

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

(2)



The Council of Jerusalem (15:1-35)

The Council of Jerusalem was a meeting of the Apostles and church elders to discuss Paul's recent visit to Antioch where he ate with Gentile Christians. News of Peter freely associating with Gentile Christians reached the Jerusalem elders who then persuaded Peter to withdraw from such common meals (Galatians 2:11-13). However Paul saw nothing wrong with Peter eating with newly converted Gentiles, and told him that his withdrawal would “**compel the Gentiles to live like Jews**” *before* becoming Christians (Galatians 2:14). Complicating matters was the belief that to relax the Mosaic Law for Gentiles would result in a large number of Gentile converts; and Jewish Christians feared that so many recent converts from paganism would weaken the Church's moral integrity.

The difficulty was that Jewish Christians had to find a way to live with Gentile Christians. This issue struck at the very heart of the early Church. For if Gentile Christians (such as the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius) truly believed in Christ, why should they still submit to the law of Moses?

Eventually, “**after there had been much debate**” (15:7), a compromise was reached. While Jewish Christians were free to maintain certain traditions of the Mosaic law, Gentile Christians were free to maintain different forms of worship, provided that they accept the saving experience of God through faith in Jesus. For example, Gentile converts to Christianity need not be circumcised. However regarding food, Gentile Christians must consider the consciences of the Jewish Christians when choosing which foods they ate. In all, the Council at Jerusalem concluded that the rituals and practices of the Mosaic Law were no longer essential for converts to Christianity.

Paul leaves Antioch without Mark & Barnabas; Silas joins Paul (15:36-16:15)

Paul parts company with Barnabas and Mark because Barnabas wants Mark to accompany them to Cyprus and Anatolia. Paul rejects this suggestion because Mark had earlier abandoned Paul in Perga and returned to Jerusalem. As a result, Barnabas and Mark together travel to Cyprus.

Meanwhile Paul takes Silas, who is also a Roman citizen, and goes to Lystra where they pick up Timothy, the son of a Jewish mother. Since Timothy is uncircumcised, he is technically an apostate Jew. If Paul is to maintain his links with the synagogue, Timothy must be circumcised.

Paul and Silas imprisoned (16:16-24)

In Philippi Paul exorcises a “pythoness” (a woman who practices divination) slave girl who had become a profitable fortune-teller for her owners; however they have now lost their business due to Paul and Silas preaching the gospel. The slave owners denounce Paul and Silas before the magistrates for “**disturbing our city**” (16:20). Paul and Silas are stripped, beaten with rods and

imprisoned. Overnight an earthquake enables Paul and Silas to escape, which leads to their jailer's and his family's conversion.

“Lictors” (rod-carriers) were officials of the chief magistrate in Rome, who cleared the magistrate's way through crowds and punished offenders. They carried bundles of rods (including an axe inserted within) to compel both respect and fear.

Arrival at Thessalonica (17:1-4)

In Thessalonica Paul attracts a large number of converts which infuriates the Jews, who then incite a mob against Paul and his companions. Leaving Thessalonica Paul and Silas make their way to Beroea, about forty miles southwest. Years later faithful Christians would proudly call themselves “Beroeans” after their example of great faith and enthusiasm for the gospel.

Athens (17:16-34)

Arriving in Athens Paul is viewed by the elites as nothing more than a “seed picker” or “gutter sparrow;” that is, a type of wandering peddler of religion that was common then in Athens. Paul admits to being impressed by Athenian religiosity, but this is not meant to be complementary; it was forbidden to offer complements before the Court of the Areopagus, which could be interpreted as seeking a favor. Paul ends his speech with the Resurrection of Jesus. Until then, most of Paul's listeners would have agreed with him about the immortality of the soul, but not bodily resurrection. Instead the Athenians would have invoked their god Apollo: “*Once a man dies and the earth drinks up his blood, there is no resurrection.*” After being politely dismissed, Paul leaves for Corinth.

Corinth; Paul before Gallio; hasty visit to Ephesus; Apollos (18:1-28)

In Corinth Paul meets the married couple Aquila and Priscilla who, like Paul, are tentmakers. Aquila and Priscilla were in Corinth because the Emperor had expelled all Jews from Rome, believing they were instigating constant riots in the name of “Chrestus” (believed to refer to Jesus).

Eighteen months later the Jews bring Paul before Gallio the proconsul (Roman official) and charge him with propagating a religion that was not of Judaism and not approved by Rome. However Gallio dismisses the charge because he sees it as an internal Jewish matter; that what Paul was preaching was simply a variety of Judaism. Paul leaves Corinth with Priscilla and Aquila and arrives at Ephesus.

In Ephesus Paul meets Apollos, a Jew from Alexandria who knows only the baptism of John the Baptist. Yet despite this, Apollos has great knowledge of the Scriptures and is an effective preacher of the word. Priscilla and Aquila give Apollos further instruction in the faith.

Paul and the twelve disciples of Ephesus; lecture hall of Tyrannus (19:1-10)

In Ephesus Paul meets a dozen men that he assumes are baptized, but in fact are, like Apollos, not baptized. Paul lays hands on them and they receive the Spirit.

Paul continues to teach in the synagogues, but soon the authorities forbid this. Then Tyrannus, a local teacher, invites Paul to use his lecture hall. For the next two years Paul spends his morning hours making tents (20:34), and the rest of the day preaching the gospel.

Conflict with the magicians (19:11-19)

Ephesus was the center of the magic arts where Jewish exorcists in particular were thought to have the most effective spells. The reason is, Jews do not invoke the name of God; so pagans believed that God's “secret” name held special powers. Thus when local magicians try to imitate Paul's use of the name of Jesus, this only invites a demonic assault upon them. As a result, other Ephesian “diviners,” Jew and Gentile, confess to Paul and renounce their sorcery.

Riot in Ephesus; Paul leaves for Macedonia and Achaia; Paul at Troas (19:21-20:12)

Two and a half years follow and Christianity has a firm foothold in the young churches of Asia. Paul visits his friends in Macedonia and Achaia, and then goes to Jerusalem.

Meanwhile in Ephesus is Demetrius, who with his guild of silversmiths sell “souvenirs” of the god Artemis. Demetrius persuades his fellow guild members to stage a mass protest against the Christian “propaganda” that threatens their business. The silversmiths run into the open street proclaiming, “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

Fearing reprisals because of Judaism’s own condemnation of graven images, the Jews make clear they have nothing to do with the present trouble. And the town clerk, who is responsible for public order, reassures the crowd that the fame and majesty of Artemis were not violated.

After the mob disperses, Paul heads to Corinth from where he will send his letter to the Christians in Rome. Note: Paul’s reference to the “breaking of the bread” in 20:7, is the earliest text we have of Christians coming together for the Eucharist.

Arrival at Jerusalem (21:15-16)

In Jerusalem Paul is rumored not only to have refused to require Gentile converts to follow Jewish law, but that he actually dissuaded Jewish Christians from their ancestral customs. In fact, when in mixed Jewish and Gentile society, Paul conducts himself as he thinks each situation warrants. With this rumor dispelled, the Jerusalem elders still wish to challenge Paul to make clear that he does not teach the abandonment of Jewish customs. Paul accepts their challenge to join in the vow of four Nazarite men so as to reassure the elders of his orthodoxy: “**To the Jews I became as a Jew in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law—though not being myself under the law—that I might win those under the law**” (1 Corinthians 9:20).

Riot in the temple (21:27-30)

After Paul completes his ritual purification in the Temple’s Court of Israel, a riot breaks out in the Temple courts. Among the Gentile friends who are with Paul is Trophimus, from Ephesus. The problem is that Jews from Asia believe that Trophimus has accompanied Paul into the Temple’s sacred courts. Gentiles may visit the outer court of the Temple, but they were absolutely forbidden to enter any of the inner courts on pain of death. In fact, Rome authorized the death penalty for such trespassers even when the offenders were Roman citizens. To prevent this, signs were fixed to the barriers of the outer court: “*No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple enclosure. Anyone who is caught trespassing will bear personal responsibility for his ensuing death.*” The crowd drags Paul down the Temple steps into the outer court.

Rescued by the Romans; Paul is permitted to address the crowd (21:31-22:21)

In the outer court Paul is fiercely attacked by the mob until the Roman garrison intervenes. Paul is permitted to speak to the crowd in Aramaic about his strictly orthodox Jewish upbringing and his conversion experience. The crowd listens patiently until he mentions his mission to the Gentiles, which only renews their furious outcry. Since Paul was speaking in Aramaic, which the Tribune (Roman official or “peace officer”) does not understand, the Tribune decides to interrogate Paul himself and orders him to be flogged.

Paul before the Sanhedrin and at Caesarea to face accusations (22:30-24:21)

The next day Paul is brought before the Sanhedrin where he testifies, “**I am a Pharisee, my forebearers were Pharisees, and the charge in which I am now being examined concerns the national hope, which depends for its fulfillment on the resurrection of the dead**” (23:6). With these words Paul is saying the Sanhedrin should agree that the ancestral hope of Israel is bound up

with the resurrection of the dead. Paul says this hope was fulfilled in Jesus who, less than thirty years prior, was raised from the dead. The Sadducee members of the court are enraged at this public invocation of what in their eyes is a lately invented heresy.

Escaping another plot to kill him, Paul leaves for Caesarea where the high priest Ananias, elders, and the Roman prosecuting attorney, Tertullus, state their case against him before Felix the procurator (sixteen years after Pontius Pilate). Tertullus charges Paul with being a fomenter of insurrection among the Jews, a ringleader of the Nazarene sect, and a man who has attempted to violate the sanctity of the Temple. In the end, Paul's strongest defense is that his accusers—Jews from Asia—have not even bothered to be present (24:18-19). Thus the only charge that can be made against him is the question of the resurrection of the dead—in other words, no crime at all.

Paul's interview with Felix (24:24-26)

With Paul in custody, Felix takes the opportunity to improve his knowledge of "the Way." But Felix is soon frustrated by Paul's talk of "justice and self-control and future judgment." In any event, Felix is suddenly recalled to Rome and his successor, Festus, keeps Paul in prison.

Paul appeals to Caesar (25:1-32)

Between the Sanhedrin's charges and Paul's denials, Festus is at a loss. So Festus agrees to have Paul tried in Jerusalem since the charge is the violation of the Temple's sanctity. But Paul believes this will put him again in jeopardy; for Festus was a novice and his lack of experience might be exploited by the Sanhedrin. So as a Roman citizen there is one way left open to Paul. Since the foundation of the Republic in 509 B.C., Romans citizens had the right of appeal to the Emperor. Paul declares, "**I appeal to Caesar**" (25:11).

In sending Paul to Rome Festus must also send his report. To do so Festus knows he will need a better grasp of the issues. Fortunately King Herod Agrippa II, an expert on Jewish religious matters, arrives on a complementary visit to congratulate the new procurator.

Paul defends himself before King Herod Agrippa (26:1-23)

Paul's defense is that neither his manner of life nor his teaching should cause issues because his hope has been that God would keep His promise; that He would one day deliver his people as He did when they were slaves in Egypt. So why should the Jews think it incredible that God would in fact honor their hope by raising Jesus from the dead? Of course what they object to is not Paul's announcement that the prophecies have been fulfilled, but the *terms* in which he announced it: a law-free gospel that removes the religious barrier between Jews and Gentiles.

For Paul the logic of his argument is so plain that he can scarcely imagine how King Agrippa can fail to accept the obvious conclusion. Paul asks the king, "**King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe**" (26:27). But as king of the Jews and a vassal of the Emperor, King Agrippa cannot admit that he believes the prophets nor admit that he does not believe them.

In the end, Festus gives up: "**Paul, you are mad; all your great learning is turning you mad**" (26:24). And King Agrippa says to Paul, "**In short, you are trying to make me play the Christian**" (26:28). Finally the king grants Paul's wish and sends him to Rome to appeal before Caesar.

Paul's voyage and shipwreck; winter in Malta; Rome (27:1-28:31)

The many details of Paul's perilous voyage emphasize that it is God's will that Paul preaches the gospel in the heart of the Roman Empire. After arriving at the toe of Italy, Paul and his companions make their way to Rome. In Rome Paul waits for his hearing and freely preaches the gospel. The authorities know this and do nothing to prevent him. What began in Jerusalem ends in Rome.