

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## **Acts 21:17–23:35 - Paul at Jerusalem**

Have you ever read a book, or watched a film, knowing that there would be no happy ending? Recently, I was reading the life story of Keith Green, the Christian singer and songwriter. He was tragically killed in an aeroplane crash, and as the story drew to its climax, I could hear myself saying, "Don't get on the plane. Don't do it!" If only I could go back in time and warn him, but of course that was impossible.

It is then, perhaps, with a similar sense of foreboding that we approach today's chapters, and look at the fateful journey Paul took to Jerusalem. There he would be arrested, and from there he was eventually sent to Rome, and to his death. It is one of the great controversies in the book of Acts. Should Paul have gone to Jerusalem? But to get stuck in trying to solve this is to miss the point of these chapters. Each servant is answerable to his own Master. Indeed, in 1 Corinthians 4:5, Paul himself could write, "Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God." Paul did go to Jerusalem, and for us to argue as to whether he should have gone there or not, is a waste of time. Let us concentrate on learning the lessons from these chapters, and applying them to our own lives. We shall come to look at why Paul undertook this undoubtedly hazardous journey to Jerusalem later, but before we do so, there is much for us to learn from the journey itself.

Paul had taken his heartbreaking leave of the Ephesian believers. What a wonderful thing it is to see real Christian love in action. With the words "Now I commit you to God and to the word of His grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified" ringing in his ears, Paul and his companions take ship and set sail down the Aegean sea. In fact, the first seven verses of these chapters describe his voyage, past Cos, Rhodes and Cyprus to Tyre and finally Caesarea. It is absolutely remarkable that so much space in the Bible is given to what I have just described in one sentence. The Bible is God's precious word to reveal Himself to us, and to teach us all that we need to know. Not one word is superfluous. And yet seven verses here, and more besides elsewhere, just tell us of the ordinary facts of the journey. Some important truths get less space! Surely this teaches most powerfully that God is vitally interested in the ordinary circumstances of our lives. We tend to compartmentalise our lives into what is spiritual, what is work, what is social etc. God does not do this. He is interested in us 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In Colossians 3:17, Paul writes, "And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him." As I wash the dishes, or get stopped at a red light, He is with me every bit as much as when I pray or preach the Gospel. Does this seem a bit fanciful? Surely my church life is more important than my home life? Not at all! Nothing could be more mundane than eating and drinking, and yet in 1 Corinthians 10:31, we read, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

So let us eat our breakfast this morning to the glory of God – giving thanks for the food, the faculties to enjoy it, and the opportunities for work we shall get from its energy. But let us realise that nothing is unimportant to God in our lives.

In Acts 21:4, we read that Paul and his companions found the local disciples, at a stop over on the journey. The word used implies an active, diligent search for them. Paul had a right sense of the value of fellowship with other believers, and he worked hard to make the most of any opportunity that came his way. And look who it is that sends him on his way - it is all the disciples and their wives and their children. It is of the first importance that there are times when the whole family together is active for the Lord. It concerns me, that, at times, particularly with young children and babies, one parent stays at home while the other goes to church, or crèches are provided so that mum and dad can worship in peace. It is so necessary that young children see for themselves what is important to their parents. I guess the children who saw Paul off would have remembered little of anything that Paul had to say that day, but they would have remembered the tears running down dad's cheeks! Even children who are too young to understand anything of what is going on are able to sense the importance of an occasion, and who can tell what the Spirit of God may be doing at such times? So if you are responsible for children, be active all together, in the life of your church. It may not be easy; crying and shuffling can be distracting, but it is what God wants.

It was these disciples who gave Paul the first of three warnings in this chapter that he should not go to Jerusalem.

Next, Paul comes to Caesarea, and there stays at the house of Philip, the evangelist. He was one of the seven men chosen by the apostles in chapter 6. We further read about him in chapter 8. What a tremendous example he is to us!

Not only was he faithful in what we would call his church life, but he was faithful in his family life too. So we read that he had four unmarried daughters who were prophetesses. How important it is to realise that we all have gifts, and we are all responsible to use them. Perhaps the greatest of all the gifts, prophecy involved telling the mind of God for the moment. Christian women were not second class citizens in the first century, nor are they in the twenty-first. God gives gifts to all, just as He chooses, and we are responsible to Him to use them, for His glory. Of course, there are proper circumstances for that service, as indicated in 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2, and these godly sisters would, no doubt, have used their gift only in appropriate circumstances. Even though I may have a great gift from God, still I have to use it as He directs in accordance with His word. To do otherwise would be simply to serve in my own strength. It is fitting then that the second vocal warning given to Paul comes from a Judean prophet, called Agabus. In almost Old Testament style, he takes Paul's belt and binds his own hands and feet with the warning that so would the owner of the belt be bound at Jerusalem. Paul could have been in no doubt, therefore, that his visit to Jerusalem would not be an easy one. It seems that on hearing this, Paul's companions issue a third warning to avoid going to Jerusalem. It is touching to see that instead of going in a huff, these differences lead to a closer fellowship. They do not fall out with one another but entrust themselves to the will of God. It is all very well being convinced that I am right, and living accordingly, but I should never forget that I might be wrong. Where there are differences amongst believers, we need to display the same character that Paul and his companions show in this chapter.

So it is that Paul eventually comes to Jerusalem. On his missionary journey, Paul had increasingly been seeing non-Jewish converts. From the time the Gospel entered Europe, at Philippi and onwards, more and more Gentiles had been converted to Christ. Obviously, they would bring with them their cultures and pre-Christian manners. All of this would have been quite alien to the strict Jewish upbringing that all of the first Christian converts had experienced. The believers from Jerusalem who shared such a similar background and experience were now faced by tales of believers acting in very different ways. As well as qualms they may have had themselves, we can imagine the criticisms these believing Jews must have received from their non-believing Jewish counterparts. Wasn't this new religion just an excuse to reject all that Moses had given them, and all that had been added to that by way of interpretation? It all amounted to a pretty explosive situation. Paul was urgently called back to Jerusalem and a meeting was arranged with James and all the elders.

The greeting given to Paul and his companions was a warm one. No doubt rumours may have reached the church in Jerusalem that Paul was converting Gentiles and that they were doing things altogether differently from these most Jewish of believers. Still the greeting given is as it should be. Jesus' commandment to "love one another as I have loved you" leaves no room for icy suspicion and cold formality. Then Paul gives a point by point account in detail of the work he has been involved in. There is no desire to hide anything here, to spin the best gloss on events. Paul was not too busy to address the legitimate concerns of his Jerusalem brethren. He gives a full account of all that he had been involved in. No man, or local church, is an island. We are responsible to one another and Paul, realising this, answers fully the concerns of the believers in Jerusalem.

On hearing Paul's account, James and the elders realise that Paul has been describing nothing less than the working of God amongst the Gentiles, and they praise God for it. We find it difficult to understand the enormity of this. These strict Jews, brought up to believe that they, and they alone, were God's chosen people, were now praising God for His work amongst the Gentile nations. For sure, they themselves had turned to Christ, but they were still Jews and this must have gone against their natural instincts. To their credit, they reaffirm that these Gentile believers would not need to conform to an outward show of Judaism, but would merely need to abstain from those things already agreed (see 15:29).

However, from this point on it all seems to unravel. James advises Paul to make an outward show of his Jewish roots. Elsewhere Paul himself could say that he was a Pharisee of the Pharisees; he loved his Jewish blood. But God had called him to minister particularly amongst the Gentiles. No doubt for James' part, what he suggested to Paul was good advice. Why not try to smooth over some ruffled feathers? However, Paul's actions only inflame the hatred of the Jewish leaders all the more. They stir up the crowd to a frenzy, and drag Paul off to kill him.

However, this was certainly not a part of the plan of God, and so Paul is arrested by the Roman commander. There was nothing Paul could do or say, as we see in the next chapter, that could assuage the hostility of the Jewish leaders. There are several similarities between the Lord Himself and Paul in their treatment in Jerusalem. Paul was doomed to fail as he tried to reconcile the irreconcilable. It is simply not possible to maintain that God was working amongst the Gentiles on the one hand, and that nothing had changed on the other, that the Jews alone mattered to God.

It is important in understanding the Bible to draw clear lines between the way God dealt with the Jews, in Judaism, and how He has chosen now to deal with the whole world, in Christianity. Let us be quite clear too, that for the Christian, any form of anti-Semitism is utterly wrong. How badly the church, we as Christians, have failed in this respect, particularly in centuries past. The Jews were God's chosen people, the apple of His eye. Anyone with even the least understanding of the future of this world will realise that once again God will use the nation of Israel to

display His glory, in a most marvellous way. The Jews will once again be “His people”, where before they have been “not His people”. The prophet Hosea shows just how precious Israel is to God. Having said all that, today we live in times when God has chosen to deal with mankind on a totally different basis. As Christians we are not responsible to keep The Law and the Ten Commandments, as the Epistle to the Galatians teaches us. The privileges of Christianity are so much better because of the better work and person of Jesus Christ, as the Epistle to the Hebrews explains. Jesus had some important words to say in John 10:16, “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also (here is a clear reference to the Gentiles). They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one Shepherd”. No longer would God deal with man solely on the basis of his nationality. No! Jesus would come to make Jew and Gentile into one new flock, based upon personal relationship with Him. Those who hear His voice, who accept Him as the shepherd, are His sheep.

But as Paul tries to address the crowd they would not listen. As we move into chapter 22, we see that all Paul has to say is with a Jewish audience in mind. He presents his Jewish credentials as being impeccably orthodox. The high priest and council were witnesses to the fact that he had been active in his persecution of Christians. It is remarkable how Paul can speak so openly about this aspect of his former life. Where we might blush at our former sins, Paul recounts them unashamedly. In just the same way, Peter at Pentecost could accuse his hearers of having denied Jesus, when he was so guilty of such a crime. Here were two men who fully understood the grace of God. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. There is nothing in us that merits God’s forgiveness. Still, God works in our lives and brings complete forgiveness. Those past sins are completely dealt with, and can be held up as examples of the greatness of the grace of God’s salvation. As believers, we must not labour under a false sense of guilt for our past. Jesus has dealt with it completely. We are forgiven, fully, frankly, and brought to a position where we will not face condemnation for our sins.

It is interesting how the appreciation of the vision Paul had on the road to Damascus grows. In chapter 9 he saw a light. Here in chapter 22, it is a great light. When Paul recounts his conversion for a third time, in chapter 26, it is a light brighter than the sun. Does our appreciation of the Lord Jesus grow in such a way? As we look back and see the ways that God has worked in our own lives, there should be a similar increase in our appreciation of Him, and His worthiness.

Jewish law demanded that two or three witnesses establish a fact. Could Paul present such to confirm that he had been sent to the Gentiles? Clearly Ananias, a devout man according to law, was one. Then Paul explains that Christ Himself was another, appearing to him in a trance. At this the Jews would listen no further and they rush at Paul to harm him. So the commander of the Roman guards takes Paul into custody and threatens to scourge him. At this Paul speaks up, and reminds the centurion of his legal rights as a Roman citizen. One who had been born with Roman citizenship, presumably through his father, could not be subjected to scourging without a trial. Paul’s actions here in no way conflict with his instructions to avoid involvement in the legal process in 1 Corinthians 6. God would not have His servants suffer needlessly. Of course, there may be times when we will suffer “for righteousness sake”, and then a calm acceptance of the will of the Lord is called for. Many times Paul did indeed suffer for the Gospel, but here he quietly points out his right as a Roman, and so is spared further punishment. This left the commander in an awkward position, and so to find out for himself why Paul’s presence caused such a commotion, he summons the Sanhedrin, or Jewish council, to a hearing.

Did Paul behave in a manner in keeping with the highest calling of Christianity? His hard words to the High Priest, although perhaps spoken without the knowledge of who he was, are in marked contrast to the silent dignity of the Lord, when He was on trial. On recognising the division in the council between orthodox Pharisee and secular Sadducee, Paul exploits this to his advantage with carefully chosen words. But it all leaves an uneasy taste in the mouth, and it gets him nowhere, other than a return to his cell. How Paul longed to bring the Gospel to his own people, the Jews. His early life fully suited him to this work. But God had sent him as the apostle to the Gentiles, and he had no business here in Jerusalem. How easy it is when we, as Christians, find ourselves in a place, or a situation, where we ought not to be, then fall from the highest standards expected of our faith. It is hard enough to live a Christ – honouring life when we stay close to Him, following His will. It becomes impossible when we follow our own desires.

But let us marvel at the grace of God! In 23:11, when perhaps Paul had reason to be feeling down, we read “But the following night the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.’” When we fail, He never does for He has promised never to leave us nor forsake us. As He had stood to receive Stephen, so now Jesus stands with Paul, in the witness box! Paul would learn that Jesus always has His people where He wants them. For Paul that would mean Rome! For Paul’s nephew it was hearing of the ambush plan that a group of more than forty Jews had hatched to rid themselves of Paul. The young man brings news of the plan to Paul, who sends him with the details to the commander. Do we not learn something of the normal working of God in this? Paul had just been given a promise that he was to go to Rome. He could have said to himself; “faith will get me to Rome”, and done nothing. Instead he uses his common sense, and has the commander informed of the ambush plan. So it is dealt with mundanely, using the ordinary human process - hardly miraculous, nor very spectacular but eminently effective. We are to use our ordinary abilities and wisdom in the service of our Saviour,

for these are the usual means of seeing God at work in the world today. It is pride and my sinful flesh that always looks for the miraculous or spectacular.

So Paul is sent to Caesarea, to the governor Felix, to stand trial. With him goes a letter from the commander in Jerusalem explaining the facts of the case. Perhaps the commander employed his own spin-doctor, for the letter paints a very favourable, though not altogether truthful account. Little did the commander realise that his lies would be in print for over 2,000 years for all to see! But then nothing is hidden before God. How foolish we are if we think that God does not know about everything that we say, do or think.

So Paul is left at Caesarea awaiting his accusers, a prisoner of Rome, a bond slave of Christ. He would learn that it was the latter that ordered his life, as he travelled the road that led to Rome, and to martyrdom.

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