

ACTS of the APOSTLES: Summary of Ch. 21-23

Chapter 21

NOTE: The sub-bullets are my observations or thoughts inspired by Willie James Jennings' *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible – Acts*.

• Paul travels back to Jerusalem (21:1-16)

- In Tyre, disciples, through the Spirit, warn Paul not to go to Jerusalem (21:1-6)
 - “Through the Spirit” the disciples tell Paul not to go to Jerusalem even though Paul has already resolved through the Spirit to go to Jerusalem (Acts 19:21).
 - In this passage and the one that follows, the message from the Holy Spirit seems to contradict the message to Paul. What does this account say about the Spirit and Paul’s mission?
- In Caesarea, at the home of Philip the evangelist, prophets again warn Paul, through the Spirit, of the danger of going to Jerusalem (21:7-16)
 - Yes, this is the same Philip we last saw in Acts 8.
 - Caesarea is also where Cornelius and his family were converted (Acts 10).
 - Although they have no other mention in Acts, Philip’s four unmarried daughters have the gift of prophesy. Why do you think Luke felt this was important to mention?

• Paul arrives in Jerusalem (21:17-26)

- Paul arrives in Jerusalem, visits James and the elders. After a brief recap of what God has done among the Gentiles, the elders warn him of Jewish believers who are upset that Paul is apparently teaching the Gentiles to “forsake Moses” (21:17-22)
 - The concern is the loss of tradition (following the Law of Moses) and identity as people of God.
- The elders advise Paul to show he is obedient to the law by undergoing the ritual of purification, along with four others (21:23-25)
 - The elders are advising Paul to put on an appearance of conformity.
 - Those in Jerusalem have not witnessed the work of the Spirit in “Gentile space”. They “see parallel worlds, Jew and Gentile, but that is not the world created and now being recreated by the Spirit.” [Jennings, *Belief: Theological Commentary on... Acts*, p. 199]
- Paul undergoes the purification ritual and enters the temple (21:26)

• Paul is arrested (21:27-40)

- Jews from Asia incite “all the city” to seize Paul and try to kill him (21:27-31)
 - The charges are more speculative than substantive but have the effect of inciting fear and anger: teaching “against our people, our law, and this place” (v. 28).
 - Note the power of the rhetoric of fear in turning the crowd.
 - Where is the Holy Spirit here?
- Paul is rescued by Roman officials and soldiers (21:28-38)
 - The main concern was whether Paul was “the Egyptian who recently stirred up a revolt” (v. 37).
 - The Empire is not so much concerned about Paul’s safety but with its own preservation.
- Paul identifies himself as a Jew and as “a citizen of an important city” and asks to speak to the crowd that wants to kill him (21:39-40).

Chapter 22

• Paul's defense before the crowd (22:1-21)

- Establishing his credentials as a zealous Jew (22:1-5)
 - Paul addresses a crowd that sees him through the distorted lens of diaspora fear (fear of assimilation, losing tradition and cultural identity). To do so, Paul counters with his testimony/witness. He starts by relating his zeal to that of the crowd's right now.
 - How do you address a crowd whose view is distorted by lies intended to fuel fear?
- Describing his conversion (22:6-16)
 - Is violence the inevitable outcome of diaspora fear?
 - In Paul's case, Jesus intervenes to break the cycle of violence.
 - The crowd may have recognized an element of the ways God calls prophets in Paul's account.
- His calling to be a missionary to the Gentiles (21:17-21)
 - This is where the defense turns dangerous.
 - While it is obvious to us that Jesus/the Holy Spirit is directing Paul into a ministry intended to join Jew and Gentile, diaspora fear drives the crowd's reaction.

• Paul's defense to the Romans (22:22-30)

- The crowd calls for his execution (22:22)
 - They see a zero-sum outcome – either their traditions prevail or they are swallowed up by the Gentiles – rather than one in which both Jews and Gentiles come together in God's grace.
 - The only solution, in their view, is to kill Paul.
- Paul invokes Roman citizenship (22:23-29)
 - The Roman authorities act as Empires do – they use torture to force answers.
 - When Paul invokes Roman citizenship, a different set of rules come into play.
 - Paul uses citizenship only as a last resort: Disciples invoke citizenship only to bend “the will of the state away from violence and toward the protection of [vulnerable] bodies” [Jennings, *Belief: Theological Commentary on... Acts*, p. 206]
 - What lessons might we take from this for today?
- Paul is brought before the chief priests and council (22:30)
 - From the Roman perspective, the disagreement involves religious not Empire law.

Chapter 23

• Paul stands before the high priest and Jewish council (23:1-11)

- Paul before the high priest and the council (23:1-5)
 - The high priest tries to use violence to silence Paul.
 - Paul, on realizing who ordered the violence, points out the hypocrisy.
- Paul's testimony stirs dissension between Pharisees and Sadducees (23:6-9)
 - By witnessing his “hope of the resurrection,” Paul triggers violent dissent between the Pharisees (who believe in resurrection, angels, and God's spirit) and the Sadducees (who don't).
- The Roman tribune removes Paul when the dissension becomes violent (23:10-11)
 - The Roman tribune is less interested in sparing Paul's life than in maintaining peace.
 - Jesus tells Paul he “must bear witness also in Rome,” pointing to Paul's destiny

- **Some Jews conspire to kill Paul; the plot is thwarted (23:12-22)**

- A group of 40 Jews vow to not eat or drink until they kill Paul, conspire with the council (23:12-15)
 - “The tragedy of assassins is that they do not realize that they are death’s mark as well” [Jennings, *Belief: Theological Commentary on... Acts*, p. 209]
- Paul’s nephew overhears the plot, reports it to the Roman tribune (23:16-22)
 - Is this perhaps divine intervention?

- **Paul is sent to Caesarea to stand before Felix the Governor (23:23-35)**

- The Roman tribune summons centurions, soldiers to escort Paul to Caesarea to stand before Felix the Governor (23:23-32)
- Felix agrees to hear Paul when his accusers arrive (23:33-35)
 - Is Paul being “protected” by the Empire (state) or is Paul in God’s hands?

Emerging Topics for Deeper Exploration:

NOTE: Some or all of these topics may end up making it to Sunday’s discussions in some form or another. Additional topics may arise by then. It’s still too early in the week to tell.

The actions of the Holy Spirit: In Acts 19, Luke tells us that “Paul resolved in the Spirit ...to go on to Jerusalem” (19:21). In Acts 21, two different groups of disciples “through the Spirit” warn Paul not to go to Jerusalem (21:4) because he will be handed over to the Gentiles (21:11). What does this account say about the Spirit and Paul’s mission? Why would the same Spirit compel Paul to go to Jerusalem and warn him not to go?

Resisting the Spirit: What actions/tools of resistance do you see being used by others to resist the word and acts of the Spirit in these chapters? How does the Spirit respond to this resistance? You may have to project beyond what we’ve read so far to what you understand about the early church development. [Note also that the book of Acts leaves us hanging... as if the Spirit continues to work through disciples today.]

Discipleship vs Citizenship: Paul invokes Roman citizenship as a last resort (something Willie James Jennings describes as “desperate citizenship” in *Belief: Theological Commentary on... Acts* [p. 206]). Jennings notes that the goal of the Empire is, above all, to preserve its rule and control. In Paul’s case, the Empire doesn’t free him but ultimately executes him in Rome. According to Jennings, disciples are, above all, followers of Jesus. Citizenship is secondary, not primary, and should only be used to protect the vulnerable. What is your reaction to that?

Implications for Today: What does the pattern of witness, acceptance by some and resistance by others, and continuing movement of the Spirit suggest about what we are called to do and to look for today?