

FOLLOWING INSTRUCTIONS

A LOOK AT THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

Acts 21:18 – 26:42

We are approaching the end of the Acts of the Apostles. Paul has arrived back in Jerusalem, and gives James and the church leadership a full account of his mission exploits over the last few years. They were thrilled, but the tensions between the Jewish and Gentile parties which prompted the Council of Jerusalem are still in evidence. Therefore the Jewish leaders encourage Paul to be seen to be fully participating in the Jewish purification rites (by supporting four men who have taken a vow) in order that there can be no grounds for objections to his Jewish credentials.

This act teaches us a lot about both the church and Paul.

The leaders in Jerusalem were concerned about Paul's reputation. They knew he was not anti-Jewish. They recommended that the best thing for him to do was to engage in an act of good faith: a ritual purification ceremony. The leaders were sure that this display of "good faith" would show the Jews that Paul was not anti-Jewish.

There are many who question whether Paul should have agreed to this arrangement. They see it as a compromise. It is true that Paul did not believe that any of these things were necessary for salvation. He believed and taught that we have been delivered from the law. However, Paul didn't think these things were wrong in themselves. They were only wrong if we saw them as being essential to get to Heaven. To do these things that were asked would not deny the gospel of grace or contradict the Word of God. These were optional things.

To Paul, the most important thing was the gospel. It was so important that he was willing to give up his own personal freedoms if that would open a door for someone else. He was willing to humble himself, to incur personal expense, and even to risk his own life if that is what was needed to open a door for someone to see the truth of the gospel.

Paul's example is convicting. It reminds us that we should care more about the gospel than we do about our personal preferences or conveniences. It is much more important that the gospel be proclaimed than whether or not our way of doing things is affirmed.

Paul hadn't been in Jerusalem for long when he was recognized by some Jews from Asia Minor, who stirred up a riot, claiming that he had spoken against the Jewish religion. This caused him to be arrested, and the next four chapters outline the saga of Paul's time under arrest.

The Roman commander gives him the opportunity to address the crowd, who are not convinced by him, and when he is sentenced to be flogged, he claims his rights as a Roman citizen. The commander, feeling well out of his depth, sends Paul to the Sanhedrin, probably hoping that they could resolve this internal 'Jewish' religious affair. But Paul's nephew has to intervene, asking the Romans to take Paul back into custody for his own protection. Paul is next transferred to Caesarea, where he makes his case to the Roman governor. He is kept under house arrest for a further two years until a new governor takes office, and having made his defence once again, appeals to Caesar.

But before he can be sent to Rome, King Agrippa, visits Caesarea, and he too listens to Paul's defence. Agrippa II was the Jewish 'puppet' king of the region. He came to welcome Festus as the new governor. Paul told Agrippa about his past, his conversion, and his message. He grew up as a Pharisee, one of the most law-honouring groups in Judaism. He was focused on obeying the law and eager for the coming of the Messiah. At one time, he believed Christians were a cult to be opposed. Paul put believers in jail and participated in their execution.

But following his conversion, Paul did what he was told and went to the Gentiles and told them that they should: repent (or recognize, and turn from their sin); turn to God (for the forgiveness that can come only through Jesus Christ who suffered, died, and rose for our sin v. 23); and live new lives (as a result of the new life found through God's Spirit) thus proving that their repentance and new life was genuine.

Paul argues that this is not a new religion . . . but the fulfilment of everything spoken of in the law and the prophets. Jesus is the fulfilment of the Jewish faith!

Even Agrippa can find nothing wrong with Paul, but because he has appealed to Caesar, he must now be sent to Rome.

The accounts in these chapters do appear to be somewhat drawn out and tedious. We may well wonder why Paul's conversion experience is recorded twice. But imagine how Paul himself must have felt. He was in jail for several days in Jerusalem, five days before he appeared before Felix, and he was in jail under Felix for two years before Festus replaced him. Festus, to his credit brought Paul to trial within two weeks of taking office.

Paul told the Governor that he was willing to be punished if he had done something illegal. However, he was innocent. Rather than agree to another change in venue he took advantage of a right given to every Roman citizen; he appealed his case to Caesar himself. This is the Roman equivalent of us taking our grievance to the European Court.

Paul makes a strong case for Christianity. If we examine the evidence, we too will discover that God makes a reasonable claim upon our lives. Christianity 'makes sense'.