

Acts

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Rumors In Jerusalem

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Acts 21:15-36

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Introduction:

Good morning, Redeemer! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 21.

Over the last few weeks, we have been followed Paul as he has completed something of a “farewell tour.” He has been visiting the churches in Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia to say his goodbyes, to give his final instructions and – according to his letter to the Romans – to gather money to help support the Christians living in Jerusalem. Romans 15 says:

I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. ²⁵ At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem **bringing aid to the saints**. (Romans 15:24-25 ESV)

I want to take a brief moment to remind you why Paul was collecting this “Jerusalem offering” because it will help us to have a fuller understanding of our text for this morning.

In the earliest days of the church, the relationship between Jewish Christians and non-Jewish or Gentile Christians was volatile. These two groups of people were bound together by their faith in Jesus, but they had massive cultural differences that threatened to divide them.

These Jewish men and women had been taught all their lives that Gentiles were *unclean*. Gentiles were *not descendants of Abraham's family*. Gentiles were *not the children of the promise*.

But then Jesus came, and he reminded us that God’s plan of redemption is not limited to one ethnic group; it is a plan that overflows to the nations! Way back in Genesis 22, God spoke to Abraham and promised:

and through your offspring **all nations on earth will be blessed** (Genesis 22:18a NIV)

Do you see that? *Through* Abraham’s seed – *through* the child of the promise – ALL THE NATIONS will be blessed. That was ALWAYS the plan! Paul picks up this promise in Galatians 3 and explains:

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” **who is Christ**. (Galatians 3:16 ESV)

So, all the promises of blessing and hope and a future – all the promises of resurrection and eternal life – all the promises LAND ON and FIND THEIR FULFILLMENT IN JESUS – the TRUE OFFSPRING of Abraham. Therefore, if you want to receive God’s blessing, it doesn’t matter who your parents are or what your nationality is. It doesn’t matter if you are a Jew or if you are a Gentile. ALL THAT MATTERS is whether or not you are in right relationship with Jesus.

This doesn’t seem like a big deal to us, but it was a MASSIVE paradigm shift for the early church! And it was a *particularly* hard pill to swallow for those who had grown up as devout, Law-observing, Gentile-avoiding Jews.

Paul was doing his very best to overcome this division in the church, and he had every hope that this Jerusalem offering would finally bind the church together. Gentile Christians from Macedonia, Achaia and Asia pooled their resources and sent a generous gift to help the struggling Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. They also sent representatives on a 1,600-mile journey to express their love. We were introduced to these representatives in Acts 20:4-5. So, in our passage this morning, Paul and this team of representatives make their way into Jerusalem bearing a generous financial gift to help the struggling Jewish Christians. Look with me to Acts 21:15-36. Hear now God’s holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

¹⁵ After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem.¹⁶ And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge.

¹⁷ When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. ¹⁸ On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. ¹⁹ After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. ²⁰ And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, ²¹ and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.²² What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. ²³ Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; ²⁴ take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. ²⁵ But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.” ²⁶ Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.

²⁷ When the seven days were almost completed, 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 is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even 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, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. ³⁰ Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. ³¹ And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.³² He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. ³³ Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. ³⁴ Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. ³⁵ And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, ³⁶ for the mob of the people followed, crying out, “Away with him!” (Acts 21:15-36 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

This was not the outcome that Paul and his companions were hoping for when they travelled to Jerusalem with their gift for the church. At the heart of this story, we find a powerful example of what it means to follow Jesus. But before we will be able to get to the *heart* of the story, we will need to take the time to understand the *details* of the story.

The Details Of The Story

First, if we want to understand the heart of this story then we need to understand:

1. The problem

When Paul and his companions entered Jerusalem, they were greeted warmly by James and the elders in Jerusalem. However, very early into the visit James needed to break some bad news to Paul. In verses 20-21, James explains:

You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law,²¹ and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. (Acts 21:20b-21 ESV)

Essentially, James says: “God is doing a great thing here, Paul! Thousands of Jews have come to faith in Christ! But unfortunately, none of these new believers like you because they’ve heard some rumors...”

Now, we’re going to deal with the *substance* of those rumor in just a moment, but first I want to challenge you to try to empathize with how this report must have hit Paul.

Think about how HARD he worked to try to cultivate unity. History tells us that the flogging and the stoning and the beatings that Paul had endured had taken a massive toll on his body. By all accounts, at this point in his life and ministry Paul was scarred, bow-legged, and nearly blind. Yet, at great cost to himself he travelled hundreds of miles back and forth to the Gentile churches to pitch this vision and to collect this offering. Why? Because he wanted *so badly* for these Jewish and Gentile Christians to put aside their differences and come together!

And now here he is! He has done it! After years of Herculean effort, Paul enters Jerusalem accompanied with representatives from each of the Gentile cities bearing warm greetings and a generous gift for the poor! No doubt exhausted and relieved, he joins James and the Jerusalem elders hoping to worship together and to celebrate all that God has done! But one of the first

things he hears is, “Paul, the new Christians in Jerusalem really don’t like you. You should hear the nasty things they say about you when you’re not around!”

Let me make sure you don’t miss this: These are *believers* that are slandering Paul! This defamation is circulating – not in the *community* – but in the *congregation*! Paul’s not being insulted by the *outside world* – he’s being insulted by the *people of God*!

Listen: Paul knew what it was like to come face to face with the shortcomings of the church. He saw the good, but he also saw the bad and the ugly.

And he loved the church anyway.

He loved them, even though they whispered nasty things about him behind his back. He loved them, even though they sinned against him. He loved them, because that’s the model that Jesus set for us. Jesus laid down his life for the church knowing full well that it would be full of messy, broken people like you and me.

A little later, we are going to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, and I am going to ask you whether or not you are extending the forgiveness that you have received out to those who have sinned against you. Because that’s what it means to be a grace-filled follower of Jesus. We lay down our grudges. We lay down our need to have the last word. Part of being a Christian means looking honestly at the shortcomings and sins of others and choosing to extend the same love and mercy that Jesus extended to us.

But now, let’s turn our attention back to the rumors, and let’s consider what these people were saying. Look again at verse 21:

they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. (Acts 21:21 ESV)

The people who were slandering Paul simply misunderstood his teaching. Paul preached that a Gentile does not need to become a Jew in order to come to Jesus. He does not need to receive

circumcision. He does not need to come under the Mosaic covenant. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. (Ephesians 2:8a ESV)

Paul taught that Gentiles didn't need to become Jews to come to Jesus. But they misunderstood Paul, and they claimed that he was saying that Jews needed to *become* Gentiles¹ in order to come to Jesus! They thought that Paul was attacking their heritage – that he was forbidding Jewish families to circumcise their boys and that he was forcing Jewish people to forsake their conscience and to eat foods that were ceremonially unclean.

That was the essence of the rumor, and it was spreading rapidly amongst the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. This was a problem. However, James and the Jerusalem elders had a plan:

2. The plan

We find the plan in verses 23-24 where James explains:

Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; ²⁴take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. (Acts 21:23-24 ESV)

The “vow” that they are referring to here is most likely the Nazarite vow. Back in chapter 18, Paul made this same vow himself. It was a way of dedicating oneself to the Lord in a particularly trying time – something like the way that we practice fasting today. These vows were unique to the Jews. Therefore, if Paul would openly pay for these four men to fulfil their vows, it would clearly display that he was NOT forcing Jewish Christians to abandon their Jewish heritage.

The rumors would stop. The church would welcome Paul. And everyone would come together in unity. That was the plan.

¹ Credit to Eckhard Schnabel for this language. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 877.

In order to go into the temple with these men, Paul would need to jump through some hoops. One commentator explains:

Coming from abroad, Paul would have had to regain ceremonial purity by a seven-day ritual of purification before he could be present at the absolution ceremony of the four Jewish Christians in the Jerusalem temple.²

Now, it needs to be said at this point that Paul would never have gone along with this plan if it obscured the gospel in any way. He wouldn't, for example, go to the temple to pay for a *sin offering* because Jesus is the once-for-all sin offering. To do that would be to compromise on the message of the gospel itself, and Paul would never do that – not even for the sake of unity.

But, while paying for the Nazirite vows of these four men was an extra expense, and while the purification was a bit of a nuisance, it did not compromise the gospel. So, Paul went ahead with it in an attempt to extend an olive branch to the believers who were spreading rumors about him.

Before we jump ahead to see how this played out, I want to ask you a question: Would Paul have been justified if he chose not to go along with this plan? Didn't he have every right to say no? Think about it: Why is HE the one who is being asked to make a gesture of peace? This blind, crippled man just travelled over 800 miles to bring a financial gift to this church! Was that not enough? These other believers are running around sinning against Paul with their gossip! How come Paul is the one who needs to jump through hoops?

How many of us would be tempted to say, "How's this for a plan, James? Why don't you and the elders start exercising your leadership and call these new believers out for their gossip?! Why don't we start there?" Or how many of us would want to double down and say, "If they're so determined to be offended, then how about I lay out my picnic blanket in the court of the Gentiles and take a big bite of my pork sandwich! I'll show them what gospel freedom really looks like."

But Paul didn't do that, did he? He went ahead with the plan. Because he was more committed to the unity of the church than he was to his own rights. In fact, one of the prominent marks of Paul's

² Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 520.

life and ministry was this willingness to lay down his rights for the sake of others. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul explains:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, **that I might win more of them.** (1 Corinthians 9:19 ESV)

I like the way that one commentator explains this. He writes:

A truly emancipated spirit such as Paul's is not in bondage to its own emancipation.³

That is a powerful line. Paul was *so* free, that he wasn't bound – even by his *freedom*.

Paul was *free* to say no to this plan. Paul was *free* to say no to the purification ceremony. Paul was *free* to say no to paying for these vows. Paul was *free* to simply move on from this congregation that had slandered him. Paul was *free*, but he willingly laid it all down. THAT is true freedom.

The puritan Richard Sibbes suggests:

It would be a good contest amongst Christians, one to labour to give no offense, and the other to labour to take none.⁴

Christian, how far are you willing to go to make peace? How low are you willing to humble yourself for the sake of others? How much forgiveness can you extend for the glory of God?

Paul submitted himself to the plan. Unfortunately, as is often the case, even as Paul made sacrifices to pursue peace, he found himself swept up into conflict. This brings us to the last detail in the story:

3. The pushback

Some of the Jews from Asia spotted Paul in the temple and decided that they wanted to put an end to his influence once and for all. In verse 28, they cry out:

³ F.F. Bruce as quoted in I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 346.

⁴ Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1630, 1998), 26.

“Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.” (Acts 21:28 ESV)

Now, they were saying this because they knew that Paul was in the city with Gentiles and so they wrongly assumed that he had brought the Gentiles into the restricted area of the temple with him.

I. Howard Marshall observes here:

It is ironical that this should have been the charge against Paul at a time when he himself was undergoing purification so that he would not defile the temple!⁵

To be clear, there was NO truth to this accusation. But once the accusation was shouted in the public square the facts became irrelevant. The accusation that had been hurled against Paul was deathly serious. Between the inner courts and the court of the Gentiles, there were signs that read:

“No foreigner is to enter within the balustrade and embankment around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his death which follows”⁶

The suggestion that Paul had attempted to sneak an unclean Gentile into the inner courts of the temple was so offensive that the crowd immediately seized him and dragged him out of the temple. The penalty for such a heinous offense was death, and they had every intention of inflicting that sentence on their prisoner. We read in verses 31-32:

And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.³² He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, **they stopped beating Paul.** (Acts 21:31-32 ESV)

By the time the Roman soldiers arrive on the scene, the mob is in the process of beating Paul to death.

Next Sunday we'll consider Paul's arrest and his address to the crowd, but this morning – as we prepare our hearts to come to the Lord's Supper – I want to stop and reflect on what we have seen.

⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Leicester, England: inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 347.

⁶ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelein, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 521-522.

Paul entered Jerusalem with a generous gift for the church and with bright hopes of unity! Yet, he was assaulted with rumors, saddled with further obligations, and then pummelled by an angry mob.

Now that we have taken the time to understand the details of this story, I want to conclude by drawing your attention to what I believe is the *heart* of this story.

The Heart Of The Story

In this story Paul is clearly not being treated the way that he deserves. He enters Jerusalem with an expensive offering of peace, and he is met with resentment and rumors. He has given *everything* of himself, but they demand *more*. In humility, he agrees to pay the price for restoration even though the sinful slanderers should be the ones making the effort. He is met with more false accusations. He is rejected by the people he came to help. He is beaten. The crowd calls out for his death. And one wonders: Why would Paul subject himself to this?

We catch a glimpse into Paul's answer in his letter to the Corinthians where he writes:

Be imitators of me, **as I am of Christ.** (1 Corinthians 11:1 ESV)

In every area of Paul's life, his desire was to resemble Jesus and we see that resemblance SO clearly in this story.

Some 22 years before Paul entered Jerusalem with *his* offering, Jesus walked through the same streets as THE ultimate peace offering.

He too was met with false accusations, and angry mobs, and merciless beatings.

As Jesus stumbled under the weight of his cross the people that he came to save mocked him, and spat at him, and abandoned him, and shouted "Crucify him!"

Paul understood the example that had been set before him. He was not naïve to what Jesus meant when he commanded:

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.
(Matthew 16:24b ESV)

Take up your cross.

Sometimes you will be hated by the people that you are giving your life to save.

Sometimes you will be slandered by the people that you are pouring yourself out to help.

Sometimes you will be abandoned by the people that you are so earnestly committed to.

Sometimes that's what it will look like to take up your cross. That is the call. In 1 Peter 4 we read:

Beloved, **do not be surprised at the fiery trial** when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. (1 Peter 4:12-13 ESV)

Insofar as you share in Christ's sufferings, you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed! It was as Paul was preparing for this journey to Jerusalem that he wrote to the Romans and explained:

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, **provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.** (Romans 8:16-17 ESV)

Suffering now. Glory forever. A cross today. Eternal life tomorrow. Down. Then up. That is the pattern for the Christian life – the pattern modelled by our Saviour and empowered by His Spirit in us – and it is only when we see and understand that pattern that we will be enabled to lay down our freedoms, overlook offense, and labour on in weakness and rejoicing. Paul understood this. Paul lived this. And then, Paul wrote:

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1 ESV)

To that end, let's pray together.