Acts 22:24b-25, 29 (NIV)

He directed that he be flogged and interrogated in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. ²⁵ As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, “Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn’t even been found guilty?” ...

²⁹ Those who were about to interrogate him withdrew immediately. The commander himself was alarmed when he realized that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains.

James Dunn explains the kind of torture they used:

The procedure set in motion by the centurion was a common one—to interrogate a prisoner by means of physical torture. And torture it would have been, since the Roman scourge was usually a flail with knotted cords, or possibly in a severe flagellation with pieces of metal or bone inserted into the leather straps.¹⁶

Again, Paul uses his citizenship to highlight the contrast between the rulers of this world and the ruler whom God has appointed as Lord of all.

¹⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 298.

Acts 23: Safer in Jerusalem or Caesarea?

Will God's people rescue Paul? (Acts 23:1-5)

The Roman commander could not torture one of his own citizens, so he hands Paul back to *the chief priests and the members of the Sanhedrin* (22:30). Do the leaders of God's nation do better than the Romans?

Acts 23:1-3 (NIV)

¹ Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day."

² At this the high priest Ananias ordered those standing near Paul to strike him on the mouth. ³ Then Paul said to him, "God will strike, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!"

Paul offered a "not guilty" plea (verse 1). The high priest treats him as if he blasphemed. The high priest has always had the power of violence to enforce the honour of God's name (Numbers 25:7-13; Psalm 106:30). It's easy to abuse that power, as the Sanhedrin did when it handed Jesus over to be crucified.

Paul responded to violence not with violence but with an insult. *Whitewashed wall* was Ezekiel's term for the leaders who "painted over" the deep rot in the temple:

Ezekiel 13:14 (NIV)

"I will tear down the **wall** you have covered with **whitewash** and will level it to the ground so that its foundation will be laid bare. When it falls, you will be destroyed in it; and you will know that I am the LORD."

Jesus labelled the leaders *whitewashed tombs*. He could see that the power of death and decay within them was about to be unleashed against him (Matthew 23:27-35).

But on trial, Jesus did not react to insult with insult as Paul did:

John 18:22-23 (NIV)

²² When Jesus said this, one of the officials nearby slapped him in the face. "Is this the way you answer the high priest?" he demanded.

²³ "If I said something wrong," Jesus replied, "testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike me?"

In calling down a curse on his interrogator, Paul has violated God's Law (Ex. 22:28):

Acts 23:4-5 (NIV)

⁴ Those who were standing near Paul said, "How dare you insult God's high priest!"

⁵ Paul replied, "Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written: 'Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.'"

How could Paul not know who was high priest? Ananias was appointed as high priest by Herod of Chalcis (brother of Herod Agrippa I) in AD 47. When Quadratus (governor or Syria) accused him of violence, Ananias was extradited to Rome for trial. Caesar cleared him, so Ananias continued as high priest until he was deposed in AD 59. So, who was functioning as high priest in this period? Paul may be unsure, or his words may be ironic: who appointed him, or was he behaving like a high priest?

In any case, Paul apologizes. God has not yet washed the whitewashed wall away. Since he's still in power, Paul was wrong to curse him, to react to his insult with insult.

What is clear is that Paul will get no justice from the leader of God's people. Paul is suffering as a representative of King Jesus, whom they killed.

Refocusing the trial (Acts 23:6-11)

For Sadducees, Jesus cannot be God's anointed king because he's dead. The good news in Acts is that Jesus is Lord because God raised him from the dead (Acts 1:22; 2:24, 31, 32; 3:15; 4:4, 10, 33; 5:30; 13:33, 34, 37; 17:18, 31, 32). Unlike Pharisees, Sadducees don't believe in resurrection (verse 8).

Paul shifts the focus of the trial from his own guilt/innocence to weighing up the gospel. Notice that Paul still identifies as a Pharisee:

Acts 23:6 (NIV)

⁶ Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, **I am a Pharisee**, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead."

The dispute turns violent:

Acts 23:10 (NIV)

¹⁰ The dispute became so **violent** that the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them. He ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force and bring him into the barracks.

You know the world is in trouble when its leaders must rescue us from ourselves.

The plot to kill Paul (Acts 23:12-35)

At this point, the true ruler of the world refocuses his agent on proclaiming his authority to the nations:

Acts 23:11 (NIV)

¹¹ The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

That's encouraging. But his own people were determined to kill Paul, with the knowledge of the temple leaders, just like they did to Jesus:

Acts 23:12–16 (NIV)

¹² The next morning some Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had **killed** Paul.

¹³ More than forty men were involved in this plot. ¹⁴ They went to the chief priests and the elders and said, "We have taken a solemn oath not to eat anything until we have **killed** Paul. ¹⁵ Now then, you and the Sanhedrin petition the commander to bring him before you on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case. We are ready to **kill** him before he gets here." ¹⁶ But when the son of Paul's sister heard of this plot, he went into the barracks and told Paul.

Paul's nephew informs the commander who then saves Paul's life by transferring him to Caesarea. There Paul is imprisoned in Herod's palace (verses 17-35).

Acts 24: Trial before Felix

The last five chapters of Acts focus on taking the good news of Jesus' kingship to Rome, the centre of their world. It's what our Lord always intended (23:11; 22:17-21; 9:15).

Paul's Roman trial begins with Felix, the procurator of Judah appointed by Emperor Claudius in AD 52.



Ruins of Herod's place at Caesarea. Photo: Allen Browne, 2014.

Acts 24:1, 5-6 (NIV)

¹ Five days later the high priest Ananias went down to Caesarea with some of the elders and a lawyer named Tertullus, and they brought their charges against Paul before the governor. ...

⁵ "We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of **the Nazarene sect**

⁶ and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him. ...

The "anti-temple" charge keeps recurring. It's literally false: Paul performed the purification rites (21:24-29). But Paul is perceived as a threat to the temple authorities.

This conflict between the temple and the king also occupies the last eight chapters of Matthew's Gospel.¹⁷ Conflict with the temple saw the apostles arrested (5:28-29) and Stephen killed (6:14) as they proclaimed Jesus' authority.

Paul went to the temple *to worship* (verse 11), not to stir up trouble (verse 12). The problem is, "*I worship the God of our ancestors as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect.*" (verse 14).

But how much justice can Paul expect from the Roman rulers? Josephus portrays Felix as a self-serving and deceptive leader, worse than the criminals he put to death. Felix even arranged the death of Jonathon (the high priest) before he was deposed (*Antiquities* 20:160-164).

Acts 24:22-27 (NIV)

²² Then Felix, who was well acquainted with **the Way**, adjourned the proceedings. ...

²⁴ Several days later Felix ... sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you." ²⁶ He was hoping that Paul would offer him a **bribe** ...

²⁷ When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favour to the Jews, he left Paul in prison.

¹⁷ <https://allenbrowne.blog/2022/03/16/two-powers/>

Paul is locked away, unable to proclaim King Jesus in synagogue or marketplace. He's imprisoned by a ruler who only cares only about his own power and wealth.

Next week we'll pick up the story as Paul faces trial before Festus (25), Agrippa (26), and ultimately Caesar (27-28). Or is the history of the world ultimately in God's hands?

Reflection

What do you think? Has God called us to bear the sufferings of the world like our Lord? Is Acts making us aware of the opposition to God's kingdom that has characterized God's world since the beginning? Why do you think Luke focuses on the sufferings Paul received from the Jerusalem and Roman authorities in Acts 21–28?

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What do you make of the suggestion that Luke has intentionally told the story of Paul's final trip to Jerusalem in the same way he describes Jesus' final trip to Jerusalem?

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How do you feel when you read about the Roman government rescuing Paul from the leaders of God's people? Are there lessons for us to learn here?

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What can we learn from how Paul handled his legal trials? Are there examples to follow or avoid in the way we respond to people?

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Imagine how frustrated Paul may have felt waiting years for Felix to release him, knowing he was after a bribe. What would you have done?

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Please read Acts 25–28 for our final week.