

Thursday Bible Study: Paul Arrives in Jerusalem - Acts 21:17–40

Where We Left Off

Paul has completed his journey to Jerusalem.

Along the way:

- Believers welcomed him into their homes.
- The Holy Spirit warned of imprisonment and suffering.
- His friends pleaded with him not to go.
- Paul expressed his readiness to suffer for the name of Jesus.

Last Sunday, we left off just as Paul was arriving in the city of Jerusalem

Now we get to follow Paul into a meeting with the Jerusalem church's leaders, into the temple, and finally into Roman custody.

1. A Warm Welcome

Acts 21:17–20a

“When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, ‘You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Gentiles through his ministry.’”

The brothers receive Paul and his companions gladly.

The next day, Paul visits James, with all the elders present.

Which James is this?

- This is James, the brother of Jesus, who has become a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church.
 - James the brother of John was killed by Herod in Acts 12:2.
 - James played a leading role in the Jerusalem council in Acts 15.
 - Paul identifies James as ***“the Lord’s brother”*** in Galatians 1:19.

What does Paul report?

Paul describes, one by one, the things God has done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

- **Notice where he places the emphasis:**
 - God has been doing the work.
 - The leaders respond by glorifying God.
- **Before we hear about the difficulties in Jerusalem, Luke shows us that Paul and company actually received a very warm welcome and rejoiced together over God’s work.**

Remember the Gift

In our Acts 20 study, we followed Paul’s preparations to bring financial help from the Gentile churches to believers in Jerusalem.

- **Romans 15:25–27 explains that purpose.**
- **Acts 21 doesn’t describe the presentation of the collection.** Later, however, Paul says that he came to bring alms to his nation and to present offerings (Acts 24:17).
- Most likely, Paul would have presented the gift upon his arrival

For Discussion

- *What do Paul's report and the leaders' response reveal about their attitude toward God's work among the Gentiles?*
- *Mirror Question: Can we genuinely rejoice when God works through someone else, especially when their ministry looks different than ours?*

2. A Troubling Report About Paul

Read Acts 21:20–22

"You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come."

The leaders tell Paul about the many Jewish believers who are zealous for the Law.

- These are people who have believed in Jesus.
- Their continued attachment to Jewish practices becomes a point of tension between the Jewish and gentile believers

What Have They Heard?

They have been told that Paul teaches Jews living among the Gentiles:

- To forsake Moses.
- Not to circumcise their children.
- Not to follow their ancestral customs.

The Real Story:

Paul was concerned with the freedom that the gospel brings to those who embrace the grace of God in Christ

- The Bible says that the law was given as *“...our Schoolmaster to bring us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.”*
- Paul wasn't “Anti-Law”. He just understood the purpose of it.
 - All the law and the prophets were always meant to point us TO Christ.
 - The Bible calls them shadows... but the substance is Christ (Col. 2:16-17 and Galatians 3:23-25)
 - **The law's purpose was to**
 - reveal God's holiness
 - Expose our sin
 - Point forward to Christ.
 - Now that Christ has come and fulfilled the law, believers are no longer under the Mosaic covenant as the basis of their relationship with God."
- **When Gentile believers were saved, and Jewish teachers told them they needed to become Jewish and follow the Mosaic law, Paul strongly opposed that message**
 - *“...having begun by the Spirit, are you being perfected by the flesh?”*
- **The fact that believers are not bound by the law, doesn't make it inherently wrong for Jewish believers to continue to practice their customs...**
 - And it also doesn't make it wrong for them to forsake them.
 - It's important to understand though that following the law does not contribute in any way to a believer's salvation

For Discussion

- *How could an inaccurate report about Paul threaten fellowship between believers?*

- *Why is it important to distinguish what someone actually teaches from what others say they teach?*

3. The Elders Propose a Public Response

Read Acts 21:23–26

“Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus, all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.”

The elders propose a solution... “prove the critics wrong”

The elders ask Paul to:

- Join 4 other Jewish men in ritual purification at the Temple
- Pay their expenses
- Help them complete the process associated with shaving their heads

Their purpose: People will see that the reports about Paul are unfounded and that he himself observes the Law.

- **Question worth considering:**

- *Were the Elders wisely protecting the unity of the church, or could this have been a discipleship opportunity to bring greater clarity and depth to the Jewish believer's understanding of a believer's freedom in Christ?*

Paul Agrees to the proposal... not because he's obligated to, but in good faith

- Paul takes the men, purifies himself with them, and enters the temple to give notice of the completion of the purification period and the offerings.

For Discussion

- Paul accepts an inconvenience and expense to address concerns within the church.
 - *Is it important for us at times to prioritize unity and fellowship within the Church despite differences or misunderstandings? Why?*
 - *How can we distinguish between yielding to a personal preference and compromising in an area of Christian doctrine?*

4. Assumptions become Accusations

Read Acts 21:27–30

“When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, ‘Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.’ For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut.”

As the seven days are nearly completed, Jews from Asia (possibly Ephesus) recognize Paul in the temple.

They stir up the crowd and accuse him of teaching against:

- The Jewish people.
- The Law.
- The temple.

Then they make a false accusation:

- They accuse Paul of bring a gentile into the restricted area of the temple
 - Whether intentional or not, the accusation was false

Remember Trophimus?

He was one of Paul's traveling companions from Acts 20, accompanying Paul as he brought the gift for the Jerusalem church. (Acts 21:29 identifies him as an Ephesian.)

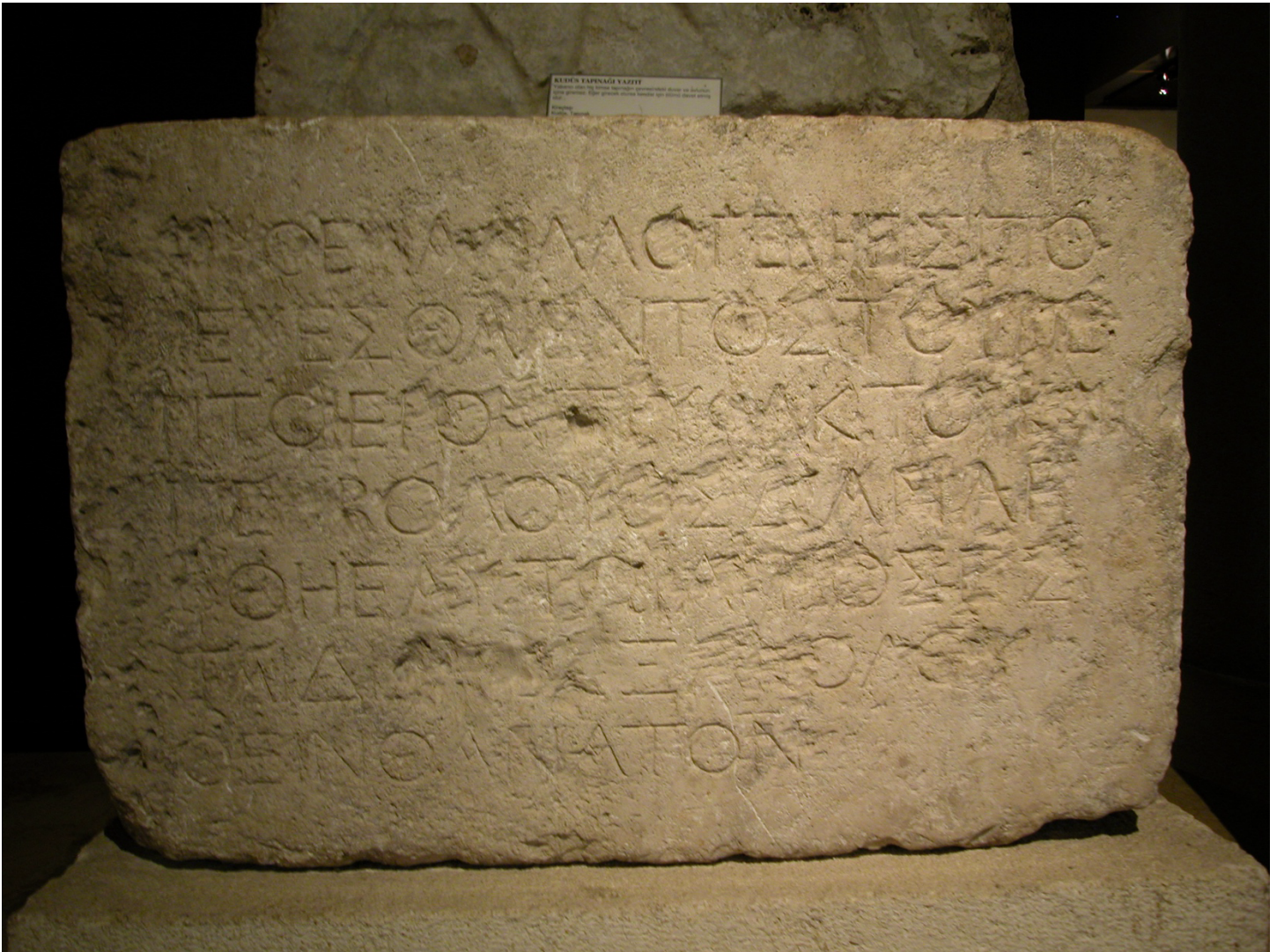
- The accusers had seen him with Paul **in the city**.
- They assumed Paul had brought him **into the temple**.

The Temple Boundary

In the Temple Courts, there were distinct areas that were designated only for specific people groups

- **Gentiles could enter the outer temple precincts, commonly called the Court of the Gentiles.**
 - They were prohibited from passing beyond the barrier (Soreg) into the more restricted sacred courts.
- **Josephus describes warning notices at this boundary, and surviving inscriptions provide archaeological evidence for the restriction.**

- This helps us understand the seriousness of the accusation. The charge concerns crossing a prohibited boundary, rather than merely being “somewhere” on the temple grounds.



A Surviving Temple Warning

Photo: Prof. Yong Woo Park / Wikimedia Commons, CC0.

The Stone Reads:

ΜΗΘΕΝΑ ΑΛΛΟΓΕΝΗ ΕΙΣΠΟΡΕΥΕΣΘΑΙ
ΕΝΤΟΣ ΤΟΥ ΠΕΡΙ ΤΟ ΙΕΡΟΝ ΤΡΥΦΑΚΤΟΥ
ΚΑΙ ΠΕΡΙΒΟΛΟΥ ΟΣ Δ' ΑΝ ΛΗΦΘΗΙ
ΕΑΥΤΩΙ ΑΙΤΙΟΣ ΕΣΤΑΙ ΔΙΑ ΤΟ
ΕΞΑΚΟΛΟΥΘΕΙΝ ΘΑΝΑΤΟΝ

English Translation:

“No foreigner may enter within the barrier and enclosure surrounding the temple.

Whoever is caught will be responsible for his ensuing death.”

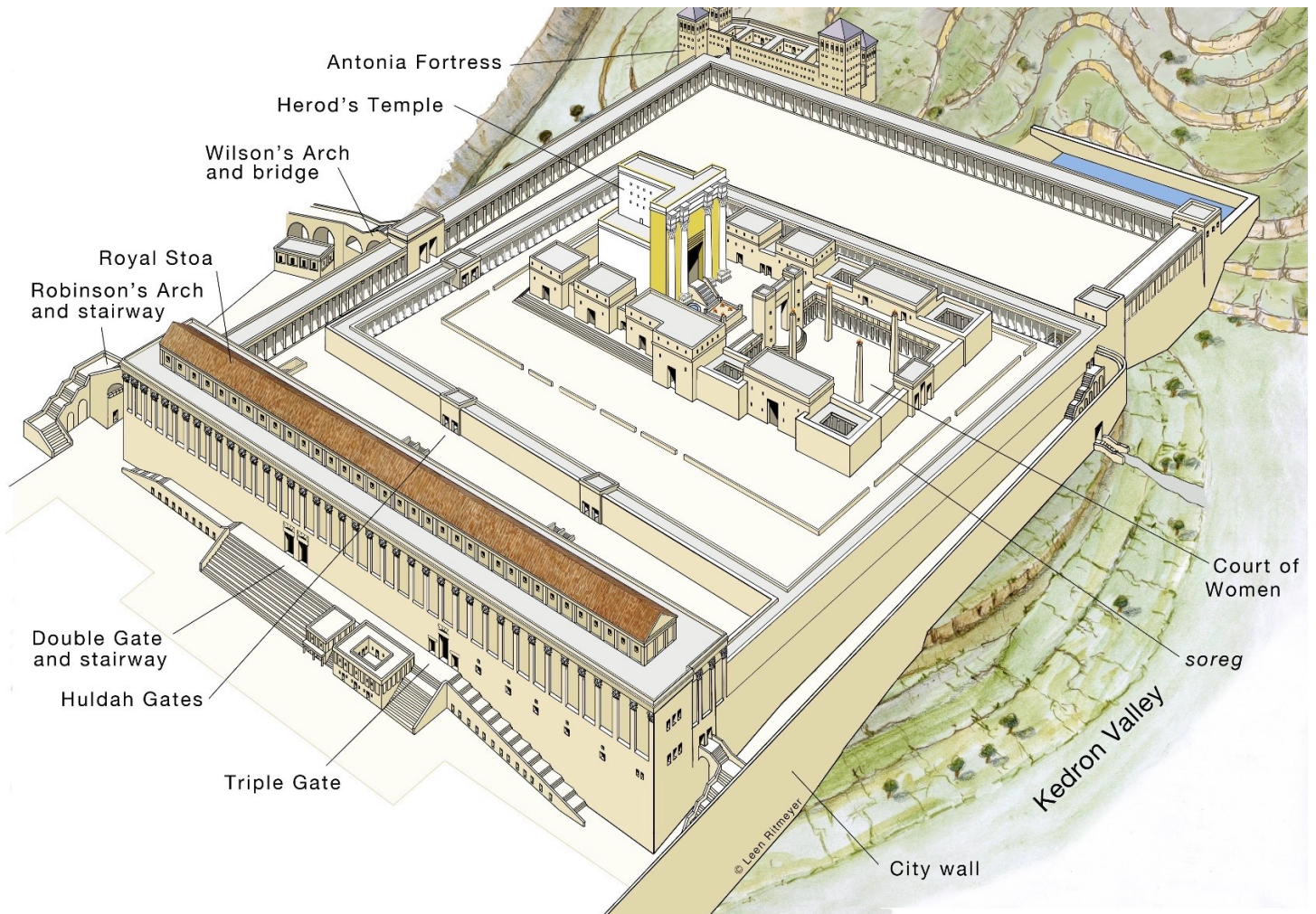
An interesting New Testament Reference to this concept:

Ephesians 2:14

*"For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has
broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility."*

The Result of the False Accusation??

- The city is stirred up, Paul is seized and dragged out, the Temple doors are shut.



For Discussion

- *What did the accusers know, and what had they assumed?*
- *How can we determine whether our own zeal for what is “right” is being governed by truth and love... or by our own tendencies to assume the worst about people?*

5. Roman Soldiers Intervene

Read Acts 21:31–36

“And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd. For the mob of the people followed, crying out, ‘Away with him!’”

The crowd is trying to kill Paul.

The Commander of the cohort at the fortress hears about the uproar and immediately takes soldiers and centurions and runs down to the crowd.

- When the people see the soldiers, they stop beating Paul.

The commander:

- Takes custody of Paul.
- Orders him bound with two chains.
- Asks who he is and what he has done.

The people are shouting conflicting things, so he isn't able to establish the facts and he orders Paul to be taken back into the barracks.

- The crowd is so violent that the soldiers have to carry him up the steps.

The Antonia Fortress

The barracks are generally identified with the Antonia Fortress.

- Its description fits the location and access described by Josephus.

Antonia stood at the northwest corner of the temple enclosure.

- It overlooked the temple and gave soldiers access to the temple's porticoes, or covered colonnades.

Josephus Describes Antonia in Jewish War 5.5.8:

"Now as to the tower of Antonia, it was situated at the corner of two cloisters of the court of the temple: of that on the west, and that on the north."

He also describes its access to the temple:

"But on the corner, where it joined to the two cloisters of the temple, it had passages down to them both."

Picture the Scene

A Roman military stronghold stands beside the temple.

- Soldiers descend into the temple area when trouble erupts.
- Paul is carried back up the steps while the crowd follows, shouting for his removal.

For Discussion

- Paul is rescued from the crowd, but he remains unjustly bound and in danger.
 - *What does this scene help us to understand about God's care when a difficult situation has not been fully resolved?*

- *Looking back, can you remember a time when God helped you through the intervention of an ordinary person or circumstance during a hard season?*

6. The Commander Has the Wrong Man

Read Acts 21:37–39

“As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, ‘May I say something to you?’ And he said, ‘Do you know Greek? Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?’ Paul replied, ‘I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people.’

As Paul is about to enter the barracks, he asks permission to speak to the commander.

- The commander is surprised that Paul speaks Greek.
- Still trying to figure out who Paul is, he asks if he is “the Egyptian”
 - had stirred up a revolt and led four thousand men of the assassins into the wilderness.

The Egyptian in Josephus

Josephus also describes an Egyptian who claimed to be a prophet and gathered followers.

- In his account, the man led them from the wilderness to the Mount of Olives and threatened Jerusalem.

“...these he led round about from the wilderness to the mount which was called the Mount of Olives, and was ready to break into Jerusalem by force from that place”

Josephus describes the Roman response under Felix:

“when it came to a battle, the Egyptian ran away, with a few others”

~ Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.13.5

Why Might the Commander Suspect Him?

Josephus says the Egyptian escaped.

- That makes the commander’s question understandable: he suspected that maybe the fugitive had reappeared.

Paul Identifies Himself

Paul says he is:

- A Jew.
- From Tarsus in Cilicia.
- A citizen of a significant city.

This is his identification with Tarsus. (he hasn’t yet disclosed his Roman citizenship)

For Discussion:

Paul’s been beaten and misunderstood, yet he speaks respectfully to the commander.

- *When we are misjudged or falsely accused, what makes it difficult to respond with this kind of restraint?*
- *What can help us to explain ourselves truthfully without allowing resentment to dictate our response?*

7. Paul Stands on the Steps

Read Acts 21:40

“And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying:”

The commander gives Paul permission to speak.

- Paul stands on the steps and motions to the people, and a great hush follows.
- He begins to address them in their own language.
- This is where we leave the scene.
 - The man who had been beaten and carried away now has an opportunity to address the crowd.
- On Sunday, we will hear what he has to say.

Final Discussion

- After everything that had happened to him, Paul asks to speak to the people.
 - *What strikes you about his willingness to stay engaged with them?*
 - *Which part of this passage invites you to examine your own heart, and how might we be able to learn from what we’ve discussed this week?*

Closing Thought

Most of us will never face a crowd like Paul did, but we will have opportunities this week to

- Listen to a negative report about somebody
- Decide whether we will believe the best or the worst about people
- Respond when we feel misunderstood or misrepresented

This passage invites us to bring those moments before Christ.

- Are we willing to listen before we judge?
- Can we care enough about another person to accept an inconvenience or a misunderstanding?
- When we are hurt, can we speak truthfully and graciously?

Paul's circumstances were still unresolved as he stood on those steps.

- When we are forced to wait in our own unresolved circumstances, we too can ask the Lord to help us to respond like Christ, and trust Him with the outcome.

As we close today, consider:

- **Where do I need Christ's grace to shape my response to someone this week?**