

# Study 33: Acts 21

## ***Introduction***

Paul headed back to Jerusalem, hoping to be there by Pentecost. He knew that trouble awaited him, but didn't know what that entailed – but was prepared to go whatever the consequences.

As Paul made his way back to Jerusalem, the trouble awaiting him was reinforced, and its nature became clearer.

***Timing:***            *When did these events occur?*

***Content:***           *What are the major events?*

***Cast:***              *Who are the major players?*

## ***Body of the Study***

***The trip back***

***What happened at Tyre and Caesarea?***

***What does it mean that Philip's daughters were prophetesses?***

***What does Paul do when he comes to Jerusalem?***

***What reception did Paul get?***

***What happens to Paul when he is seen in the Temple?***

## **Homework:**

*Read the notes as a review of the study.*

- *How soon is the prophecy of Paul's binding and arrest fulfilled after he gets to Jerusalem?*
- *What were the outstanding events out of Paul's three missionary journey?*

*Read chapter 22 in preparation for next week*

# Notes for study 33: Acts chapter 21

## *Introduction*

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As Paul made his way back to Jerusalem, the trouble awaiting him was reinforced, and its nature became clearer.

**Timing:**            *When did these events occur?*

The period of the chapter covers only a few weeks (perhaps 2 months?) in AD 58.

**Content:**            *What are the major events?*

The trip back to Jerusalem, visiting Tyre and Caesarea, Agabus' prophecy and warning against going to Jerusalem, Visit to James and the elders, Accusation of the Jews, Violence and protective custody.

**Cast:**                *Who are the major players?*

Paul, Luke, Philip, Agabus, James,.

## *Body of the Study*

### *The trip back*

The Ephesian elders escorted Paul and his party back to the ship. The journey would have taken around four weeks. The ship that they were on was heading to Patara – and (as we have already noticed), Paul had some degree of control or at least influence on the travels of the ship. The first part of the journey must have had favourable winds, for Luke described the journey as “...*running a straight course...*” (21:1). Some writers have commented that “...*in the Aegean Sea, the wind regularly comes up between midnight and dawn, blowing from the north, and continues until the next afternoon...*”<sup>1</sup>

This gives very clear support to Luke's accuracy in the narrative. Either he was there as a witness – and knew these things first hand as he claimed, – or he had done much research to provide accuracy to such a trivial piece of information, – or his mention of it was a mere coincidence. Taken in isolation, it could be passed off as a coincidence, however in combination with so many other pieces of “trivia”, Luke can only be ascribed “*among the historians of the first rank*”<sup>2</sup>

“...*We ran a straight course and came to Cos...*” (21:1 NKJV). Cos is a long narrow island about 37 km long. It was most famous as a health resort due to the hot ferrous and sulphurous springs which were used by Hippocrates (460 – 377 BC) to cure his patients. He was the father of modern medicine.<sup>3</sup>

The next day they sailed to Rhodes. This city was famed for the mighty statue over 30m high (about the size of the statue of liberty) – The Colossus of Rhodes – that was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It stood for 56 years, with one foot on each side of the harbour entrance, and the ships would pass between the legs of the statue. It was destroyed by an earthquake around 224 BC, however the remains were still visible in the harbour at the time

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<sup>1</sup> Reese, p778

<sup>2</sup> Ramsay, p4

<sup>3</sup> International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, p.786

of Paul's visit. The remains were sold to a Jew in 600 AD, and it took 900 camels to carry away the brass<sup>4</sup>.

From Rhodes the ship headed to Patara, a harbour on the coast of Lycia. It was here that Paul changed ships. This suggests that if Paul was in charge of the ship, that the owner of the ship did not want to go any further, or perhaps the small ship that he had chartered was not suitable for a journey across the broader stretch of sea. The ship had called at Rhodes, as well as Miletus (where it stayed for several days). This suggests that the sole purpose of the journey might not have been to transport Paul and his company, but rather to transport cargo – and the passengers were just a convenient bonus that could be easily accommodated, and some flexibility given to their journey and requests. Another possibility is that the ship that he had been on was a coastal trader, and would have continued at a slow pace, when Paul was trying to get to Jerusalem rather in a hurry. Adding up the time that Paul has spent since leaving Philippi, 29 or 30 days passed before his arrival in Tyre.

The trip across the Mediterranean to Phoenicia was 650 km and required a larger ship to undertake the journey that would have taken 4 or 5 days. They came within sight of Cyprus, but did not stop and sailed to the South, and headed straight for Syria. They arrived at Tyre, and it was “...there the ship was to unload her cargo...” (21:3 NKJV). Tyre was a major port in that part of Syria, and whilst Paul was waiting for the unloading, he stayed there for 7 days and was able to spend time with the brethren. This is the first specific mention of brethren in Tyre, although 11:19 and 15:3 mention evangelising in Phoenicia.

After a week, Paul moved on with the ship to Ptolemais where he stays only for a short one-day visit, and then came to Caesarea. At this point Paul and his company left the ship and completed the journey to Jerusalem overland.

### **What happened at Tyre and Caesarea?**

Paul had to go and “look up the disciples” at Tyre, and so it is obvious that they neither expected him nor were forewarned of his coming. The seven-day stay must have included at least one first day of the week, and the worship assembly. Some of the brethren must have had the gift of prophecy – whether this gift came from those who were travelling with Paul, or from within those at Tyre, we are not told. The prophets forewarned Paul about the coming dangers at Jerusalem, and “...They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem...” (21:4 NKJV) – even to set foot in the place.

Paul and his companions had obviously developed a strong rapport with the brethren in Tyre, and when they were about to leave, it seems that the whole church came down to the sea shore to see them off “...and they all accompanied us, with the wives and children...” (21:5 NKJV). Like the departure from the Ephesian elders, the parting was one of the breaking of a bond, and in like manner was fittingly ended in prayer together “...And we knelt down on the shore and prayed...” (21:5 NKJV).

When Paul came to Caesarea, he found “...Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven...” (21:8 NKJV) deacons appointed in Jerusalem in chapter 6, and is last mentioned in 8:40 as having made his way to Caesarea. It sounds as if he had been there for at least 20 years. The description of Philip “...the evangelist...” is one of only 3 places in the New Testament that this word is used (the others are Eph 4:11; 2 Tim 4:5). The Greek word translated *evangelist* has the same root as the word translated *gospel*. So an evangelist is a proclaimer of the gospel – “a gospeller” or a proclaimer of “the good news”.

Whilst at Caesarea, “...a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea...” (21:10 NKJV). He was previously mentioned in 11:28, where he predicted that a large drought was to occur. The stay in Caesarea was for “...many days...” (21:10), and news of Paul's arrival must have reached Jerusalem, and allowed sufficient time for Agabus to come down and visit Paul. Agabus would have been (naturally) aware of any discontent amongst the Jews towards Paul, and was (supernaturally) given instruction by the Holy Spirit to warn Paul of what lay

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<sup>4</sup> Dale, Edsil L “Acts Comments” Cincinnati Ohio, quoted by Reese, p778

ahead. "...he took Paul's belt, and bound his own hands and feet..." (21:11 NKJV). He proclaimed "...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'..." (21:11 NKJV). Paul's companions and the brethren in Caesarea "...pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem..." (21:12 NKJV). However Paul insisted that he was going to go (just as he had in the other occasions) "...Paul answered, 'Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.'..." (21:13 NIV).

### **What does it mean that Philip's daughters were prophetesses?**

Philip "...had four virgin daughters who prophesied..." (21:9 NKJV). They certainly had the gift of prophecy, which was one of the miraculous spiritual gifts given through the laying on of the apostle's hands (1 Cor 12:10). The gift of prophecy might have been used for predicting future events (as Agabus had done as recorded in this chapter), or to proclaim a message from God given by inspiration.

A more interesting question is how, where, and when they used their gift. Paul forbade the women in Corinth from prophesying in the assembly:

*"...As in all the congregations of the saints, <sup>34</sup> women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. <sup>35</sup> If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church..." (1 Cor 14:34 NIV)*

Paul further instructs Timothy that women are not to take a teaching role in the church:

*"...A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. <sup>12</sup> I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. <sup>13</sup> For Adam was formed first, then Eve. <sup>14</sup> And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner..." (1 Tim 2:11-12 NIV)*

Rather than Philip's daughters giving precedent to women in leadership and teaching positions in the church, it is in perfect harmony of all three passages that the four daughters of Philip prophesied only in locations and times where they were teaching women, and not usurping God's order of authority: God – Christ – man – woman. Those who had the spiritual gifts had control over the exercise of the gifts (1 Cor 14:32) so it cannot be argued that that they were speaking as directed by the Holy Spirit, and therefore unable to control their actions. Such control was exactly what Paul was arguing in 1 Cor 14:27-34.

### **What does Paul do when he comes to Jerusalem?**

Paul brought with him to Jerusalem, the eight brethren who had travelled with him from Corinth, as well as some of the brethren from Caesarea (21:16), so there must have been around 12 or so of them all together. They also brought the large sum of money that had been collected for the poor saints in Jerusalem.

Luke counted down the days since they left Philippi, and allowing for travelling time and their stay in Caesarea, they must have arrived in Caesarea with several days to spare. Counting the days, Luke leaves us in no doubt that they arrived in Jerusalem before the feast of Pentecost (around 40 days had passed after they left Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread. Pentecost was 50 days after the Sabbath of the Passover week). As always, Jerusalem would have been extremely busy with travellers from all over the world, and it was most likely during the feast that the dispute with Paul over Trophimus arose.

The day after arriving, Paul went to visit James, also taking Luke "...with us..." (21:18) and some other brethren as well. We don't know which James this was, but it was either James the Lord's brother who had presided over the Jerusalem conference (15:13; Gal 1:19; 2:9-12), or it could have been James the son of Alphaeus. James the brother of John had already been put to death (12:2). The James in question is distinguished from the elders in this verse, so he most likely was not an elder. In whatever capacity, he was widely respected by the brethren and the apostles.

Paul related “...in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry...” (21:19 NKJV). Some of these events were his three years in Ephesus, his revisiting of the brethren in Galatia, Asia Minor, and Europe, and his eighteen months in Corinth. Of note would be the turning around of idol worship in Ephesus, and the problems of immorality which was put in order in Corinth. And of course, the bountiful gift to the Jerusalem brethren from the brethren scattered throughout Europe and Asia.

### **What reception did Paul get?**

A rift still existed between the Jews and the Gentiles. Despite the Jerusalem conference that was 7 years earlier, the animosity still remained. Paul’s work amongst the Gentiles was well recognised, but the numbers of Jewish believers had also grown greatly. The Jewish believers were zealous to keep the Law, they had heard many things about Paul’s work, and had supposed that he had been saying to the Jews – that they should forsake the Law of Moses. James tells Paul “...You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. <sup>21</sup> They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs...” (21:20-21 NIV).

Discussion on the place of the Law, and the keeping of the traditions was given in study 24 (“Circumcision”). The Law of Moses had been nailed to the cross, and was of no effect, but the Jews kept *the practice* because of their Nationality.

What the Jews had heard about Paul’s practice and teaching was rumour and hearsay, and was not what he was doing and teaching at all. The accusations against Paul were:

- You teach all the Jews (true)
- Who are amongst the Gentiles (true)
- To forsake Moses (partly true)
- Telling them not to circumcise their children (false)
- Nor to follow Jewish customs (false)

The Christians were to cease following the Law of Moses as a religious practice – for salvation is in Christ, not Moses – and the Law was only our schoolmaster (tutor) to bring us to Christ. Now that we have attained perfection through Christ, we no longer need the schoolmaster (Gal 3:23-29). But the Jewish civil and civic practices still continued. Paul never advocated their abandonment, nor did he ever command that the Gentiles should follow and keep them.

Four men who were evidently Jewish Christians had taken a vow, apparently a Nazarite vow, and they must have become unclean during the period of the vow. This could occur by (for example) touching a dead body or an unclean animal, and required an act of purification, and the period of the vow to start over again. This gave Paul the opportunity to show that he himself also kept and practiced the Law, and gave the Jewish brethren first hand experience of his Jewish practice, and squelched the rumours. James and the elders instructed Paul to go with these four men “...Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law...” (21:24 NIV).

The main points from the Jerusalem decree were re-iterated again – “...that Gentiles should abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality...” (21:25)

Paul followed the request, and went and purified himself along with the brethren. This included Paul going into the Temple (21:26).

### **What happens to Paul when he is seen in the Temple?**

Paul was seen by some of the Jews from Asia. They must have come to Jerusalem for the feast, and had recognised Trophimus the Ephesian, and seen him with Paul. He had come with Paul in bringing the gift to Jerusalem (20:4), and must have been a Gentile. The next day, the

Jews saw Paul in the Temple and concluded that he had taken Trophimus into the Temple with him. This was not the case, and Paul was falsely accused.

Archaeologists have uncovered signs from the Temple in Jerusalem that says:

*No man of alien race is to enter within the barricade which surrounds the Temple. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for the penalty of death that follows.*

Needless to say, all of the Jews were in uproar against Paul “...*And all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple...*” (21:30 NKJV). The penalty of defiling the Temple was death – even to Roman citizens – and the Jews were about to administer it to Paul “...*while they were trying to kill him...*” (21:31 NIV). The commotion was huge, and attracted the attention of the Roman soldiers who overlooked the Temple courts from the fortress of Antonia above. The commander of the garrison (*chiliarch*) was a man who was in charge of 1000 men plus 120 horsemen. “...*He immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them...*” (21:32 NKJV). The soldiers would have calmed the riot very quickly. The centurions that he took with him were each in charge of 100 men. “...*And when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul...*” (21:32 NKJV).

The soldiers who rescued Paul thought that he was an Egyptian (21:38), and they were surprised that he spoke Greek (21:37). Several years before, an Egyptian revolutionary had deceived the people, claiming to be a prophet. He was supposed to have “...*led four thousand terrorists out into the wilderness...*” (21:38). Josephus says that the man had a following of 30,000 people, although he is inconsistent with the number.<sup>5</sup> Josephus appears to have exaggerated the number, and Luke’s record records what the commander said, not necessarily the accuracy of the original event.

The Romans tried to find out why Paul was being beaten, but received an inconsistent story from those beating him “...*some among the multitude cried one thing and some another. And when he could not ascertain the truth because of the tumult, he commanded him to be taken into the barracks...*” (21:34 NKJV). Paul was taken into custody – probably both as protection in the interim – and also in readiness for punishment when the charge had been ascertained.

Paul appealed to the commander to let him speak to the people, in the hope that he might be able to clear up any misunderstanding that may have occurred. He introduces himself as:

- A Jew
- From Tarsus (out of town)
- A not insignificant city (Paul may have intended to imply his Roman citizenship)

Paul then spoke to them in *Hebrew*. The NIV translates this as *Aramaic* on the basis that this would have been a more common language. However the text says *Ebraidi* (Hebrew), and the word is translated as Hebrew in every occurrence in the KJV.

In conclusion it is worth noticing in passing that the original transcript by Luke did not have chapters and verses. These were added around 1000 years later to assist (correctly) in finding the location of the thoughts that are conveyed by the writing. There is no place in the New Testament where the chapter break is so inappropriately placed as the mid-sentence break between Acts 21 and Acts 22.

*To go to next study, click here*  
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<sup>5</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, book 20, 8:6; *Wars of the Jews*, Book 2, 13:5