

Lesson 20

Acts 21:1—22:29

THE MISUNDERSTOOD MISSIONARY

Memory Verse: “And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.” Acts 22:16 (NIV)

Paul and his party sail to Patara from Miletus where they change ships and sail across the Mediterranean to Phoenicia (21:1-3). They have fellowship with the Christians at Tyre, Ptolemais and Caesarea, where churches have been founded by those scattered after the killing of Stephen. One of those early evangelists, Philip, is still in Caesarea and Paul’s party stays with him several days (21:4-9; cf. 8:4-5,40; 11:19). In Caesarea, as in Tyre, prophets warn Paul of the trouble that he will meet in Jerusalem, but he is determined to go on (21:10-14; see also 21:4).

Finally, Paul reaches his destination, Jerusalem. There he stays with Mnason, who is a Jewish Christian from Cyprus and an early member of the Jerusalem church. He is probably one of the few in Jerusalem who are fully in agreement with Paul’s work among the Gentiles (21:15-16).

Over the previous ten years the church in Jerusalem has become narrower in its outlook. As leaders of the broader outlook such as Peter, John and Barnabas moved out to other areas, the Jewish Christians left in Jerusalem slip back into legalism. At the Jerusalem meeting of Chapter 15, James and his like-minded fellow elders have successfully defended the Gentiles, but they now have little influence over the members at large. Those who wish to put all Christians under the Jewish law, though silenced at the Jerusalem meeting, have not changed their former views, and now their number has grown to many thousands (see 21:20).

The elders of the Jerusalem church are glad to receive the offering from the Gentile churches (21:17-19), but this has little effect on the thinking of most of the church members. The legalistic Jews are not concerned greatly about what Paul taught the Gentiles, but they are angered to hear reports that he teaches the Jews not to keep the law of Moses or the traditions of their ancestors (21:20-21). James and his friends suggest that Paul prove to the Jerusalemites that he is as religious a Jew as any, by joining with four other Jews in a purification ceremony in the temple (21:22-25).

Being willing to do almost anything to win his fellow Jews, Paul joins in the ceremony (21:26; cf. 1 Corinthians 9:20-23). Whether he is right or wrong in doing so is not clear. Certainly the plan is not a success, for it gets Paul into serious trouble that leaves him a prisoner of Rome for most of the next five years.

Paul, James and the elders are so busy trying to please the Jerusalem Jews that they may have forgotten Paul’s constant enemies, the Asian Jews (cf. 20:18-19; 2 Corinthians 1:8). These are the ones who bring about his downfall. Because they see him in the streets with a Gentile friend from Ephesus, they accuse him (wrongly) of taking the Gentile into a part of the temple where Gentiles were forbidden (21:27-29). When a riot broke out, the mob seizes Paul and tries to kill him (21:30-31).

The Roman troops in Jerusalem were well trained to control Jewish riots, and on this occasion only their swift action prevents Paul from being murdered (21:32). The military commander, has no idea who Paul is or what he has done to make the Jews angry, but he is determined to see him dealt with properly according to Roman law, not by mob violence (21:33-36).

By his command of the situation, Paul shows resolute physical courage and mental alertness. One minute he is snatched from a violent death, the next he is able to address a mob of wildly excited Jews who were screaming for his blood. He speaks with such power that a rioting crowd of would-be murderers listens to him in silence (21:37-40).

Paul wants to show that he is a zealous Jew, called by God to serve him. He tells of his Jewish upbringing and education, and of his religious zeal in persecuting those he thought to be law-breakers (22:1-5). But then the risen Jesus intervened and he became a believer (22:6-11). Through the announcement of a respected and law-abiding Jew named Ananias, he learnt of God’s purpose for him to take the gospel to people everywhere (22:12-16). Above all he wants his own people, the Jews, to hear the gospel, and only when they rejected it did God send him to preach the gospel among the Gentiles (22:17-21).

As soon as Paul mentions his mission to the Gentiles, uproar breaks out afresh. All Paul’s speech and all the crowd’s shouting are in Aramaic, which the Roman commander probably could not understand. So he decides there is only one way to find out the truth, and that is by flogging (22:22-24). When Paul tells the soldiers that he is a Roman citizen, they quickly untie him. They know how close they themselves have come to being law-breakers (22:25-29).

We will learn from this section the misunderstandings and its consequences in the Lord’s ministry through Paul.

Scriptural Reading: Acts 22:1-21

Things to learn: 1) Misunderstood Plans. 2) Misunderstood Message 3) Misunderstood Ministry

Read the introduction to this study and Acts 21:1-22:29

Questions:

1). Paul at the end of his third mission trip plans to end up in Jerusalem. In what ways did the friends of Paul misunderstand his plans (Acts 21:1-17)?

2). How did the Jerusalem Church misunderstand Paul’s message in Acts 21:18–26?

3). Review Paul’s explanation to the Jews who misunderstood his ministry (refer Acts 21:27-22:29)?