



37 | ACTS 21:17-36

MAGNIFYING GOD ALONE

Instead of magnifying our fear or our circumstances, we need to magnify our great and glorious, infinite, and loving God.

Outline

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Call to Worship

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises! ⁵ Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre, with the lyre and the sound of melody! ⁶ With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord! —Psalm 98:4-6

Songs

O Praise the Name

Bow the Knee

Above All

Give Me Oil in My Lamp

Christ Our Hope In Life And Death

Announcements

WELCOME: We are glad you are here! Be sure to grab a Welcome Packet if you are visiting with us.

Introduction

Do you ever **fear bad news?** The email from work. The message from the doctor. The text message from a hurting relative. Maybe it's the conversation you need to have with a spouse or family member. David says it

Psalm 112:1, 7-8 | Blessed is the man who fears the LORD ... ⁷ He is not afraid of bad news; his heart is firm, trusting in the LORD. ⁸ His heart is steady; he will not be afraid.

We **don't have to live in fear** of a difficult trial we might go through, or a trying season of our marriage, or someone's words against us. We don't have to fear what's going to happen in our state or country? What about my health? Lots of things confront us that may bring suffering into our lives. But here's the truth: we as believers don't need to be afraid if we have a big view of God. Instead of magnifying our fear or our circumstances, we need to magnify our great, infinite, loving God. I think of David's motto when difficulties overwhelmed him.

Psalm 34:3 | Oh, **magnify the LORD with me**, and let us exalt his name together!

It reminds me of a story of a famous college coach. **Luigi Piccolo**, or better known as "Lou Little" was football coach at Georgetown University from 1924-1929. Back then, he had on his squad a player of average ability who rarely got into the game. But Coach Little was fond of him. He especially liked the way he **walked arm-in-arm with his father** on campus. One day, shortly before **a big game with Fordham**, the boy's mother called with the news that **his father had died that morning** of a heart attack.

The student went home with a heavy heart but was back three days later. "**Coach**," he pleaded, "**will you start me in the game against Fordham?** I think that is what my father would have enjoyed most." After a moment's hesitation, Little said, "Okay, **but only for a play** or two."

True to his word, he **put the boy in—but he never took him out**. For sixty action-packed minutes that inspired young man **ran and blocked like an All-American**. After the game the coach praised him. "Son, you have never played like that before. **What got into you?**"

"Remember how my father and I used to go arm-in-arm?" answered the boy. "Well, **he was totally blind, and today was the first time he ever saw me play!**" The young football player's desire to please someone he loved—someone not visibly present—made all the difference. **His love for his father was magnified!**

The Apostle Paul magnified the Lord! He lived, fought, and died with the abiding consciousness that he was doing it all for God. Because he served the risen Christ, he did not allow the well-meaning pleadings of his loving friends—arguments that appealed to his desire for self-comfort, even self-preservation—to sidetrack him from obeying God by going on to Jerusalem.¹

Paul's arrival in Jerusalem marked the end of his missionary journeys. He would **soon be arrested** and remain an "**ambassador in chains**" (Eph 6:20) for the remainder of

¹ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, 291.

the period covered by Acts.² Paul was eager to do God's will no matter what the cost. He refused to be controlled by fear. Instead, he magnified the greatness and glory of God.

Key Thought: Instead of magnifying our fear or our circumstances, we need to magnify our great and glorious, infinite and loving God.

How do we do that? Paul did it by getting encouragement from the church, having empathy for the seekers, understanding the spiritual warfare with the enemy, and having a heart to evangelize the lost.

1. MAGNIFY GOD WITH COMMUNITY (21:17-20A)

We need to magnify the Lord by looking to his **community**, our **forever family, his church**. Despite all the foreboding about his arrival to Jerusalem, Paul was actually delighted to get there. You need the help of your local church, your forever family, if you are going to magnify the Lord. This is clear from Paul's practice. The first thing he did when he came to Jerusalem is to seek out the brothers in the local congregation.

The most foundational truth about God's covenant people, his church, is that Jesus is the architect. He will build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail (Mt 16:18).

SUPPORT FELLOWSHIP

Acts 21:17 | When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly.

Paul no doubt **arrived in Jerusalem by the Day of Pentecost** as he had planned (20:16). What sweet fellowship Paul and his team must have had. The church received Paul and his team gladly.

How vital fellowship is when you are in a warzone. Likeminded brothers and sisters who can encourage and support you is a big part of living an abundant Christian life (1 Jn 1:7). We can't live the Christian life alone. Love must rule and reign among us.

Paul would have been deeply encouraged, but he must have wondered **whether the Gentiles' gift would be acceptable to the Jerusalem church** as a whole. Much would hang on his meeting with James and the other elders (21:18).³ He met with **the pastor and elders in Jerusalem** the next day.

SUBMIT TO LEADERSHIP

Acts 21:18 | On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.

James is the half-brother of our Lord Jesus Christ. What a joy for James to hear of Paul's great expeditions for the church of Jesus Christ. Certainly, the leadership of Jerusalem church were **pleased and grateful for the generous expression** of love from the Gentile churches in the **much needed offering** Paul and the others brought (2 Cor 8:20).⁴

² MacArthur, *Acts*, vol. 2, 247.

³ Bruce, *Acts: Bible Study Commentary*, Ac 21:15-26.

⁴ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol. 2, 247.

Paul's collection for the Jerusalem church occupies significant portions of his letters (1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8:1-9:15; Rom 15:14-32). What compelled Paul to raise funds among his Gentile converts for the poor in Jerusalem? First, he's helping those who have been affected financially among the Jews. **A very severe famine occurred in Judea** around 46-47 A.D. and support was needed for the ⁵ Paul's reasoning is found in Romans 15. Listen to his appeal to the Gentiles at the church at Rome.

Romans 15:26-27 | For Macedonia [Philippi] and Achaia [Corinth] have been pleased to make some **contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem**. ²⁷ For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.

Another reason for the offering for the Jerusalem church was to bring **solidarity with the churches in Gentile lands**. Paul was **accompanied by the representatives of the Gentile churches** who had come up to Jerusalem with him. We may assume that the presence of the latter was connected with the presentation of the collection to the Jerusalem church (Acts 24:17). From Luke's point of view the **Gentile brothers were present to confirm Paul's account of his successful missionary campaign**.⁶

CELEBRATE PARTNERSHIP

Acts 21:19-20a | After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. ^{20a} And when they heard it, they glorified God.

Happily, all seemed to go well. The **Jerusalem elders glorified God** when they heard Paul's report of his Gentile evangelism and church planting. The Jerusalem leaders had **agreed years before** that **Paul should minister to the Gentiles** (Gal 2:7-10), and the elders rejoiced at what they heard. One by one, Paul related the incredible events that had occurred. He gave a full and accurate account, not of what he had done, but of what the Lord had done through his ministry (*cf* 1 Cor 15:10).⁷

How amazing it must have been to have the **Gentile converts there as a visual representation of God's goodness** to the Jerusalem elders (*cf* 20:4-6).⁸ It's also appropriate that all this happened at the Feast of Pentecost. Remember what the Lord said before he had ascended?

Acts 1:8 | 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.

God had fulfilled what he had promised! God builds the community of the saints. We are his workmanship, his masterpiece, his new creation (Eph 2:10). And now Paul is in Jerusalem at the **Feast of Pentecost where it had all began** so many years before. It's around 57 A.D. and the Holy Spirit was poured out at Jerusalem around 33

⁵ Bruce W. Winter, "Acts and Food Shortages," in *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting*, ed. David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 59-78.

⁶ Marshall, *Acts*, 362.

⁷ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1, 490.

⁸ Bruce, *Acts: Bible Study Commentary*, Ac 21:15-26.

A.D. It's been a bit over twenty years, and here are the Gentile converts standing in their midst.

Application: What God is doing is around his forever family, the community of those justified in Christ. Are you as committed to Christ's community as he is? Paul committed to be the vessel of the Lord to build his church. **What are you doing to build the local church?** Are you the Lord's vessel and instrument in his hand?

2. MAGNIFY GOD WITH EXPANSION (21:20B-26)

We need to magnify the Lord by looking to his **expansion** of God's kingdom. Paul enjoyed **fellowship with the community of saints** at Jerusalem, and he's reaching so many Gentiles for Christ. Of course, new church members means new culture, and there seemed to be some misunderstanding by some of the Jewish believers as to what Paul was teaching.

EXPECT HOSTILITY

In their delight of Paul's ministry, **the elders bring a concern to Paul**. So many Gentiles are coming to Christ, and **rumors are spreading that Paul doesn't care about the Old Testament law** of Moses.

Acts 21:20b-22 | 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."

Though the elders rejoiced with Paul's ministry, there were still people around who were intensely suspicious of Paul. **The rumors were false**, but you could see how they could misunderstand Paul. They were saying that Paul was telling Jewish Christians to basically stop being Jewish. Indeed, Paul proclaimed that Christ was the end of the law (Rom 10:4), but there is no evidence that he actively persuaded Jewish Christians to forego circumcising their children or to give up Jewish customs.⁹

Paul was dealing with misinformation and slander. The Bible is clear that spreading rumors in the church without any discussion with the person you are talking about was a problem in the early church, and it's a problem in our church from time to time. We are called to go privately and gather information instead of gossiping and spreading rumors.

That reminds me of a story about a lady in an eastern land who repeated a bit of gossip about a neighbor, and within a short time the whole town knew the story. The slandered person was deeply hurt and most unhappy. But then the lady responsible for spreading the rumor learned that it was completely untrue, so she went to a wise old sage to find out what she could do to repair the damage. After listening to her problem, he said, "Go to the marketplace, purchase a fowl, and have it killed. Then on your way home pluck its feathers

⁹ Marshall, *Acts*, 362-363.

one by one and drop them along the path!” Though surprised by this unusual advice, the woman did as she was told.

The next day she informed the man that she had done as instructed. “Now go and collect all those feathers and bring them back to me,” the sage said. The lady followed the same path, but to her dismay the wind had blown all the feathers away. After searching all day long, she returned with only two or three in hand. “You see,” said the old wise man, “it is easy to drop them, but impossible to bring them all back. Likewise, it does not take much to spread a false rumor, but you can never completely undo the wrong.” We Christians must take this to heart!¹⁰

Just when we think all is going well, Satan has his schemes to try and **disrupt the unity of the saints** and our fellowship with the Lord.

When God is doing great things, especially when new cultures are being reached with the gospel, the devil brings many challenges and much confusion. A challenge is made to the heart of Paul’s ministry.

What about you? Are you open to God reaching new cultures with the gospel **no matter what opposition you might face**? We seem to be happy if God is reaching people that are just like us. But heaven will not be filled with people mostly like you. He is saving people from every nation under heaven. Satan hates the expansion of the church, but we are called to lay down our lives no matter what the opposition.

WORK FOR UNITY

Paul had come to the elders and told them: God is working mightily, and they glorified God, but they let Paul know, “There is some misinformation among the people going on.” They didn’t have email where they could email everyone, so they decided to make a public demonstration of Paul’s love for the Jewish people. The elders at Jerusalem had an idea for **Paul to pay for a Thanksgiving offering** at the temple.

Acts 21:23-25 | “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. ²⁵But 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.”

In order to clarify that in Paul’s ministry of evangelism to Gentiles, that he is not telling Jews to stop being Jewish, the elders present an idea to Paul. James, it appears, recommended that Paul should openly endorse and support something very Jewish, the Nazarite vows of several men. Paul had taken a similar vow himself (see on 18:18 and Nu. 6:1–21), so he would not be supporting something merely for political reasons. James hoped that by such participation, **everyone would know there is no truth in these reports about Paul**.¹¹ James, in the **letter from the Jerusalem council**, was clear that Gentiles did not have to live like Jews, as the letter at the counsel of Jerusalem stated. But it would now be clear that Paul is not forbidding the Jews from being Jewish.

¹⁰ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, 293.

¹¹ Conrad Gempf, “Acts,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1100.

Was this the wisest advice? It's not that important. Their motives were good, but Paul's life is not in the hands of the elders of Jerusalem. **All of us children of God are in the Lord's hands.** It had already been prophesied by multiple people that **Paul would be arrested and bound in Jerusalem and be on his way to Rome.**

SACRIFICE FOR THE COMMUNITY

Paul was willing to give up his Jewish culture for the Gentiles or celebrate his Jewish culture for his countrymen, as long as Christ was exalted. His true culture and citizenship was in heaven (Phil 1:20).

Since one of Paul's desires is the unity of the church, of which the offering from Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia is also a token, he **agrees to do carry out the elders' wishes.**¹² He is empathetic to the believing Gentiles who are grafted into Israel. Paul was willing to do whatever it took to build up and edify the church, both Jew and Gentile. He was never against Jewish culture and customs since he himself was also a Jew!

Acts 21:26 | 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.

Paul was always ready to be a Jew to the Jews.¹³ This was a vow taken in gratitude for some special blessing from the hand of God. It involved abstention from meat and wine for thirty days, during which the hair had to be allowed to grow. It seems that in most cases at least the last seven days had to be spent entirely in the temple courts.

At the end of the seven days, **certain offerings had to be brought**—a year-old lamb for a sin offering, a ram for a peace offering, a basket of unleavened bread, cakes of fine flour mixed with oil and a meat offering and a drink offering. Finally, the hair had to be cut and burned on the altar with the sacrifice.¹⁴ This was an expensive ritual, and Paul was willing to cover the expenses. **Paul gave notice that he would be providing the resources and the sacrifices for all four men.** By doing this, he could live out the reality of his faith.

1 Corinthians 9:20 | To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews.

For Paul the various cultures of the world, including **his own culture, was something he was willing to give up or use to the advantage of the gospel.** For us as western Christians, we need to also at times be willing to give up our culture for the gospel's sake.

I think of **Hudson Taylor** who gave up his western culture to win the Chinese, and today there more than a hundred million believers there today. We adapt in many different ways to each other's various cultures in our own congregation, as we should. Today we have eastern brothers and sisters in with us as western brothers and sisters. Eastern worship is very different than western worship, and that's ok. **We need to be a church of many different cultures.** We want our church to match the culture of heaven, with people from every tribe and language and nation.

¹² Baker, "Acts," in *Evangelical Commentary*, 915–916.

¹³ Polhill, *Acts*, 450.

¹⁴ Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 183.

3. MAGNIFY GOD AMIDST OPPOSITION (21:27-32)

Despite Paul's best efforts in following the elders' advice, the attack of the enemy follows Paul from Asia. We understand that the enemy is already defeated.

1 John 4:4, NKJV | Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world.

LOOK TO GOD IN THE FACE OF DEFAMATION

Some of the Jewish zealots in Ephesus had followed Paul to Jerusalem to stir up strife. They hated Paul and created a conspiracy to bring him down, but **Paul is unafraid. He walks in his integrity since he did nothing wrong.**

Acts 21:27-29 | 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.

It so happened that Paul's effort toward unity instead led to disaster. It was the time of Pentecost. **Jews were present in Jerusalem once again from all over the world**, and certain Jews from Asia were there, who no doubt knew how effective Paul's work in Asia had been. They had seen Paul in the city with Trophimus, whom they most probably knew. The business of the vow had taken Paul frequently into the temple courts, and these Asian Jews assumed that Paul had taken Trophimus into the temple along with him.¹⁵ When **the devil comes to attack**, he is the **accuser of the brothers**, and he always assumes the worst.

The **accusation against Paul was that he brought a Gentile into the court of Israel**, in the temple complex, which was a death penalty offense. In the temple, separating the court of the Gentiles from the other courts, stood a wall beyond which no Gentile was allowed to go (*cf* Eph 2:14). On the wall was this solemn inscription:

No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Anyone who is caught so doing will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.

The Romans had granted the Jewish religious leaders authority to deal with anybody who broke this law, and this included **the right of execution**. This law plays an important role in what happened to Paul a week after he and the four Nazarites began their purification ceremonies.¹⁶

LOOK TO GOD IN THE FACE OF DEATH

A small riot begins at the temple mount over these accusations, so much that they have to **close the entire temple compound down** and shut the gates for a time.

¹⁵ Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 184–185.

¹⁶ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1, 491.

Acts 21:30-31 | 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. ³¹And as **they were seeking to kill him**, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.

The Jews from Asia had stirred up the whole city, so that **they started beating Paul** (21:32), and they were going to **put him to death**. They told the officer in charge of the centurions, called a "**tribune**." He was **one of the highest-ranking officers** in the Roman military, and he, by God's grace, stepped in and **saved Paul's life**.

LOOK TO GOD FOR DELIVERANCE

When word reached the Roman tribune in charge of keeping peace in the city, he ordered **soldiers and centurions to protect Paul**. The crowd was beating Paul to a pulp. They believed he had committed **a crime worthy of death**, and they were glad to help him to it.

Acts 21:32-33 | 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. ³³Then 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.

Only with the presence of Roman soldiers did the zealous Jews stop beating Paul. The soldiers arrived and arrested Paul, **binding him with chains** that would become the familiar jewelry of the apostle for most of the rest of his life. They **carried him out of the temple courts** to the steps of **the Fortress Antonia where our Lord was mocked** with a purple robe and crown of thorns.

Remember the **Lord had warned Paul** when the Lord Jesus first appeared to him how much he would have to suffer.

Acts 21:32 | I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.

Dear saint, when we are called to be joined with Christ through faith, we become members of his family and of his army. We can never rest. **We must be willing to suffer for the Lord**. Thankfully, God used a Roman platoon of soldiers to rescue the apostle, because he's got a lot more work to be done. The first order of business: he tries to address the crowd.

4. MAGNIFY GOD WITH EVANGELISM (21:34-36)

Whatever riots are rumbling on earth, God is bringing sinners to himself, and all heaven is rejoicing. Don't be so concerned about the spiritual opposition and satanic harassment on earth. Through the fog of war, God is bringing the lost to himself. **Don't magnify the obstacles. Magnify God's omnipotence to build his church**. The gates of hell will never prevail!

God can turn a mob into a miracle. He can turn a beating into a testimony time, and that's just what the Lord does.

Acts 21:34-36 | 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. ³⁵And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, ³⁶for the mob of the people followed, crying out, “Away with him!”

As Paul is bound with chains and being taken away to the Antonia Fortress. He’s mobbed by the crowd.

Paul asks to speak to the crowd (21:37), and he’s able to give his testimony. We will cover that in our next lesson. But understand that Paul had signed up for suffering as long as that suffering resulted in the expansion of the kingdom of God.

The rest of the chapter is taken up with Paul giving his testimony in detail to the crowd there. He’s able to evangelize the great crowd gathered for the **Feast of Pentecost there in 57 A.D., about 24 years after the Holy Spirit was poured out when Peter preached.**

He’s also going to be sent off to various imprisonments, including two at Rome, where the great apostle will write out seven of his thirteen New Testament letters to the churches.

The point is, whatever you are going through, learn to suffer well. God will use it to evangelize the lost. You may feel like such a failure, but if the Spirit of God is in you, he is communicating his love to a dying world through you.

The crowd cried out “Away with him” or as some translations say, “Kill him!” They wanted Paul dead. Yet Paul gave life to those wanting his death. He just kept testifying knowing he is immortal until God is finished. He magnified the Lord, not his circumstances.

Conclusion

The missionary journeys are completed. Paul had visited Jerusalem for the last. He is arrested and though he is released for a short time, for the most part, he never again finds freedom.¹⁷ Yet, where is his freedom? Though Paul is in chains, he is indeed free—**free to testify to kings and the Pretorian guard of the gospel of Jesus Christ,** and some in Caesar’s own household will come to Christ as a result. He would never have had that opportunity if he had not been incarcerated for preaching Christ. Paul was arrested, but he didn’t magnify his problems. He magnified the Lord.

In his book, William Hendricks, *Revealing Stories of Why People are Leaving the Church*, he took a survey asking folks **why they no longer attended church.** Surprisingly, the most **common complaint** was **not the music, or the facility, or that church was dull.** The most common reason given for leaving the church was that **the church did not provide them an opportunity to meet with God.** E.g., it was not ‘worshipful’ enough! They came hoping to experience something of God, to be spiritually fed, but many left empty. Hendricks wrote:

Apparently, it doesn’t matter if the service is entertaining. When interaction with God is absent, eventually the church loses its appeal.—William Henderson¹⁸

¹⁷ Boice, *Acts: An Expository Commentary*, 355.

¹⁸ William D. Hendricks, *Exit Interviews: Revealing Stories of Why People Are Leaving Church* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1993).

Dear saints, let's make sure when we come to church, we come to magnify the Lord. We need to see and experience God every moment we are together and when we are not together. That's the key. **Magnify the Lord! He's bigger than any problem we are going through.**