

Notes on Acts 21–28

by Grant Thorpe 2000

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Chapter twenty one

A scattered but unified community had developed as the gospel spread to new regions. Paul would have strengthened that unity by his teaching and encouragement. When he reached the East Mediterranean coast, prophets, stirred by the Spirit, began to warn him about what would happen in Jerusalem. We cannot be sure of why Paul was determined to go to Jerusalem, but it must have been something to do with love for his fellow Jews. He remained a Jew to the Jews. Perhaps also, his longing for the unity of the church drew him back to Jerusalem after each journey to report what good things God had done among the Gentiles. Whatever, his journey was for 'the Lord Jesus' because it was for him he was prepared to die.

The Jewish church received Paul warmly and officially and delighted in his ministry among Gentiles. However, Jewish Christians now numbered thousands and the leaders were eager to dispel rumours that Paul encouraged Jews to stop being Jews when they became Christians. Paul was eager to show that the rumours were not true. He joined some fellow Christian Jews in a Jewish religious ceremony.

The practice of denying Jewish identity had a lamentable precedent 200 years previously (I Maccabees 1:15) when the very existence of Jewish worship was threatened. Judaism, understandably did not want a repeat of this. Without some care by the church, unconverted Jews may have likened the church to the evil Antiochus Epiphanes.

All this was unable to quell the bitterness and blindness of Jews from around Ephesus (probably visiting for Pentecost). The vice like grip of Rome on all civil unrest was called in to save the situation and, through them, Paul gained an opportunity to declare his message. As will be seen, he was not interested in a speech designed to defend himself. He spoke of Christ who alone could address the profound unsettlement in human beings. Clearly, it was not the message of Christ which caused the uproar, but the bigotry of those who believed they had to defend their own religion. Being ignorant of the message of Jesus, they had lost touch with the God of Israel and were being led by their own passions.

Prayer

Our Father, you have planned the unity of the race and the end of all hostility, both with yourself and with one another. Grant that we may so trust in Jesus, your Son, that we may bring no other message than him. Passions for the preservation of our own life and culture are ready to rise whenever the peace of Christ leaves us. Therefore, we pray, keep us in his

grace and enable us to display his meekness and gentleness in all our relationships. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

Chapter twenty two

Jerusalem had always been important to Paul, so it is not surprising that we have three chapters devoted to his last contact with that city.

Jesus had shown that Jerusalem was significant in the history of salvation (John 4:20–22). He also said it was impossible for a prophet to perish outside of Jerusalem (Luke 13:33). Here was the place where God had revealed his love for the nations, but here was the place where the obstinacy of humanity had been most clearly demonstrated. It remained obstinate.

Paul used the occasion of his arrest to clarify who he was and why he belonged to Christ. He had been well established in all that Jews thought was important, but Jesus had appeared to him as Lord. Ananias had clarified what had happened: it was the God they all honoured who had allowed Paul to know his will, and to hear and see the Righteous One (Messiah). So, he had come to the true meaning of being a Jew, as a Christian.

Paul described his subsequent Jerusalem visit. He had thought his remarkable story would make people listen. At that time, Christ told him there was other work for him to do, among Gentiles. Here was the problem for these Jews: they had made God's revelation to them a hiding place for themselves rather than a relationship in which they would share in God's purpose for all peoples. The orderliness (even if harshly so) of Rome, contrasts with the passionate disorder of the Jews, and so, a forum was arranged in which Rome hoped to get to the bottom of things.

Prayer

Father, it is not by zeal that we have come to know you but by your gracious revelation through Christ. We too, were opposed to you, but now, we know your will, through this gospel. Grant, Lord, that we may not be quickly discouraged by the hostility of unbelievers, but that they may hear the testimony we bring and know that Christ is truly Lord. For his name's sake we pray. Amen.

Chapter twenty three

Paul would know that being accused in court was necessary so that Christian witness could be given there (Luke 21:12–15). It would not be just an opportunity to get free. However, his Christian witness included calling things what they were. Paul was not guilty of a crime; his conscience was clear.

Paul was not likely to be claiming sinlessness but a clear conscience in regard to any matter that could be brought into a religious or civil court. He knew of nothing against himself (I Cor. 4:1–4) and had, by uprightness, maintained a clear conscience (II Cor. 1:12) that first flowed from the forgiveness of sins. As a consequence, Paul was bold like a lion (Prov. 28:1). The High Priest had no right to ask for Paul to be struck and hardly qualified as a High Priest. Perhaps this incident decided Paul in not seeking

any further justice from the Jews. Whatever, he showed how the gospel he preached was bedded in Israel's faith. He knew the Pharisees would not want to deny this. He knew, too, that the Sadducees did deny it, and that raising the matter would deflect attention from himself to something more useful.

Pharisees preferred to believe that a spirit or angel had spoken to Paul because they wanted to agree with him about the resurrection. But it was the Lord himself that had spoken to Paul, and, once again, this Lord came and encouraged him. Paul would not be caught up in a provincial court but would have opportunity to bear witness to Christ in Rome.

The drama of people vowing to kill Paul and a hefty guard escorting him to Caesarea is wonderful to read. So ended Paul's witness to Jerusalem. The remainder of the story shows Roman officials trying to deal with Paul's case according to their procedures, all the while, trying to put their own situation in the best light. How different was Paul's approach: he sought that Christ should be set free among them rather than himself set free in the world.

Prayer

Father, may it always be settled in our minds that our task is not to live for ourselves but to bear witness to you and your Christ. We thank you that, by his resurrection, we are justified in your presence. By this grace, help us to keep a clear conscience before you and before the world. Grant that all those who face public opposition to their faith may be kept in peace and joy and bear good testimony, for the sake of Christ. Amen.

Chapter twenty four

The curtesies (or fawning) which Tertullus showed to Felix were in sharp contrast with the hatred needed to bring unprovable accusations against Paul before a second court. Paul's defence not only gave Felix opportunity to judge justly but for his accusers to be ashamed of their malice. Paul had done nothing amiss, and in fact, had done good. In their hearts, his accusers must have known this. Again, Paul drew the court on to consider the miracle which launched the Christian faith, the resurrection.

The two years spent at Caesarea were a change of pace for Paul. If he were not sure of the providence of God, he may have found them frustrating: he was accused by the Jews of things he had not done, and was held by an irresponsible Roman governor who hoped for bribes rather than for righteousness. Some think that Luke, who is writing this story and is with Paul for these two years, may have researched his Gospel account during this time, while he was close to the action of the life of Jesus (Luke 1:1–4). Paul had some freedom to meet with others, and, no doubt, used this opportunity to good effect.

Prayer

Father, while this world does what it thinks is necessary to maintain its own authority and culture, grant to us a clear vision of your kingdom. We thank you for Christ, risen from the dead, and Lord over all powers. He will lead us in triumph to make known your love for the world. Keep us in this faith and hope. This, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Chapter twenty five

Paul's case could now have looked grim. A new governor, wanting to humour the Jews and visiting their capital within days of taking office, was petitioned by them, not with a view to justice but a lynching. Perhaps they thought the new governor would not be awake to their scheme! While not accepting a Jerusalem venue, Festus lost no time in bringing the matter to trial. However, his unwillingness to judge the case on its own evidence showed he was ruled by the desire for Jewish acceptance. Paul could see there would be no justice in Caesarea, and certainly not in Jerusalem, so he appealed, as was his right, to be tried in Rome. With all the failings of Roman justice, it was better to go to its highest court than to trust himself to Jews who had rejected their Messiah.

King Agrippa and Festus were colleagues. Agrippa was also regarded well by Jews because his grandmother was of famous Jewish descent and he had remained conversant with Jewish matters. Festus had made a problem for himself by not releasing Paul straight away and now needed a respectable basis for referral to Rome. (We are not told how Luke discovered what was said between these two men.). So, Paul's case came before another public forum.

Prayer

Father, as the world does what it feels it must to retain its power and dignity, grant that we may live under the lordship of your Son in faith, hope and love. We thank you for the forms of justice which remain in public life and pray for all who are in authority over us. You, Lord, have great care for all peoples, and are not willing that any should perish but that all should come to the truth. Thankyou for the light of Christ which shines in a dark world, and in his name we pray. Amen.

Chapter twenty six

Paul had told the story of his conversion at Jerusalem. Now, in this Gentile forum, Paul again went to the heart of what was driving him. He had been a faithful Jew. He was now devoted to the matter which was at the heart of Jewish life. This was the coming of the Messiah, but it was the resurrection by which Messiah had been declared to the world. Surely, all Israel believed that if their Messiah was killed by his enemies, God would raise him up again?

Paul showed how he himself missed this point in his hatred of Jesus, and then, was graciously met by Jesus on the Damascus Road. From the beginning, he was told that he would suffer for what he now knew and proclaimed. The message was always the same: there is freedom from Satan and forgiveness of sins for all who turn to Christ; the inheritance promised to Israel is available for all (not just Jews) who are sanctified by trusting in Christ.

Paul hoped that the plainness of his testimony and the certainty that Christ fulfilled the Old Testament would be irresistible to King Agrippa and that the King would come to love this Christ as Paul had done. However, the lie in which Agrippa lived gripped him more powerfully than the truth of Christ and he distained the idea that he could change in a moment. Roman justice would have to do the best it could with this evidence, but Christ had spoken to Agrippa as surely as he had appeared to Paul, though with a different result.

Prayer

Father, by the word of your Son in this world, you have commended yourself to everyone as the faithful and gracious God. We thank you for turning us to the light of Christ, so that our sins are forgiven and so that we are no longer under the dominion of Satan. We rejoice that the inheritance of a renewed creation may now be proclaimed to people of all nations. By your Spirit, form in us the will to proclaim this truth to all, for the sake of Christ your Son. Amen.

Chapter twenty seven

In this detailed account of a journey on which Luke travelled with Paul, the carelessness of the centurion in embarking on the trip stands in contrast with his later defending of Paul's life. Cutting prisoner's shackles free was tacit acknowledgment that he had encountered a reign more certain to bring order than his own Roman heritage.

The guidance given to Paul made all the difference to the spirit of the crew, and to the outcome. This guidance was not just about safety however, but about Paul standing before Caesar in Rome, to bear witness to the gospel he preached. We may be sure that Paul was praying for that, because it was his goal. But Paul must also have been praying for the lives of those who travelled with him ('God has granted you . . . v. 24). His giving thanks to God, breaking bread and encouraging everyone to eat was like Jesus doing the same by Lake Galilee, bringing the blessings of the reign of God to all who were with him. It should have been clear to all on board that there is one Lord and that only his reign can ensure the well being of the world.

Prayer

Father, your servant Paul endured many hardships in his service for you, but he knew that your reign was sure. He showed at all times that you are not willing that any should perish. Open our eyes to the wideness and faithfulness of your gracious reign. Save us from all fear and grant that we may bring the blessings of your reign to all with whom we share this present life. Keep us patiently waiting for the coming of your Son who will bring about the restoration of all things (3:21). In his name we pray. Amen.

Chapter twenty eight

After the storms of Jewish opposition, and a literal storm at sea, the three months on Malta seem idyllic. Paul moved freely, the local inhabitants were friendly, and then, assumed he was a god rather than a murderer. The chief's father and many others were healed and provision was made for their onward journey. What seems strange is there being no mention of preaching or converts, and no challenge to his being called a god. There may not have been anyone with a common language (*babaros* was used for someone who spoke an unknown language). However, it is clear that the blessings of the gospel were portrayed to these people in a way they could understand and that they were responsive to what they saw. All this is suggestive of the future going out of the gospel to Gentiles.

Coming to the mainland of Italy, Paul was greeted by Christians and seems to have stayed with them for a week (though how a centurion would allow this is unclear). In Rome, again, he was greeted by Christians and Paul was encouraged by all this.

However, his purpose, as always when arriving in a city, was to speak to Jews of their Messiah. He used his own prisoner status to bring them up to date on what had happened already. Would they be any different to other Jews? Some heeded and some did not. Isaiah was right about Jews being slow to believe God's promises.

God would still do good however. His gospel was free to go directly to Gentiles. It would have been wonderful if these Jews had received their Messiah and been the light to Gentiles that they were destined to be, but the gospel would go on anyway, and Paul went on with his task. This seems to be the situation when Luke finished his narrative

Prayer

Father, grant that with a glad and generous heart, we may always make known the liberty and joy of your goodwill to all. I thank you that the obstinacy of humanity does not alter the love you have for us all or lessen the power of your gospel to bring men and women to you. You will take your servants to all the nations of the earth as you took Paul to Rome. Keep us ever in this faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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