

perversity, wickedness and eternal death. Reader: come to Christ, and have life! The Jews did not prosper after they crucified their own Messiah. You cannot prosper if you scorn his offer. Come to him - and live!

A second thing we see in this passage is Paul's wisdom. He was not an awkward man - he was someone willing to suffer very greatly for his Lord. He was wise - not choosing suffering for its own sake, but avoiding it when he could do so. When the Romans bound him to interrogate him (because they did not understand Hebrew or know what had been said), he protested. He insisted on his rights. He was a Roman citizen, and it was illegal to examine him by scourging. It was illegal even to bind him, when had not been tried or condemned. Paul had now been taken into custody by the Romans, who would be his guardians for years to come. Very wisely, he stood upon his rights; if he allowed himself to be badly treated now, it would be hard to avoid ill-treatment in future. Christ told his servants to be "as wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16). Paul was both; he caused no trouble, but was not simple or foolish when it came.

Let us also admire the sovereignty of God in all of this. Not everybody in Jerusalem was a Roman citizen. The commander himself had not been born one, but had had to buy his citizenship with a large sum of money. Citizenship was a privilege, and did not belong to everyone. Paul had been born with his. As a student and a rabbi, he would likely never have come to gain it any other way. God, though, knew well in advance what his plans were for Paul. He had planned and purposed it all, that his servant should be protected at this time. It was all in his hand, as he worked all things for good for the ones whom he loved.

The same God lives and rules today. The times and places where we were born, and the situations in which we live, are not random. God is working out his purposes - for the advance of his glory through the gospel of his Son. Many things will always be unclear to us, because we have limited sight and little wisdom. We can, though, always trust that God has everything precisely in hand. We can lean upon him and trust him completely. Events around us might be confusing and even terrifying. We might be tempted to think that God has lost control, or does not see. These thoughts, though, are completely untrue. God reigns - and all is happening perfectly according to plan. The time shall come when the gospel's work shall be complete, and we shall look on with our Saviour in awe and wonder at what was done. Let us seek to live with that attitude today too.

## ***Expository thoughts on*** **The Acts Of The Apostles**

### ***Daily Bible Reading Notes***

### ***Week 16 (Chapter 21:1-22:29)***

**Grace Church Belper**

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(For previous weeks' notes, visit <http://www.gracebelper.org.uk/readingnotes.php>)

## Acts 21:1-14

*1 Now it came to pass, that when we had departed from them and set sail, running a straight course we came to Cos, the following day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. 2 And finding a ship sailing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. 3 When we had sighted Cyprus, we passed it on the left, sailed to Syria, and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload her cargo. 4 And finding disciples, we stayed there seven days. They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem. 5 When we had come to the end of those days, we departed and went on our way; and they all accompanied us, with wives and children, till we were out of the city. And we knelt down on the shore and prayed. 6 When we had taken our leave of one another, we boarded the ship, and they returned home. 7 And when we had finished our voyage from Tyre, we came to Ptolemais, greeted the brethren, and stayed with them one day. 8 On the next day we who were Paul's companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. 9 Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied. 10 And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" 12 Now when we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem. 13 Then Paul answered, "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." 14 So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, "The will of the Lord be done."*

Luke now tells us about Paul's journey from Asia minor to Jerusalem - the journey which Paul had purposed over a year before (19:21). This time, Paul's missionary journey does not end in Antioch. He heads to Jerusalem, where he will be arrested and from there begin the journey to Rome. He is accompanied by a number of believers from Asia minor and from Europe. Luke is one of them, and will accompany Paul all the way to the Empire's capital. In these verses, Luke records their journey from Miletus, where they had met the Ephesian elders (20:17), across the Mediterranean sea, past Cyprus to Phoenicia and Judea.

One thing we are reminded of by these verses is that *all believers are one family through Christ*. In many of the places where they stopped on their journey they found believers, and paused a while to meet with them, for fellowship and to encourage them. What a blessing it must have been to find believers in these places. Just a few years before, only a tiny number were true followers of the Lord Jesus. Now, there were churches scattered across the whole map. The gospel had been powerfully at work; the Lord Jesus had been keeping his promise. These churches were not ones that Paul had planted; they were the result of other men's labours. Just who had planted them, though, did not really matter. They trusted, like Paul and his friends, in the Lord Jesus Christ for their salvation. However they had come to do so, they were now part of the one Christian family. When the travellers came to their towns, they did not go to try and see the rich or famous in those towns. They went to see those who, like them, trusted in God's Son for the forgiveness of their sins.

*things, Paul said to the centurion who stood by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?" 26 When the centurion heard that, he went and told the commander, saying, "Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman." 27 When the commander came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman?" He said, "Yes." The commander answered, "With a large sum I obtained this citizenship." And Paul said, "But I was born a citizen." 29 Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him.*

Paul intended to say more than he did. We cannot know exactly what he would have said. Maybe he would have told the people about how the Gentiles were turning to the God of Israel. Possibly he would have argued with them that the Scriptures predicted all these things. Surely he would have insisted on their need to repent, and find the same mercy which had been so freely given to him. We will, though, just have to wonder - because Paul's speech was cut short. The crowd had been willing to hear him for a time; but at the mention of the Gentiles, their patience ended.

As we look on the sad and perverse behaviour of the Jews, we are reminded of the words of the Lord Jesus. "You will not come to me", he said, "that you might have life" (John 5:40). This truth is written in large letters across these verses. The person who is not born again, who has not been awakened by God's Spirit, will do anything and say anything rather than come to the Lord Jesus. Their way is almost unbelievably perverse - but we cannot deny that this is what they do. If they would come to the Saviour, he would have saved them. He laid down his life for wretches and sinners of all kinds. He did not shed one drop of blood for those who were righteous - all of his sufferings were to atone for man's wickedness. He freely offers a complete pardon, and a perfect standing before God: the standing of his own perfect life, death and resurrection. He loves sinners, and delights to receive them back. There is more rejoicing in heaven when one sinner repents, than over ninety-nine righteous ones who have no need of repentance (Luke 15:7). The Lord is thrilled when a wanderer returns back to him. In the verse we have been reading, he was pleading, through his servant, for the Jews to return to him. He sent Paul to them, to be a witness to the fact that Jesus was the Messiah, risen from the dead, and the one through whom the nations would be saved. He pleaded with them that in such wonderful days, when all kinds of lost and gone-astray peoples were coming back to their maker, that Israel - his own chosen nation - should not miss out. The people, though, had no heart to hear any of this. All they knew was that whatever teaching placed them on a similar level with the Gentiles, they hated. If they had to confess that they too had gone astray and needed forgiveness just like the other peoples, that was too much. Their religious pride and self-righteousness were a barrier that they could not get past. Though from one angle it was totally free, from another the price was too high. At that cost, they were not willing to come to Christ, and would rather pass on the life that he would give to them.

Is there someone reading these words who is in the same position? Someone who has not yet come to the Lord Jesus Christ, and has so far been unwilling to receive life from him? What a foolish way this is! We have no other Saviour, who is so full of love. There is no other Redeemer, who can shed his blood for our sins. There is no-one else at God's right hand, who can receive us back and wipe our record clean. The Saviour who exists is so full of mercy, love and grace as it is possible to be. If we refuse him, we choose

Church history has proved this point again and again. There is nobody so hardened against the truth, as those who are religious themselves. There is nothing which hardens a man so much against grace, hypocrisy. Living with a show of religion, but without Christ, makes the very worst of men. The Pharisees' religion made them into murderers of the Son of God. All the strictness of those in the crowd had turned them into enemies of the truth which could save them. What a great warning this is for us! Do we understand this? It is not only a warning for the unconverted, but for Christians too. There is nothing that will drain our spiritual power so much as hypocrisy. Sin unrepented of, prayerless living, secret enjoyment of godless ways and secret toleration of what God hates will ruin our fruitfulness and dishonour God like nothing else. The only weapon that will do us any good is a sharp one. We must seek for Christ and for reality, in all that we do - nothing else can make up for it.

Finally, these verses show us the amazing mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ. When we look at Paul as he describes himself, when an unconverted man, there is only one right response. We must be astonished. Here was a man who hated the truth, who persecuted and hurt God's people with great violence, and was involved in the murder of an outstanding saint. What did God do with such a criminal? Did he damn him to hell for ever and ever? Did God's thunderbolt strike him dead as an example to all of what happened to such evildoers? No; God revealed Christ to him, forgave all of his sins, and gave him the privilege of being the apostle to the Gentiles. God freely forgave him, gave him his Holy Spirit, and made him the one who would write half the New Testament and take the good news throughout the nations. What incredible grace! What had Paul done to deserve all of this? Nothing - and nothing he ever did afterwards could repay the tiniest fraction. It was sheer, undeserved mercy.

One lesson we shall never have fully learnt, but must always be learning, is this: God is a God of almost unbelievable mercy and grace. His mercies are new every morning; for the worst of sinners, he gave his own Son to die. Paul certainly never lost his sense of this; as he grew as a Christian, he marvelled at it more and more. In 1 Corinthians 15:9 he called himself "the least of the apostles"; in Ephesians 3:8, he called himself "less than the least of all saints". Some years later, he wrote to Timothy, describing himself as "the chief of sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). He was always astonished that so holy a God should have been so kind to him. Can we do anything less? Has God shown us anything of the blackness of our own sin? Do we understand the foulness and pollution of our own hearts? The nearer we come to God, and the more light we gain, the more darkness and evil we will see in ourselves. As we see these things, we should not despair - we should be more and more amazed at God's grace. Let us look at our sin; but let us look even more at the Saviour. We shall see ever more beauty and glory in him.

## Acts 22:21-29

*21 "Then he said to me, 'Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.'" 22 And they listened to him until this word, and then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!" 23 Then, as they cried out and tore off their clothes and threw dust into the air, 24 the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him. 25 And as they bound him with*

The believer in Christ belongs to the largest family in the world. However many brothers and sisters you have by birth, you have a vast number in the Lord. They are from all peoples, nations, backgrounds and cultures. They will have all kinds of different habits, practices and ways of life. Such things normally divide us from people. In Christ though we have something far more important that brings us together. We have one Lord, who died for our sins on the cross. We have one Holy Spirit given to us, who brings us into fellowship with God and makes us progressively more holy. We have one hope ahead of us, the glory of God in heaven. Our own flesh and blood are less close to us, if they do not trust in Christ.

This fact is not just something for our heads. For Paul and his friends, it was obviously more. Wherever they went, their first interest was in the people of Christ, and their joy was to have fellowship with them, to share in their joys and sorrows, to pray and talk together of the things of God. Today many of us live and worship in gatherings which seem to be always shrinking. The number of those who remain faithful to Christ seem to be fewer and fewer. We can easily become tempted to despair. We need to lift up our eyes, and see the big picture! The word of Christ is going out in all the world, in every continent. The gospel continues to make great strides. We have many poor brothers and sisters in many countries, who need our prayers and whatever support we can give them. We have opportunities to help them today in ways that those before us could hardly dream about. How important it is that we do not get so much caught up in ourselves, that we stop up doing nothing for them. How grievous it would be to the Lord if, having given us so much opportunity, we do so little with it.

The second, and very striking, thing for us in these verses is the attitude of Paul as he went up to Jerusalem. We know that Paul was not someone who was foolish or reckless in embracing danger. Time after time, when his life had been severely threatened, he had moved on to another city, so that he might be able to usefully serve the gospel there. He knew that when he was dead, he could not do anything more for the gospel's progress (Philippians 1:21-24). Here, though, he had decided and purposed that he must go to Jerusalem, whatever the danger. He had collected a good deal of money from the Gentile churches. The opportunity to further advance the unity of Jew and Gentile, and shut the mouths of Jewish enemies, was too great to pass by. A prophet came down from Jerusalem to tell him what would happen to him when he went there. This does not mean that Agabus was telling him not to go; rather God was helping him to be prepared. Like his master before him, though of course in a much lesser way, he could only fulfil his purpose by going to Jerusalem. Like his master before him, that way would be full of pain and trouble. And just like his master, he needed to "set his face" (Luke 9:51) to see that the work would be carried through. Paul's attitude is summed up in his own words, in verse 13. He was "ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus". Coming from Paul's lips, this was no light and easy boast. We might persuade ourselves that we would happily say the same things - but, like Peter in the few hours of Jesus' life, soon discover to our grief how little strength we have to carry them out. Paul, though, had already faced death on many occasions. His resolve and love to the Lord had often been put to the test, and he knew what he was talking about.

Where are our hearts? The question to most of us today will not be whether we are ready

to die for Jesus' sake. We will though, have opportunity in each hour to live for him. We must, like Paul, be "ready" and determined to push through with what is God's will. If others, believers or unbelievers, try to dissuade us, we must refuse to allow them to persuade us. The Lord's will must be done. We must not think that this is only for those called on to give up their lives. It is for everyone who claims to be a follower of Christ. His claims go over every area of our life. We may not be called on to die for him; but what we do with each day and each hour will show what we would have done, had we ever been asked. Let us not fail our Lord.

## Acts 21:15-25

*15 And after those days we packed and went up to Jerusalem. 16 Also some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us and brought with them a certain Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we were to lodge. 17 And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. 18 On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. 20 And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law; 21 but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to walk according to the customs. 22 What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come. 23 Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. 24 Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law. 25 But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality."*

The travellers now arrive at Jerusalem, and meet with the believers and leaders there. Now Luke tells us about what met Paul and his friends when they arrived. By this time, James (the half-brother of Jesus) was the acknowledged leader of the Jerusalem church. We have very little information about which apostles were still in Jerusalem, and which were evangelising and teaching in other places. Luke does not tell us. He does, though, name "a certain Mnason of Cyprus", who seems to have been well known to the early church. Mnason is the reminder that there are hundreds and thousands of believers who have done great service for the Lord, about whom we know almost nothing. What men know about us, though, is of no real importance. The final judgment will not be held in the court of man; we must do what we do in the sight of the Lord Jesus Christ.

When Paul came to the church at Jerusalem, the next day he met with "James, and all the elders" (verse 18). The few words about this meeting underline for us that *the glory of the Lord is tied up with the work of missions*. Surely there were many gripping tales that Paul could have told. He could have told them about being stoned, about being shipwrecked, about being imprisoned, about being chased out of towns by furious mobs. These, though, were all only accompaniments of the main story. The main story was what "God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry". He had gone out, not to have great adventures,

once like the crowd who opposed him, now came to be where he was. This passage contains all the rest of Paul's speech; after the words in verse 21, they refused to hear more. Paul's testimony was unique, and very remarkable. Let us study it well!

Paul twice mentions in this part of his speech *the will of God, that he should take the gospel to the world*. God twice announced to him his purpose, to have all the nations hear of Christ. The very first Christian who he met once he was converted, Ananias, brought this message to him. Ananias told him that God has chosen him to see the risen Christ that he might "be his witness to all men". When Paul came to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, he had a vision that we do not read about anywhere else in the Bible. There are only a tiny number of such appearances of the Lord recorded. What the Lord had to say to him was that he would be sent "far away from here to the Gentiles". Paul would be a witness to the Jews, but that witness would not be accepted. Then, he would testify about the risen Jesus throughout the known world. This was God's purpose, and it was sure.

Christianity is, and has always been, a message for the whole world. Every Christian is, and has always been, instructed to play a part in making disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). From the very beginning, God's plan has been that the Saviour of mankind should be preached across the whole globe, and believed upon by people of every tribe, nation, language and culture (Revelation 7:9). God is a missionary; he came from heaven to earth in the person of his Son. Every missionary since has simply been a poor shadow of the master.

Christians today have very wonderful privileges. Those who went before us had to plan and journey for months and years to take the gospel to other nations. News and knowledge about the progress of Christ's kingdom in the world travelled very slowly. For many centuries, the gospel was confined only to limited regions of the world. All this has changed now. The gospel has made astonishing advances in the last 200 years. We have incredible opportunities to lend support to people in very far away places. The Lord has given us much; and much will be expected from us. Do we pray for the work of missions? Do we seek out information on it, and send help when and where we can? It is the Lord's will that we should do so.

Secondly in these verses we see something of *the awful hardness of heart of religious hypocrites*. Those who Paul confronted were certainly hypocrites. They made a great show of their zeal for God; but their real zeal was a Jewish pride. They loved their nation more than they loved God; and if God loved the world, then that was too much for them. They had been taught in the law all their lives, and should have been the first to embrace the Messiah when he came. Paul himself had many reasons to think that they would listen to him and his message. The fact that he was a Christian now was most amazing - and ought to give the most stubborn Jew cause to stop and think. Paul's hatred of the Christian faith had been extremely great. He had even openly been involved in the murder of one of the greatest early Christians, the deacon Stephen. If this man was now preaching the Christian faith, there must be some great reason for it. Surely this would be a man that they would listen to! But it was not so. The Lord knew the truth; they would not receive his testimony about him (verse 18). There would be no other alternative; Paul must depart to the Gentiles (verse 21).

Israel's Messiah, and that every knee must bow to him. He learnt in a moment that his mission against the church was a personal attack against the Son of God. He saw that all of his learning which opposed the Lord Jesus was foolishness, and needed to be changed. He had come to Damascus to take prisoners, but was instead led into Damascus as if he were one. His mission had been to destroy the church; instead, he joined it. Now, he stood as its greatest preacher, preaching it at risk to his own life. Before, he had been ready to kill for his faith; now, he was ready to die for it.

Reader, are you converted? We must understand that real conversion is a massive thing. It consists in far more than saying a few words, or being splashed with a bit of water. True conversion is a complete about-turn in the direction of the soul. It is the over-throwing of a king, "king self"; it is the crowning of a new king: King Jesus. It is a revolution, in which we see all of our wisdom as foolishness, and all of God's "foolishness" as the real wisdom to which we now bow. It is a miraculous work of the Spirit of God, in which he brings new life and new realities into a soul which were not there before. "Conversion" is not a way of speaking about deciding to adopt Christian ideas and outward ways of life. It is a way of speaking about a miracle performed by the Spirit of God, which results in everlasting life.

If we know what this means, how thankful we ought to be to God. There are countless millions who have no idea what we are talking about. They think that religion is just a matter of arguments over words, rules, and names, or they think it is something pleasant for you but irrelevant to them. If, though, we have truly had the great love and mercy of the Lord Jesus revealed to us, we should count it as the most precious thing of all. Whatever we have, or whatever we lose - if we know Christ, we have more than if we owned the whole world. Let us keep our eyes upon the goal, and press on!

## Acts 22:11-21

*11 And since I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of those who were with me, I came into Damascus. 12 Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there, 13 came to me; and he stood and said to me, Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And at that same hour I looked up at him. 14 Then he said, 'The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know his will, and see the just one, and hear the voice of his mouth. 15 For you will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. 16 And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptised, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.' 17 Now it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance 18 and saw him saying to me, 'Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning me.' 19 So I said, 'Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on you. 20 And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death, and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.' 21 Then he said to me, 'Depart, for I will send you far away from here to the Gentiles.'"*

In this section, Luke continues to tell us about the speech of Paul to the crowd in Jerusalem. Paul is still re-telling what happened when he was converted; how he, being

but to serve his maker by preaching about the way of salvation in Christ. He had travelled throughout so many provinces in order to see lost sinners won to the Lord Jesus and saved. And through God's grace, that is what he had seen happen. When he told the Jerusalem leaders this, their response was to glorify the Lord (verse 20). It was the work in which their hearts were involved too, and news like this made them overjoyed. The Lord's glory is tied up with the advance of the gospel truth, and this is what we should care about most of all. It is good when poverty, ignorance and hunger are dealt with. When people become healthier, and get more chances to work and to learn, we cannot complain. But God's kingdom is far more than this; hell will be filled with healthy, wealthy and intelligent people. God is at work today - and the front line of his advance is the bringing of people to Jesus, by faith. Paul and the Jerusalem leaders saw all of this work as God's work, before it was their own. God had done it; God must have all the glory. We join in, but the work is his. Do we understand this? The story of history is the story of God saving the nations through faith in Jesus Christ. If anything else is our great interest, then we have gone wrong. If anyone other than God is getting the glory and profit from our lives, our thinking needs to change.

Secondly, we must look at the matter which the Jerusalem leaders raised with Paul. This was good news; a huge number, "myriads" of Jews were trusting in the Christ. They had, though, heard many false rumours about Paul, that he was an apostate from his Jewish roots. Paul was, they had been told, not just someone who taught Gentiles not to become Jews, but someone who taught Jews to not be Jews either. He told the Israelites living in the Gentile world, so it was said, to abandon their customs and not raise their children in the traditional way (verse 21). All of this was false, as we have already seen. Paul himself would never confuse the vital issues in this way. When he was with Jews, he lived like a Jew (1 Corinthians 9:20). He put nothing in the way of his fellow Jews - so that they might stumble over nothing, unless it was the gospel itself. Wherever possible, he would make the gospel the issue - and that only. Such, though, was not what the great number of Jews in Jerusalem had been told. Paul's enemies had successfully spread other reports, and it was commonly believed that he lived quite differently.

These facts, teach us then, that *God's best servants are often misunderstood and rejected in their lifetimes*. Paul, in his own day, was a controversial figure. Wherever he went, there were enemies of his teaching, who infiltrated the Christian church and turned believers against him. Towards the end of his life, Paul wrote the sad words, "all those who are in Asia have turned away from me" (2 Timothy 1:15). When he was in prison, few took any trouble to comfort the one who was suffering because of his labours for them. He had many enemies, and those enemies seemed in his lifetime to have a great deal of success. God, though, has a way of making sure that the truth comes out in the end. There are many faithful believers who have been far better loved after death than during life. Charles Spurgeon is now one of the most famous and well-loved preachers who ever lived; in the last years of his own life, few stood with him in his great struggles. Arthur Pink's books have gone all round the world; when he was alive, he was obscure and very few had time for him. And what of the master himself? In the hour of his own great need, the few who had been with him to that stage all scattered and fled; but today, his name is worshipped throughout the nations.

We must settle one thing in our minds, otherwise our effectiveness for the Lord will be

ruined. We must be quite convinced that we must do what is right, and we will serve the Lord, whatever others say or think about it. We must obey God, and be unpopular with everyone if necessary. If we preach, we must preach God's word and not alter it one little bit if it is not liked. If we witness to our friends, we must tell them honestly and directly about their need of a Saviour, however much they laugh or make fun. If we have to make difficult choices that seem to damage us, we must make them in the fear of God, whatever the immediate results. We must allow God to take care of the long term, simply trusting that here and now we will do what is right, and do it for his glory. If our aim in life is to have a good reputation, we will find at last that the only reputation we gained is that of a man-pleaser. Nobody is really admired in the end if their principles change whenever it suits them. On the last day, those people will be admired who served God, at any and every cost. Let us make sure that we will at last stand with them!

## Acts 21:23-30

*23 Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. 24 Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law. 25 But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality." 26 Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them. 27 Now when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, 28 crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." 29 (For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.) 30 And all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut.*

The book of Acts is now drawing towards its final stage: the journey of Paul to Rome. Luke now spends some time to explain just how Paul began that journey - how he fell into the Romans' hands when he was in Jerusalem.

A first thing to learn here is that *we must be willing to please others, when no principle is at stake*. When the gospel can be helped by us taking trouble to do something we would not otherwise do, we ought to do it. Paul here gives us an example of someone putting themselves out - simply to remove any cause of offence against the Christian faith. Many of the Christian Jews in Jerusalem had been told that Paul was anti-Jewish, and despised the Jewish customs. This was not true; Paul had himself taken a vow some three years earlier, causing himself quite some trouble (Acts 18:18-21). When it was suggested that he involve himself in another vow again, though, he did not take offence. He did not throw his hands up and complain. Because there was no great principle at stake, he simply got on and did it. If the Jews would be more convinced of his love to them by doing this, and more ready to receive his apostolic teaching, then he was pleased to do what he could.

Hebrew language - underlining his loyalty to the history of the Jews. He was courageous seeking the opportunity to witness to them about the Lord Jesus. Having been taken in custody by the Romans, his thoughts might have been on getting away safely, and keeping quiet for a bit. He did not think this way at all, though; with the security afforded by the guards, he took the opportunity to preach Christ to his fellow Jews. He cared too much for them and for the honour of his Lord, and too little for himself, to do anything else. Let us look at what he had to say.

The first point that Paul made was very simple, and very important. He showed the people that where they then were, he had been before. Unless we were converted as infants, we can say the same thing: where the unconverted stand, we did once. We can understand their thinking, and know what they mean. The mob that now faced him were moved by desires which he very well understood - because he had been there too. They were Jews with impeccable credentials; so was he. He was Jewish by birth, and had been brought up in Jerusalem itself - trained at the feet of one of Israel's most famous rabbis. They were eager to learn and apply God's law; he had been instructed in all of its strictness. They were full of zeal for God's glory; he knew just how they felt. Many of them hated and opposed the Christian faith very strongly; but few of them had gone so far as he had. He had travelled over hundreds of miles, to persecute his targets to prison and to death. He had not gone on his own, but with letters from the high priest to aid his mission. If there was ever anyone who took his opposition to Christianity seriously, it was the unconverted Paul!

Reader, if you are unconverted, have you never thought about this? True Christians witness to you about things which they have experienced and which they know. They have not turned to Christ because they wish to embrace myths or foolishness. It is not an easy thing to turn your back on your previous way of life - to lose friends, be pushed away by family, and be counted as stupid. But the things spoken of in the Bible are true and real. The work of the Holy Spirit to make us aware of our sin; the miracle of the new birth, and the revealing of the Lord Jesus Christ to our needy souls; these are all great realities. We can understand your position as a person who does not yet know anything about these things - because we once stood there with you. Now, though, we stand on the other side, having known them, and testifying to you that they are real, true, and reliable for all eternity. If you seek the Lord, it will not be a pointless quest. You will be setting out on a journey which millions have set out on before - with the promise that those who seek with all their hearts, will certainly find (Jeremiah 29:13).

In this passage secondly, we should see *the glory of true conversion*. There are three records of Paul's conversion in the book of Acts. He loved to tell people about it, and just what the Lord had done. For Paul, conversion was a very radical change. He had been taught and had lived in the strictest Judaism of his time every year of his life. He had learned very thoroughly that way, and lived and breathed it every day. Nobody could outstrip him for zeal in his opposition to the church, which took him vast distances, and even to murder. None of this, though, made any difference once the living Christ confronted him. When the Lord Jesus, in his risen power, met him on the road to Damascus, he lost all power to oppose him. He had to simply call him "Lord", and ask him what he should do. His conversion was a great dawning of light; things now became clear. He understood very suddenly that Jesus of Nazareth was alive from the dead, with

upon it utterly, even to death. Indeed, we must do so - because only the Bible explains to us the way to be saved. If we are relying upon the blood of Christ which it tells us about, then we have no reason to fear. God cannot break his word; and can never have the desire or even the thought to do so. The safety of believers in Christ who are still on the earth is no less than those who have died and already gone into his presence. God has promised to save one as much as the other; the future is just as certain with God as the past. So, believers must not give way to doubts. The devil must not be allowed to ruin our service to Christ, by crippling us with his lies. Let us believe; we shall never need to be ashamed for doing so.

Finally, these things that happened here with Paul show us that *we are immortal, until the time that God has decided for us*. Once again, there was a furious mob - so angry, that Paul's death was the only thing they desired. They were so enraged, that they would murder him on the spot, and deal with the consequences later. Once again, though, it did not take place - because the time which God had determined for Paul had not yet come. God had a purpose for Paul - to preach the gospel in Rome. Hence the Holy Spirit had not announced that a mob would kill him, but that he would be handed over to the Romans. It was impossible for Paul to die before that: God had chosen the time, and until that time was arrived, he was immortal. So it is, too, for each one of us. If God has work for us to do, then he will enable us to do it; once he has no more work for us to do, we will find that we are no longer here, but with him. We must then, do everything that we do with all of our might. We must do it as those who believe that if God has given us opportunities to serve him, then all of hell cannot prevent us. We must work as those who believe in the living God - and that our labour in the Lord shall not be in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58).

## Acts 22:40-23:10

*40 So when he had given him permission, Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, saying, 1 Brethren and fathers, hear my defence before you now. 2 And when they heard that he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, they kept all the more silent. Then he said, 3 "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today. 4 I persecuted this way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, 5 as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished. 6 Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me. 7 And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?' 8 So I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.' 9 And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of him who spoke to me. 10 So I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do.'*

Luke now tells us about the speech that Paul made to the furious crowd. Through it, we see a lot of Paul's wisdom, and Paul's courage. He was wise, speaking to them in the

We have to admire Paul's wisdom and humility in this. Lesser men would have done something else. We can see the temptation to be awkward, and to stand his ground - to make a protest about his liberty in Christ. What grand speeches and fine words we can imagine he could have spoken in his defence! He could have said a great deal about defending the freedom of Christians from the Jewish law. Or, he could have simply insisted on his status as an apostle. Why should he have to take such troubles and pains? Christ had appointed him - and so the church ought to listen! He could tell himself that he was being faithful by teaching the word - and there was nothing in the Bible to require him to pay the expenses of these men. Had he not risked his life for the gospel? Why should he now have to run up a bill simply to prove his faithfulness? Luke does not tell us that Paul asked any of these questions though - he simply bent his back to the work, and did what would help the cause of the Lord Jesus. Here is a way of thinking that we should copy. Let us stop asking "do I like this?" or "how much trouble will this cost me?" Let us just ask the one question which really matters - "will this help or hinder the work of Christ?" "What will help others to accept my sincerity about the gospel?" Whatever it costs us, let us be willing to pay - knowing how the Lord Jesus even gave himself on the cross, for our sakes. Nothing should be too much to show our gratitude to him.

We see, though, as we read about what happened, that *some people can never be pleased*. Though Paul took such pains to show that he honoured what God had done through Moses, there were unbelieving Jews who were set against everything he stood for. Some Bible readers might then think that Paul failed in his purpose. That is not true; Paul never imagined that he would be able to satisfy everyone. The Jerusalem leaders' concerns were about convincing the church, not the whole world (verse 20). They all knew well enough that the gospel had enemies of the most unreasonable kind. Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica, saying, "pray... that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men: for all men have not faith" (2 Thessalonians 3:1-2). He did not say that unreasonable and wicked men can always be won; he asked though that he might be delivered from them. He knew, though, that it was the Lord's will for him to not be delivered in Jerusalem. He knew that however blamelessly he behaved, he would be bound and handed over (21:11).

We can be far too easily discouraged when we see that our efforts do not have the results we hope for. When we see that the gospel has enemies who are strongly opposed and almost everything the church stands for, we wonder what we are doing wrong. The answer, though, might be "nothing". The only perfect man who ever lived, was crucified and a murderer was let free. The one who knew no sin at all, was treated as the scum of the earth, and hung up to die on a cross. It is a wicked world; and some people are perverse almost beyond all belief. Nobody had seen Paul with a Gentile in the temple; the Jews from Asia accused him anyway, and stirred up the city to violence. Let us not be surprised when some of the people of our day react in a similar way. There will always be those who do not love the Lord; let us face up to reality, and not allow Satan to discourage us through them.

Finally then, we see one fact clearly: man makes his plans, but the Lord's will is what prevails. Paul took great pains to be blameless, and to show his complete faithfulness to the Jewish law. As it turned out, though, he was dragged out of the temple by a furious

mob who were convinced that he had defiled it. It was Paul's plan to show his integrity; it was God's plan that this plan should make no difference.

As believers, there is one thing which we must do every day. That is, to bow before the sovereignty of God. We must make our plans, guided by the wisdom that God gives us, and with prayer at every point. We must recognise, though, that God sees more than we do, and his plans are wiser than ours. We should not react by losing heart, or by thinking that all our thinking and working has been done in vain. We should react by praising God, and trusting him that he has something even better in mind. Paul planned to evangelise Rome by travelling there himself. In the event, he would evangelise Rome whilst protected by the Empire's soldiers, and so gain access even to the household of Caesar himself (Philippians 4:22). Instead of being attacked and silenced, his gospel went even further. All this came about because of his arrest after this riot in these verses. At what point he saw just how wonderfully God had overruled, we do not know. It may be a long time before we understand just why God is not allowing things to work out as we had wanted. Let us, though, trust him every step of the way - let us praise him whether what comes to us seems good or bad; the Lord is good, and what he does right!

## Acts 21:30-40

*30 And all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut. 31 Now as they were seeking to kill him, news came to the commander of the garrison that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. 32 He immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them. And when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. 33 Then the commander came near and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and he asked who he was and what he had done. 34 And some among the multitude cried one thing and some another. So when he could not ascertain the truth because of the tumult, he commanded him to be taken into the barracks. 35 When he reached the stairs, he had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob. 36 For the multitude of the people followed after, crying out, "Away with him!" 37 Then as Paul was about to be led into the barracks, he said to the commanders, "May I speak to you?" He replied, "Can you speak Greek? 38 Are you not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a rebellion and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness?" 39 But Paul said, "I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city; and I implore you, permit me to speak to the people." 40 So when he had given permission, Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people.*

We are now reading about how Paul came to be a Roman prisoner, and so to begin his journey to Rome. He had long planned to visit the capital of the empire (19:21); but he would get there in a way he had not thought of. As we read, the Jews from Asia have stirred up the city against Paul, with false accusations that he had defiled the temple. Now Luke tells us what happened next.

Let us notice firstly the *ignorance and prejudice* which Paul had to face. "All the city" was caught up in the commotion. The people were so sure that he was a very wicked man, that they began beating him to death on the spot. The commander, whose garrison was only a

very short distance from the temple, heard that "all Jerusalem as in an uproar". When he was seized by the Romans, a "multitude" followed him, and cried out "away with him". What, though, were the crimes for which he deserved to die? When the commander tried to find out about this, "some... cried one thing and some another". He could not find out the truth; the mob was too crazed and bloodthirsty. Notice too what the commander assumed about Paul. He was surprised that he spoke Greek - the language of the educated; He thought that he must be an Egyptian, a notorious rebel and leader of a gang of murderers. He was most amazed to discover that he was both a Jew, and a Roman citizen.

In fact, there was not a shred of truth in all the things being said against Paul. He had not defiled the temple; he was there to show his respect for it. He was not worthy to die; he was not a more godly man in the whole city. He was not uneducated, but had been received one of the finest educations of any man alive (Acts 22:3). He was not an Egyptian, but a Jew who could trace his ancestry all the way back to Benjamin the son of Jacob (Philippians 3:5). He was not the leader of a gang of thugs, but a preacher of the good news that leads to eternal life. He was not in Jerusalem to tear down the Jewish temple, but to preach its climax and goal in the coming of their long-desired Messiah. Despite all of this, he yet found himself having to give a defence for his very life.

If Christians are misunderstood, and if God-fearing people have their motives questioned and their ways slandered, we should not be surprised at all. Sinful men counted the Son of God himself as deserving only to be hung up on a cross to die. Satan has been a liar from the beginning (John 8:44), and has always had plenty of helpers in his work. The gospel will always meet with prejudice and ignorance. If this puts us off or leads us to despair, we should change our thinking. Truth will not win out, without a real battle. Error and sin will not give up easily, and they will play by the rules. We must be ready always to respond with wisdom and with grace. We must make sure that we are always blameless, so that we give no opportunity to those who would slander our Lord.

Let us see secondly that *God's word was fulfilled*. What had been prophesied through Agabus, came to pass. God's word is sure and true - the things it declares must take place. God is all-knowing, and can never be in error, and is truth himself, so is incapable of leading anyone astray. Agabus had said that Paul would be bound (verse 11); and so he was (verse 33). The prophecy had announced that he would be handed over from the Jews to the Gentiles; and so it came to pass. When Agabus said, "thus says the Holy Spirit" was not a guess; it was a word that could be totally relied upon; it was as certain, though in the future, as anything that had already happened in the past. It is certainly true that God fulfilled his word in his own way, and maybe not quite as we would expect. Agabus had not said anything about great violence; but neither had he ruled it out. He had not said the Jews would hand him over reluctantly; but again, nor had he said that they would do so freely either. There is some mystery about the binding of Paul; it may be that the Jews had bound him in order to beat him to death and Luke has not mentioned it; or it may be that it was Jews who carried out the commander's order when it was given (verse 33). Either way, though, we may be sure that what God said, came to pass.

It is essential for every Christian to have great confidence in God's word. The Bible is not a book of nice ideas, suggestions and thoughts about what might possibly be true. It is an announcement from the living God, about the things which certainly are. We may rely