

### THE BOOK OF ACTS

#### Lesson 48, Chapters 21 and 22

We'll continue in Acts 21 and then finish up in Acts 22 today.

When we left Paul he was in Jerusalem to celebrate Shavuot after spending many years of establishing Believing congregations in Macedonia and Asia. He had just begun to perform the ritual purification procedures that James (Yeshua's half-brother), the supreme leader of The Way, had instructed him to do. Beginning in Acts 21:20 through verse 24 James explains that Paul is to pay for, and participate in, the vow offerings and all other elements needed for 4 Believers who are under a Nazarite vow to bring their vows to the proper termination. The purpose of this exhibition is for Paul to publically demonstrate his fidelity and devotion to **Halakhah** (Jewish Law) because many Judean Jews have been convinced that Paul has abandoned his Jewishness, ceased following the Law, is telling others to do so and thus has apostatized from Judaism. Since Paul has been operating strictly in the foreign nations of the Diaspora, these slanderous rumors about Paul's anti-Law and anti-Jewish teaching have been brought to Jerusalem by Diaspora Jews traveling there for the various pilgrimage festivals.

Verse 26 explains that Paul did exactly what James suggested. One might reason that any Christian would read this passage and immediately understand that Paul followed the Law just as he has claimed on several occasions that he does. Yet what we find with most of the early Church Fathers, especially those who were affiliated with the Rome-based Church leadership council, is that they insist that while Paul indeed did what James told him to do he did so only under duress and was entirely insincere about it. Some of the Church Fathers, like Chrysostom, go so far as to claim that Paul was merely playing the role of a good law-abiding Jew but in fact it was all a planned deception that God had designed for him. And the purpose of the deception is so that Jews would give Paul an audience for him to speak the Gospel to them. Thus, to put it nicely, Paul was just pretending to be a Believing Jew who followed the Law in order that he would have more opportunities to spread the Good News.

I profoundly condemn such a false and agenda-driven interpretation; it is a doctrine that many mainstream Christian denominations still adhere to in our day. The only way one can draw such a strange conclusion is if one begins from the Church doctrine that Paul was anti-Law (even anti-Jewish to some degree) and insists on reading that premise back into the Scriptures; because otherwise it is simply not there.

Paul and the 4 Believers purified themselves (meaning they immersed in a **mikveh**). Then they went to an outer court of the Temple where they reported their purification to a priest; it was verified that they could now enter a 7 day waiting period after which they were considered ritually pure enough to bring their vow sacrifices to the altar. But just before the 7 day period ended, some unbelieving Jews from Asia who were in Jerusalem for Shavuot spotted Paul, recognized him, and grabbed him while shouting out for support from the crowd. They accused him of teaching people not to obey the Law, and to have no regard for the Temple. Further

they claim he has brought some gentiles into the Temple, no doubt meaning he took these gentiles into areas that were off limits to them. Thus Paul had knowingly and intentionally caused the Temple to be defiled. Verse 29 explains that these visiting Jews had seen a fellow named Trophimus, a resident of Ephesus, accompanying Paul in Jerusalem and assumed (wrongly) that Paul had allowed this gentile into the Temple. It must be understood that in Jewish Law such a thing was forbidden and was cause for execution of the perpetrator; even a Roman citizen was not exempt from such a severe consequence for trespassing into the holy precincts of the Temple.

It is interesting to note that the Jews were so rigid on this issue of Temple defilement by gentiles that notices were posted and barriers installed to keep the thousands of gentiles who entered the Temple to site-see from even accidentally wandering into the inner courts. The signs were written in both Greek and Latin so no excuse could be made for gentiles trespassing upon such holy grounds. This is not speculation; in the late 1800's archeologists uncovered an ancient sign on the Temple Mount that read:

***“No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Any one who is caught trespassing will bear personal responsibility for his ensuing death”.***

Let's re-read the final few verses of Acts chapter 21.

### **RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 21:26 – end**

Let's be clear: every last accusation against Paul was a lie. He did not teach against the Jewish people; he did not teach against the Law, and he did not teach against the Temple. Further he did not bring some ***goyim*** (gentiles) into the Temple and thus did not defile it. But of course due to the zealous nature of Judean Jews, and due to the humiliating occupation by the Romans of the Holy Land, these were the exact accusations against someone that would have aroused the quickest and most volcanic emotional outburst among Jews. Let us not forget that this was happening during the holy Biblical Feast of Shavuot so the feelings of religious piety among the Jews were all the more heightened. It wasn't going to take much of a spark to set off riots, thus the local Roman military garrison that was co-located with the Temple Mount (in the northwest corner of the walled area) was on special alert during these Jewish holy days.

Verse 31 explains that the crowd quickly swelled in size and agitation as Paul was forcefully dragged out of the Temple and the gates shut behind him; the mob intended to kill him. Why not just kill him immediately instead of dragging him outside the Temple courts? Because death is the worst sort of defilement and so it was illegal to kill anyone inside the Temple grounds. The Roman soldiers stationed at the Antonia Fortress spotted the turbulence, reacted quickly and they showed up in a nick of time to rescue Paul. The fortress was connected to the Temple Mount with only 2 flights of steps so that the Roman guards could rapidly respond to any threat. Interestingly it was Herod the Great who had built the fortress, had it manned with Roman soldiers, and then he named it after his patron, Mark Antony. Clearly the point of building the fortress there on the Temple Mount was to discourage the riots and disturbances that happened regularly in the Temple area. Civil disorder was not tolerated by Rome; and so

the Roman guard descended upon the mob in force and the mob quit beating Paul.

The commander of the troops at this time was a tribune named Claudius Lysias and he personally took charge of the situation to restore order. Since Sha'ul was the focus of the crowd's anger, he was taken into custody. Paul was shackled and Lysias decided to take him back to the barracks for interrogation. But before he led Paul away he asked the mob to explain the problem. Everyone shouted something different and so he made no progress in ascertaining the charges against Paul. As the soldiers started to head back to the barracks the crowd erupted and the garrison literally had to carry Paul to protect him from continuing to be assaulted.

Lysias was going to have to get to the truth by other means, and that meant persuading Paul to tell him. Of course Paul was explaining that he had done nothing wrong; something that Lysias couldn't accept given the circumstances. Inside the fortress Paul spoke Greek to Lysias as he asked to have a word with him. Having begun life as a Diaspora Jew, Greek was Paul's first language. This surprised the commander because he was certain that he had just arrested a notorious troublemaker and wanted man known simply as "the Egyptian". Apparently it was known that the Egyptian didn't speak Greek, so Paul could not have been him. Josephus speaks about the Egyptian; apparently he came to Jerusalem perhaps 3 years earlier. This charismatic leader managed to nearly overnight cobble together about 4,000 followers (likely these were mostly members of the Zealots and of the dreaded Jewish assassins called the Sicarri). He talked them into going to the Mt. of Olives and waiting because at the appropriate moment the walls of Jerusalem were going to miraculously fall down (similar to the Jericho scenario), and then they'd be able to rush in and push the Roman troops out.

However the Roman governor got wind of this plan and sent some soldiers against them; many of the Egyptian's followers were killed and many more taken prisoner. Needless to say the enormous limestone walls of Jerusalem remained intact, but the Egyptian was nowhere to be found. No doubt had he resurfaced those Jews he had abandoned would have been none too happy to see him. Apparently Lysias figured that Paul must have been the mysterious Egyptian since the feelings against him were so strong. The Egyptian couldn't speak Greek, but Paul could; so Lysias knew he had the wrong man.

Paul now had the opening to explain just who he was and he starts with the fact that he was from Tarsus, a well known city in Cilicia. And would the tribune give Paul permission to speak to the crowd? Still trying to figure out just what crime Paul had committed, Lysias saw no harm in Paul's request. Although the CJB says that Paul addressed the mob in Hebrew, that's not quite the case; rather the verse says Paul spoke in the Hebrew language. What this means to convey is "the language that the Hebrews spoke". The question is: what language did the Hebrews speak? All current scholarship on the issue of language in the Holy Land is that Aramaic was the most universally spoken. However Hebrew was also widely used and the two languages are quite similar. So we can't be certain whether Paul spoke Hebrew or Aramaic to the crowd.

Let's move on to chapter 22.

### READ ACTS CHAPTER 22 all

I would like to pause for a few moments to interject a personal viewpoint. As I was studying and reading this chapter I thought to myself what a terrible state of agitation and anger that the Jews constantly lived under in Jerusalem because they were surrounded with immorality, idolatry, and the stench of ritual uncleanness brought on by the presence of the brutal Roman soldiers trampling upon the Jews' holiest places. There was never a moment of true peace of mind. The Jews' highest religious authority, the Priesthood, had become corrupt and it was operated to the benefit of wealthy Jewish aristocrats who were in league with their Roman occupiers. And then there were the throngs of curious gentiles who regularly visited Jerusalem in ever increasing numbers since the days that Rome had made Judea a Roman province, and bringing with them all manner of ritual impurities caused by their paganism. It made me think about the state of the world, and of the USA in particular, in these early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We live in such an angry, frustrated, polarized society. It doesn't take much to touch off riots, assaults and murders, or even acts of terrorism or road rage. Confusion and chaos abound; what is right? What is wrong? Things feel like they are spinning out of control. So many of our deepest hopes seem unattainable, and our cherished traditions are under constant attack and revision.

Those of us who adhere to some form of Orthodox Judaism or fundamental Christianity find ourselves at serious odds with our government, public schools, and of late our secular culture in general. It seems that some new sort of legislated immorality, degradation or ungodly social policy arrives every day, and when we refuse to knuckle under we are deemed intolerant bigots and religious nuts that are full of hatred. Home schooling is expanding rapidly as dedicated parents remove their children from a school environment that bans God but embraces the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender) agenda and teaches it to our children as a good, loving and admirable thing. People are leaving our churches and synagogues as more and more Pastors and Rabbis embrace the mantras and philosophies of the secular Progressive agenda.

When I read these passages of Acts 22 I found myself identifying with those Jews who attacked Paul. They had been told, and they believed, that Paul had joined the enemy (the gentiles) and was teaching other Jews to abandon their heritage, their traditions, their religion and their long held values. Some Jews didn't care one way or the other and took it mostly in stride. But the ones who strove to diligently follow God and to be obedient to Him, and those who loved their Israelite heritage and customs, could take it no longer and they took strong action against a man who they thought to be symbolic of traitorous Jews who were deserting their Hebrew values and adopting Roman culture. Was it a wise or justifiable action on their part? Was it something that God would have wanted them to do? I think the answer to both of these questions is "no". But at some point even the best among us can be pushed beyond the breaking point. It's what we do about it that matters.

I present this to you for three reasons: 1) to help you mentally picture the context of this mob action against Paul. 2) to look with a bit less disfavor upon the crowd of Jews (that had been fed false information about Paul) and to better understand the impossible circumstances that the Jewish followers of God were forced to live under. And 3) to think carefully about how you

should react, as a Believer, to all that is happening around us today, which has real parallels to what was going on in Paul's day.

Paul stood on the upper steps of the Antonia Fortress with Roman soldiers next to him as he was given permission to speak to the mob who had intended to kill him. And speaking in either Aramaic or Hebrew he began by using the same words that the martyr Stephen had used in his own defense. Paul addresses the people as "brothers and fathers". Brothers of course are speaking of a mutual heritage as Jews. Fathers (**avot** in Hebrew) is speaking to the elders and important people among the crowd. The crowd grew quiet to hear what else Paul had to say.

Paul's speech begins by explaining who he is and where he fits in traditional Jewish society. His purpose is to build a foundation to refute what these people have been told about him as he well understands their sensitivities. He presents his credentials as a natural-born Hebrew by saying that he indeed is a Jew. Explaining that he was born in Tarsus tells the Judean Jews (that forms the bulk of the crowd) that he is a Diaspora Jew. Even so, he immediately adds that he spent a good deal of his upbringing right here in Jerusalem and was taught by the highly venerated teacher Gamaliel. This identified Paul as not only having been immersed into the unique Holy Land Jewish culture but also as highly educated. It also identifies Paul as a Pharisee, which is what most of the common people were (if they carried any party affiliation at all). Remember: it was Pharisees who ran the synagogues and virtually everyone present would have belonged to one synagogue or another. So this tells the crowd that his fundamental theological doctrines were essentially the same as theirs.

Paul says that he was well educated in the details of the Torah of their fathers (in Greek it says in the **nomos**, the law, of their fathers). By adding in the words "of our fathers" he means it in the sense of forefathers (not of the "fathers" that are in his audience). So he is more referring to the Law of Moses than he is to **Halakhah** (Jewish Law). Paul is claiming to be a Torah scholar.

He then goes on to explain about a dark side to his life, but one that the crowd would not have found so distasteful. He explains that at first he was a persecutor of The Way. The tone in which Luke writes this account makes it clear that by now the existence of the sect of Judaism known as The Way was common knowledge (the sect had existed for around 25 years). And no doubt the basics of what this sect believed (that Yeshua was the Messiah) was also common knowledge. He also explains that his persecution of The Way was accomplished on an official basis with the backing of the High Priest and the Sanhedrin. Most Bibles will say Council of Elders and not Sanhedrin; but because Paul mentioned the High Priest along with the Council of Elders then because the High Priest is the head of the Sanhedrin for sure this is what Paul is referring to. So the mere fact that Paul was a representative of the Sanhedrin is further proof of his devotion to Jewishness and Judaism (and the High Priest himself could testify to the truth of this).

Now that Paul has made his case that he is not only "one of them", but he is actually in the upper ranks of Judaism and among the most zealous of religious Jews, in verse 5 he starts to tell the story of his encounter with the risen Christ. As he was pursuing some fleeing members of The Way he received letters of authorization as an agent directly working for the High Priest,

to go to Damascus to find and arrest any Believers he encountered and to bring them back to Jerusalem for prosecution. But on the road to Damascus something startling happened to him. A blinding light appeared on the roadway that he and his traveling companions saw. It flashed all around the group and as Paul fell to the ground, disoriented, he heard a voice from above speaking to him. It said, "Why are you persecuting me?" Paul, not knowing whose voice it was, asked for some ID. The response was equally as disorienting: "I am Yeshua from Nazareth and you are persecuting me!" Paul says that the witnesses to all this indeed were also stunned by the brilliance of the light; they heard Paul speaking but they didn't see who it was that Paul was speaking to nor did they hear any kind of reply. Paul believed that what was happening was real, and that the person who was talking to him was actually Yeshua of Nazareth; a man he well knew had died on a Roman execution stake. What he believed beyond that is unknown to us.

The voice then issued an instruction: "Get up and go into Damascus and there you will be told what your mission is going to be". Wow. Can you imagine? All in one breath you are saved and told that shortly someone is going to tell you what God's purpose for your life is. Paul is still blind from the bright light, but he goes, led by the hand, to Damascus. There a man named Hananyah would restore Paul's sight and gave him his marching orders as God's prophet. A sort of parenthetical comment in verse 12 says that Hananyah was "an observant follower of the Torah"; this is something we must not pass by. Hananyah was obviously a Believer; but he was also an observant Jew who continued to follow the Law. So in this chapter 22 we have Paul professing to be zealous for the Law, and we have the man whom Christ used to tell Paul his mission, Hananyah, who is also zealous for the Law. I think it is difficult to find the Book of Acts, thus far, as telling modern Believers that the Law is bad, dead, and irrelevant. Rather Luke clearly meant for us to know that Paul's commission that Yeshua said he would receive, was given through the mouth of a pious, Torah observant, Believing Jew.

We are told that Hananyah was highly regarded by the Jewish community in Damascus; no doubt it was because of his devotion to the Law. But now Hananyah says something that is easy to overlook; it is that "the God of our fathers" was the one who determined in advance that Paul should know God's will for his life. So it was the Father, YHWH, who determined in advance that Paul would know God's will for his life. We now have both God the Father and Yeshua the Son playing roles in this story, and they are separately spoken of in Acts 22. Hananyah also tells Paul that he will hear directly, audibly, from the Righteous One (the **Tzaddik** in Hebrew).

This term the Righteous One is unusual; we only find it in a couple of places in the Bible, and outside of Acts I could only find it used once in Proverbs and twice in the Book of Isaiah. What is fascinating is that the Essenes, the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls, spoke regularly in their Community Documents about the expected coming of the Righteous One. Damascus was the headquarters, outside of the Holy Land, for the Essenes (a faction of Judaism). It is also fair to say that when the theology of the Essenes is carefully studied it has many similarities to the theology of the Pharisees. So I think with Hananyah's use of the term "The Righteous One" we are hearing overtones of Essene theology and terminology and very probably Hananyah studied with the Essenes in Damascus (as, it seems, did the John the Baptist as well, but in Qumran by the Dead Sea and not in Damascus). There is not a shred of doubt in my mind that

Yeshua spent time with the Essenes as we find Him using terms in His Sermon on the Mount that not only were regularly used within the Essene community, but even a couple of unique terms that the Essenes used to refer to themselves (such as “the meek” and “the poor in spirit”).

Paul is told that he is going to be a witness to everything he has seen and heard. No doubt we do not have recorded for us everything that he has seen and heard. So Hananyah instructs Paul to immerse himself. Self-immersion was the standard Jewish practice for immersion (baptizing), rather than someone immersing them. Upon this immersion in Yeshua’s name, Paul will have his sins washed away and therefore be prepared for his mission. Christ is now the new, dominant force in Paul’s life.

In verse 17 Paul advances his story to when he left Damascus and came back to Jerusalem. He says he was praying in the Temple when he went into a trance. This is probably referring to when he came back to Jerusalem in Acts 9:26. Notice how he weaves in the matter of the Temple because, recall, he had been accused of speaking against it. Here he is venerating the Temple by praying there, and God validates Paul’s pious prayers by giving him a vision. This information would have greatly impressed Paul’s listeners. Paul also says that he saw “him” (God) and God told him to hurry and leave Jerusalem because the Jews there won’t accept what Paul learned and experienced in Damascus. Who, exactly, did Paul claim to see? God the Father or God the Son? In what form? It is unclear.

Paul attempted to convince the Lord to allow him to stay in Jerusalem by saying that the people would know who he is and therefore be more easily convinced that the sudden change in his negative attitude and antagonism towards Yeshua and The Way had to have been caused by divine intervention. So perhaps they’d be more open to hearing from him. But the opposite happened; the Lord of course was proved right. By knowing who Paul was before he turned to Yeshua, it made the Believing Jews too afraid of him to accept him, and it made the Hellenist Jews want to kill him! And Paul confesses to the crowd that he was far more than an innocent bystander in the death of Stephen. Even though Paul didn’t directly participate in stoning Stephen, he helped those who did by holding their cloaks. And, admits Paul, he was in full agreement with the killing of Stephen. God was having none of it; “be on your way” He tells Paul; Paul is going far away to foreign lands to witness to Gentiles.

Apparently the last word out of Paul’s mouth before the crowd again exploded into incensed hysteria was “gentiles”. The idea that Paul would take a means of salvation and deliverance to the enemy of the Jews (gentiles), and that a Jewish Savior would be their means of salvation (whether or not the crowd even accepted such a thought), was just too much. Verse 22 makes it clear that the primary issue was that the mob wanted him dead because of his association with gentiles. These oppressed Jews couldn’t stomach the notion that God would give gentiles equality with the Jews on account of His Messiah; there was just too much hatred against gentiles to accept such a thing. Some began tearing at their clothing; some ripped off part of their garments and waved them in the air; we’re told that they began to fling dust. It is quite impossible to determine with any certainty what this dust flinging was about. Either it was throwing dirt because they didn’t have any rocks handy to pelt Paul with; or it was a show of grief and devastation (a rather standard Jewish mourning tradition) over Paul consorting with

gentiles. Perhaps it meant something else entirely.

Seeing the crowd grow unruly again, Lysias had Paul brought inside the fortress with the intent to flog him in order to obtain the truth of Paul's offense. So far all Lysias knew was that Paul was not the Egyptian and that whatever it was that Paul had done it was serious enough that a huge crowd was willing to risk Roman wrath coming down upon them for their civil disturbance. It needs to be said that the type of flogging that the Romans inflicted upon a prisoner often as not resulted in death. It was not a whip, like we might picture. Rather the device is called a scourge (a flagellum). It was not an instrument of discipline, but rather of torture. It consisted of a wooden handle with long leather thongs, and bits of sharpened metal or bone attached at the ends. It tore at the flesh and the muscle tissue, causing intense bleeding. If one survived it, they were usually disabled for life.

The good news is that this was a form of treatment from which Roman citizens were exempt. So after being silent about it to this point, and as he was being stretched out and tied down for the whipping to begin, in verse 25 Paul asks a rhetorical question of one of his guards: "is it lawful for you to flog a Roman citizen who has received no proper trial?" The preparation came to a sudden halt, and the guard went to commander Lysias and informed him that Paul claimed he was a Roman citizen. Of course the Roman soldiers knew it was not legal for a Roman citizen to be flogged without a trial, and so Lysias asked Paul if it was true. Paul replied that it was. The commander made an odd response; he said that his citizenship cost him a great deal of money. The implication was: how could this poor Jew have enough money to buy citizenship? But Paul coolly replied that he was born into Roman citizenship (he didn't have to buy it). This meant that Paul's father was a Roman citizen (unusual for a Jew).

The result was that the soldiers immediately stopped what they were doing, and even removed Paul's chains, because they had come perilously close to big trouble. Had they done this to Paul, Roman law would have required that the soldiers have the same done to them. The problem is that the commander still doesn't know what it is that Paul did to cause this mob action. So he put Paul into a cell, without any shackles, and asked for the Sanhedrin to convene so that they could question him.

One final comment. At this particular time Judea was without a procurator (a provincial governor). For the moment, because he was the senior military man in Jerusalem, Lysias had nearly the authority of a procurator. So when he orders that the Sanhedrin is to meet, they have no choice.

We'll begin Acts chapter 23 next time as Paul is taken to the Sanhedrin for questioning.