

Series: The Relentless Gospel

Acts 21:17-40 Paul and the Jerusalem Controversy / Jeff Kennedy Oct 10, 2021

Opening Scripture: 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 When they heard it, they glorified God and said, “You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law.”

Years ago, I had the opportunity to minister with a team in Guatemala. The medical missions team we were working with there picked us up and took us to the house where we were staying. They picked us up and dropped us off in the dead of night. Before we got out of the van Dr. Tito told us, “When I open this van door, don’t do anything to draw attention to yourself, just move quickly into the house.” The door of the house was a huge reinforced steel door—windows barred.” We were told that we could not leave “the compound.” Drugs were rampant in that part of the city. We got the feeling that our safety was their top priority. After a couple days cooped up in the house, we had an opportunity to drive out to Palencia—to a little Christian school where children were being educated and taught God’s word. Driving up to the school, the town appeared to be indeed unsafe. The door into the compound where the Christian school met was a huge metal door, when we pulled up the driver honked and it came rolling open to us.

We went inside and the difference between the school campus, the buildings, the people—was night and day. It was clean and well kept. The students, teachers and workers at this Christian school were dressed in their uniforms greeted us warmly. They were so glad to see us. The light of the Gospel in their eyes. **People from two very different cultures believing in the same Jesus, transformed by the same Holy Spirit—greeting one another in the Lord.**

That is similar to what is happening in this passage. **Paul has returned after being gone for many, many years. News of his ministry has spread throughout the region. And the believers receive warmly, with open arms.** These Jewish Christians ministering among the Jews and Samaritans along with Paul whose ministry was primarily among the Gentiles, have the same Jesus, have been transformed by the same Gospel and the reunion is sweet.

But their reunion is brief.

Because there is a roiling controversy among the people by the Pharisees and other religious leaders.

Main idea: Paul is going to teach us how to handle false accusations. How do we approach unjust criticism?

The first thing we see in the story is...

1. Jerusalem Christians need clarification of Paul's ministry (Acts 21:17-25). So, while Paul is out there carrying his cross for the nations, collecting offerings from rich Gentile churches to be delivered to Jerusalem—pouring out his life as drink offering for the sake of God and his Gospel—the Jerusalem church is being lied to as the Sanhedrin actively attempts to poison them against Paul. Look at what James says, **21 But they have been informed about you—that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to abandon Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or to live according to our customs. 22 So what is to be done? They will certainly hear that you've come. 23 Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have made a vow. 24 Take these men, purify yourself along with them, and pay for them to get their heads shaved. Then everyone will know that what they were told about you amounts to nothing, but that you yourself are also careful about observing the law. 25 With regard to the Gentiles who have believed, we have written a letter containing our decision that they should keep themselves from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from what is strangled, and from sexual immorality.”**

The Background: Whatever the significance of the ritual vow taken, and Paul's visible participation in it—it is designed to demonstrate Paul's fidelity to Torah and his Jewish heritage. The leaders of the Jerusalem Church have concluded that Paul needs to demonstrate his Jewishness, his faithfulness to the covenant.

Why does Paul do this when he knows he doesn't have to? 1 Corinthians 9:1, 18 “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle?...¹⁸ What then is my reward? To preach the gospel and offer it free of charge and not make full use of my rights in the gospel.”

Paul knows he is “free” or has the “right” to receive compensation for his work of preaching. Because Corinth in particular is overrun with professional philosophers and rhetors who enrich themselves through public speaking—Paul chooses instead to make tents by day and preach by night. Bi-vocational. **But, he forgoes that *right* in order to serve them better.**

For Paul, the value of serving them is higher than his value of expressing his rights.

1 Cor 9:19-23 “Although I am free from all and not anyone's slave, I have made myself a slave to everyone, in order to win more people.²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law—though I myself am not under the law—to win those under the law.²¹ To those who are without the law, like one without the law—though I am not without God's law but under the law of Christ—to win those without the law.²² To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some.²³ Now I do all this because of the gospel, so that I may share in the blessings.”

This is exactly the kind of thing that the Jerusalem Christians have heard about. When he is among the Jews in Jerusalem he acts like a Jerusalem Jew. Torah obedient, offering sacrifices, taking extreme vows of devotion to the Mosaic Covenant—not

because it saves him but because in doing so it might save his hearers—it may give him the opportunity to bring his unsaved Jewish audience to Christ.

2. He's arrested and falsely accused. The Jewish zealots interrupt his act of devotion.

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.”

Wrong on count 1. And wrong on counts 2 and 3. These are false accusations.

Now false accusations can come in two forms: **(1) outright dishonest** attempt to defame and slander another person's character. **(2) False accusations born of misunderstanding**, lack of information, a sincere belief.

What are their accusations?

- **He teaches against the people (28a).** At issue is **who are the people of God? And how are they identified?** What badges of membership signify that you're a covenant family member? The Jews are identified as children of Abraham; observing Sabbath, Circumcision, Dietary laws, festival observance. Paul has been teaching that the people of God in this new epoch—are those who have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Galatians 3:2 “I only want to learn this from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by believing what you heard...¹⁴ The purpose (for Christ dying on a cross) was that the **blessing of Abraham** would come to the Gentiles by Christ Jesus, so that we could receive the promised Spirit through faith.” The Jerusalem Jews have heard that he teaches stuff like this and they falsely accuse him of teaching that Jews are no longer the people of God. Of course, they are. But like the Gentiles, they are by faith. They are the people of God but now having received the Spirit by faith in Jesus—*only much more so*.

Second accusation is...

- **He teaches against the law (28b).** At issue is which laws does God bind upon the people? Is it the whole law of Moses? Is it the so-called moral law?

Romans 3:28 “For we conclude that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law...Do we then nullify the law through faith? Absolutely not! On the contrary, we uphold the law.” **How is the law upheld—it's fulfilled not abolished.** In order to start something new we can either abolish the old thing and start afresh and all over again; or we can roll the old into the New bringing it to its planned obsolescence. Look at what the writer of the **Hebrews** says **8:13** “By saying a new covenant, he has declared that the first is obsolete. And what is obsolete and growing old is about to pass away.” The law was designed to lead us to the righteousness in Christ by faith. It was designed to tell us just how unrighteous we are, how so desperately in need of God's grace human beings are. It was designed to put the brakes on moral oblivion. It was designed, as a tutor, to lead us to the Lord.

Third accusation is...

- **He teaches against this place (28c).** He's teaching against this temple. This accusation is understandable. Jesus himself was accused of being against the temple. John 2 he says, "Tear this temple down and I'll rebuild it in 3 days." **2 Cor 6:16** "For we are the temple of the living God, as God said: I will dwell and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."

Fourth accusation is...

- **He's defiled the temple with Gentiles (28d).** This accusation is odd because Gentiles were allowed in the Gentile courts, which is a non-biblical designated area with stone warning signs at various entry points, "Any gentile who enters will do so on pain of death." This is odd because it is not according to the spirit and intent of Moses and Torah. Egyptians go out in the Exodus with the children of Israel, Moses provides for the incorporation of repentant foreigners and sojourners who want to worship Yahweh; and Solomon's original temple did not have a Gentile court.

Torah, Temple, and the People were always supposed to be a light to the gentile nations.

Jesus himself addressed this when he overturned the moneychanger's tables and kiosks crying out, "I have said this would be a house of prayer for the nations" and you have made a den of thieves. Sure, they're price gouging the out-of-towners who pilgrimage to worship, overcharging them for the sacrifices necessary. But they have also robbed the Gentiles of a space to gather and worship.

He saying, the purpose for which Israel was formed as a people; the purpose for which the law was given and the temple instituted has been fulfilled. God has brought that plan to its intended completion and thus aspects of it have become obsolete.

Jerusalem explodes into chaos—Paul is apprehended and he is about to die at the hands of the Jews. The Romans see the commotion and they have to rescue Paul from the rioters.

³⁴Some in the crowd were shouting one thing and some another. Since he was not able to get reliable information because of the uproar, he ordered him to be taken into the barracks. ³⁵When Paul got to the steps, he had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, ³⁶for the mass of people followed, yelling, "Get rid of him!"

Application: How do we handle false accusations?

1. Keep your cool and speak their language. When false accusations turn into silly rumors, keep your head—don't get spun out and don't lash out at those who are making up stories about you. Look at what happens here...

³⁷ As he was about to be brought into the barracks, Paul said to the commander, "Am I allowed to say something to you?" He replied, "You know how to speak Greek? ³⁸ Aren't you the Egyptian who started a revolt some time ago and led four thousand men of the Assassins into the wilderness?"

The story is taking on a life of its own. Paul has to say, "What?" Ummm no.

Paul stays cool under fire, and speaks to them in Greek. When he addresses the crowds, he speaks to them in Aramaic. Whatever audience he's addressing, he wants to speak the language that is most comfortable and non-offensive.

2. Tell people who you are. Paul has been accused of believing and teaching things he has not taught. Now, the soldier asks if he's this Egyptian leader of this band of African assassins? What? No.

³⁹ "Paul said, "I am a Jewish man from Tarsus of Cilicia, a citizen of an important city."

Acts 22:23-25 "As they were yelling and flinging aside their garments and throwing dust into the air, ²⁴ the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, directing that he be interrogated with the scourge to discover the reason they were shouting against him like this. ²⁵ As they stretched him out for the lash, Paul said to the centurion standing by, "Is it legal for you to scourge a man who is a Roman citizen and is uncondemned?"

Paul is not this Egyptian Assassin. Now, he's being asked if he is some weird Egyptian leader of some league of Assassins—which is frankly outlandish.

Paul is a native of Tarsus—a very prominent wealthy region in Rome.

Paul is a natural born citizen and it is illegal to scourge or crucify a citizen.

Illus. About a year or so ago I had a well-meaning couple in our church want to meet with me. And air out some grievances. They were coming from a place of sincerity—they were just trying to do what they thought was right. Turns out they leveled several accusations against me mostly due to misinformation, misunderstanding. I had to tell them who I am, what I believe, what my intentions are. I had to say, "That caricature of me you've built up in your mind isn't me."

False accusations can take on a life of their own. And we have to tell people who we are, what we believe, and help them to understand our intentions.

Folks, sometimes you just have to tell people who you are.

3. Tell people what you want.

39b. “Now I ask you, let me speak to the people.” Paul wants to persuade the people to believe his Gospel, to hear him out. He said, “I think if I could just tell them my story, if they could hear it directly from me, they might be persuaded.”

Listen, The answer is always no until you ask. The request is always denied if left unspoken. Sometimes we have to just tell people what we want to get out of this conflict, or this interaction, or this misunderstanding.

4. Make a reasoned defense of your case.

22:1 “Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense before you.”

There are some ways in which I don't want you to follow Jesus. No one should ever say “before Abraham was born I Am.”

Don't emulate Jesus's silence before his accusers. Why? Because Jesus had already addressed their issues, teaching openly in the temple, available to be cross-examined (and some of them did try to stump him). He has made his case.

This trial is also illegal. It's a sham. To engage it would legitimize it.

The Sanhedrin has a history with stoning blasphemers. If Jesus engages in a roiling controversy it could have short circuited God's plan for him to go the cross for the sins of the world. *We see in acts how easily they stoned Stephen—a mere deacon—to death*; they are so worked up at Paul the Romans have to rescue him from their murderous rage.

All throughout Acts the Peter and the Apostles, Paul and Luke's book of Acts itself—are all defenses of the Gospel.

The trick here is to defend yourself without becoming defensive. **For me personally, I am naturally defensive because I was raised, born, bred to fight.** Now Paul wants to speak to the crowds because he intends to defend himself, to persuade them of the truth, to help them to see that they've been lied to, that even though they're sincere—they're sincerely wrong about him, his gospel and his mission.

1. Keep your cool and speak their language.
2. Tell people who you are
3. Tell people what
4. Make a reasoned defense of your case.