

# 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 Peter's recent visit to Antioch and 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 for the Jerusalem elders was the fear 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, Acts 8:25-40) 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 could, for example, continue to avoid eating certain foods, Gentile Christians were free of all obligations of the Mosaic law, provided that they accept the salvation won by Jesus Christ. However, regarding the eating of certain foods in public, in charity, Gentile Christians must consider the consciences of the Jewish Christians. In fact, the Council of 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 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, only Barnabas and Mark 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 and now a Christian, he is technically an apostate Jew. If Paul is to maintain friendly relations with the local synagogues in order to preach among the Jews, Timothy must be circumcised.

## **Paul and Silas imprisoned (16:16-24)**

In Philippi Paul exorcises a “pythoness” slave woman (one who practices divination) who had become a profitable fortune-teller for her slaver owners; however, they have now lost their business of Paul and Silas' preaching of the gospel. The slave's 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 typically cleared the magistrate's way through crowds. For this purpose lictors carried bundles of rods (including an axe inserted within) to mete out beatings as warranted.

### **Arrival at Thessalonica (17:1-4)**

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

### **Athens (17:16-34)**

Arriving in Athens Paul is viewed by the elites as nothing more than a “seed picker” or a “gutter sparrow;” that is, they thought Paul was a type of wandering religious peddler, which was by then a common annoyance on the city streets and within the public spaces of Athens. The literal image is of a bird pecking up scattered seeds in a marketplace. By extension, it became a contemptuous term for someone who picked up bits of information here and there and repeated them as kind of religious charlatan.

Paul admits to being impressed by the religiosity of the Athenians, but this was not meant to be a compliment (it was forbidden to offer compliments before the Court of the Areopagus, which could be interpreted as seeking favors). Paul concludes by speaking of the resurrection of Jesus. Up to that point, most of Paul's listeners would have agreed with him about the immortality of the soul, but not about bodily resurrection. The Athenians believed in their god Apollo, who was said to declare, “*Once a man dies and the earth drinks up his blood, there is no resurrection.*” Paul is politely dismissed by the elites, and he 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 frequent riots in the name of “Chrestus” (Christ).

Eighteen months later the Jews bring Paul before Gallio, the proconsul (Roman official), and charge him with spreading a religion that was not of Judaism and not approved by Rome. However, Gallio dismisses the charge as a dispute among Jews; 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. Still, Apollos has a great knowledge of the Scriptures and a gift for preaching. Priscilla and Aquila instruct Apollos further 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, like Apollos, are not baptized. Paul lays hands on them and they receive the Spirit.

Paul continues to teach in the synagogues until the authorities forbid him. 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 city center of the magic arts where Jewish exorcists in particular were thought to have the most effective spells. Gentiles believed this because they knew that the Jews did not invoke

the name of God; thus they believed that God's "secret" name held special powers. But when the local magicians try to imitate Paul's use of the name of Jesus, a demonic assault upon them ensues. 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, Demetrius and 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 majesty of Artemis was 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 extant text describing Christians coming together for the Eucharist.

### **Arrival at Jerusalem (21:15-16)**

In Jerusalem the rumor is that Paul not only 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 company, 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 in fact teach the abandonment of Jewish customs. In response, 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.*" Enraged at this perceived violation, the crowd drags Paul down the temple steps into the outer court.

### **Rescue by the Romans; Paul addresses 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 then orders him to be flogged.

This is the second of three times that Paul recalls his conversion on the road to Damascus (22:3-11). Paul affirms that he is "called to be an apostle." The first criterion for being an apostle

was to have been a disciple of Jesus during his earthly ministry, and the second was to have been an eyewitness to the resurrection, and finally, to have been directly and immediately called by Jesus (Acts 1:20-26). Paul does not meet the first two requirements, but the supreme qualification for apostolic authority was a direct and immediate call by Jesus. This is the reason Paul's account of his conversion on the road to Damascus is repeated three times in Acts: to remind people that Paul is an authentic agent of revelation and speaks with the authority of Jesus.

### **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, a son of Pharisees; with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead I am on trial”** (23:6). Paul is challenging the Sanhedrin to agree that the ancestral hope of Israel is bound up with the resurrection of the dead; and that 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 only a lately invented heresy within Judaism.

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 (appointed sixteen years after Pontius Pilate). Tertullus charges Paul with being an insurrectionist 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 attend the inquisition (24:18-19). Thus the only charge that can be made against Paul concerns the resurrection of the dead, which means there is no charge.

### **Paul appeals to Caesar (25:1-32)**

Between the Sanhedrin's charges and Paul's denials, Festus (who has replaced Felix) 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 is a novice and his lack of administrative experience might be exploited by the Sanhedrin. As a Roman citizen there is one way left open to Paul. Since the foundation of the Republic in 509 B.C., Roman 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 a report; and 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 previously scheduled 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. Therefore, 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 of a messiah have been fulfilled, but the *terms* in which Paul announced it: a law-free gospel without any barriers 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 publicly admit whether he believes the prophecies.

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

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.