

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

An Exposition

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The final stages of the journey of the Apostle Paul and his companions to Jerusalem, and what befell him there, are the contents of this interesting chapter.

I. The journey from Miletus to Tyre and Ptolemais (Verses 1-7).

II. In Cesarea (Verses 8-14).

III. The Apostle's Arrival in Jerusalem and his visit to the Temple (Verses 15-26).

IV. The Uproar in the Temple. Paul taken prisoner (Verses 27-40).

I. The Journey from Miletus to Tyre and Ptolemais.

“And it came to pass, that after we were gotten from them, and had launched, we came with a straight course unto Coos, and the day following unto Rhodes, and from thence unto Patara: And finding a ship sailing over unto Phoenicia, we went aboard, and set forth. Now when we had discovered Cyprus, we left it on the left hand, and sailed into Syria, and landed at Tyre: for there the ship was to unlade her burden. And finding disciples, we tarried there seven days: who said to Paul through the Spirit, that he should not go up to Jerusalem. And when we had accomplished those days, we departed and went our way; and they all brought us on our way, with wives and children, till we were out of the city: and we kneeled down on the shore, and prayed. And when we had taken our leave one of another, we took ship; and they returned home again. And when we had finished our course from Tyre, we came to Ptolemais, and saluted the brethren, and abode with them one day” (Verses 1-7).

Little needs to be said on the journey itself, for the Holy Spirit gives no record of anything which took place, save the repeated warnings He gave to the Apostle, who in the strongest determination was hastening to reach the chosen goal, Jerusalem.

Coos, Rhodes and Patara are mentioned, and from there they took ship to Phoenicia. The landing place in that ancient country was Tyre, where some of the cargo was to be put ashore, and perhaps an additional one was taken aboard, for the destination of the ship was Ptolemais.

In Tyre they found a company of disciples and tarried there for seven days. This rather lengthy stay may have been by request of the Apostle, so that they might be enabled to spend a Lord's day with the assembly in Tyre. In Troas (chapter 20:6) they also had tarried seven days, and on the first day of the week, as we learned from that chapter, they were engaged in the breaking of bread, remembering the Lord in gathering around His table. Though no statement is made about the Apostle meeting with the believers in Tyre for the same blessed purpose, we can take it for granted that such was the case.

And the Holy Spirit through these disciples warned the Apostle at once that he should not go to Jerusalem. This indeed, was very solemn. If these disciples had spoken of themselves, if it said that they were in anxiety over Paul's journey to that city, one might say that they were simply speaking as men, but the record makes it clear that the Holy Spirit spoke through them. Could then the Apostle Paul have been under the guidance of that same Spirit in going to Jerusalem?

As stated before, the great love for his brethren, his kinsmen, burned in his heart, and so great was his desire to be in Jerusalem that he ignored the voice of the Spirit. The answer which the Apostle gave to their inspired warning is not given, but we know that he did not swerve from his purpose.

Beautiful is the farewell scene in connection with this visit. It even surpasses the farewell of the previous chapter.

"And they all brought us on our way, with wives and children," writes the penman, **"till we were out of the city; and we kneeled down on the shore and prayed."**

It is a sweet picture of love. Even the children came along to get the last glimpse of the great man of God, who had tarried in their midst. And what a prayer-meeting it must have been, there on the seashore!

In Ptolemais, which they reached next, the brethren were saluted by them, and they spent one day in their company.

II. In Cesarea.

"And the next day we that were of Paul's company departed, and came unto Cesarea: and we entered into the house of Philip the evangelist, which was one of the seven; and abode with him. And the same man had four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy. And as we tarried there many days, there came down from Judea a certain prophet, named Agabus. And when he was come unto us he took Paul's girdle, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles. And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done" (Verses 8-14).

The journey from Ptolemais to Cesarea was probably made on foot.

When they arrived in that city, they found a welcome in the house of one whose name is familiar from the earlier chapters of our book. They entered the house of Philip. As there also was an apostle by the name of Philip (Matthew 10:3), the Holy Spirit tells us that it was not the Apostle Philip, but Philip the Evangelist, one of the seven (Acts 6:5).

We had his history and great activity before. The last we read of him was at the close of Chapter 8. After he had been so blessedly used in the conversion of the eunuch, and had been caught away by the Spirit, he was found **“at Azotus, and passing through, he preached in all the cities, till he came to Cesarea.”**

Here we find him again twenty years later, settled in Caesarea, with his family. His gift as an Evangelist, no doubt, he exercised throughout all these years. There is no record given of the blessed activity of this servant of the Lord, but in that coming day his labor and the blessed results of this great Evangelist will be manifested, as shall be all the works of the Saints of God.

Special mention is made of the four unmarried daughters of Philip, who had the gift of prophecy.

This has puzzled some, because elsewhere it is stated - **“a woman suffer not to teach,”** and that women should be silent in the assembly. It has therefore been stated by some, who press this point in a dogmatic way, that these four virgins had their connection with the Jewish and earthly kingdom. But this is far-fetched.

Woman is not excluded from the gifts of the Spirit; the exercise of woman's gift, however, is according to the sphere given to her by God.

These four daughters possessed the gift of prophesying, and of teaching, and they also made use of the gift. But did they preach and teach in public? Certainly not. If they exercised their gift it must have been in their sphere, that is, in their home, the house of their father.

And when Paul and his companions appeared, nothing is said that these virgins made use of the gift in the presence of these visitors. This in itself is very striking. We desire to quote what another has said on this interesting and timely question: *

* W. Kelly *Introductory Lectures to the Acts*, page 145.

“There is no reason why a woman should not have this or most other gifts as much as a man. I do not say the same kind of gift always. Surely God is wise and gives suited gifts whether to men or women, or, it may be, I was going to say, to children. The Lord is Sovereign, and knows how, as putting all who now believe in the body of Christ, so also to give them a work suitable to the purposes of His own grace. Certainly He did clothe these four daughters of Philip with a very special spiritual power. They had one of the highest characters of spiritual gift - they prophesied. And if they were invested with this power, certainly it was not to be put under a bushel, but to be exercised, the only question is, how.

“Now Scripture, if we but be subject, is quite explicit as to this. In the first place, prophecy stands confessedly in the highest rank of teaching. It is teaching. Next, the Apostle himself is the person who tells us that he does not suffer a woman to teach. This is clearly decisive; if we bow to the Apostle as inspired to give us God’s mind, we ought to know that it is not the place of a Christian woman to teach. He is speaking on this topic, not in I Corinthians 11, but in Chapter 14. He is drawing the line between men and women in I Timothy 2. The latter Epistle forbids the women as a class to teach. The other and still closer word in the former Epistle, commands them to be silent in the assembly. At Corinth, apparently, there was some difficulty as to godly order and the right relations of men and women, because the Corinthians, being a people of speculative habits, instead of believing, reasoned about things. It was the tendency of the Greek mind to question everything. They could not understand that, if God had given a woman as good a gift as a man, she was not equally to use it. We can all feel their difficulty. Such reasoners are not wanting now. The fault of it all was, and is, that God is left out. His will was not in the thought of the Corinthians. There was no waiting on the Lord to ascertain what was His mind. Clearly, if He has called the church into being, it cannot but be made for His own glory. He has His own mind and will about the church and He has therefore spread out in His Word how all the gifts of His grace are to be exercised.

“Now the passages in I Corinthians 14 and in I Timothy 2, appear to me to be perfectly plain as to the relative place of the woman, whatever may be her gift. This may be said to decide only as to one sphere - the assembly - where the woman, according to Scripture, is precluded from the exercise of her gift. I may say further, that in those days it did not occur to them that women should go forth publicly to preach the Word. Bad as the state of things was in early days, they seem to me to have looked for a greater sense of modesty on the part of women. There is not the slightest doubt that many females with the best intentions have thus preached, as they do still. They, or their friends, defend their cause by appeals to the blessing of God on the one hand, and on the other, to the crying need of perishing sinners everywhere. But nothing can be more certain than that Scripture (and this is the standard) leaves them without the slightest warrant from the Lord for their line of conduct. Public preaching of the Gospel on the part of women is never contemplated in Scripture. It was bad enough for the Corinthians to think that they might speak among the faithful. It might have seemed that in the assembly women had the shelter of godly men; that there they were not offensively putting themselves forward before all sorts of people in the world, as must be the case in evangelizing. Among the godly they may have imagined a veil, so to speak, drawn over them, more or less. But in modern times the end is supposed to justify the means, Gross as the Corinthians were, I must confess that to my mind the plans of our own day seem even more grievous, and with less excuse for them.” *

* The so-called “Pentecostal people” and other “Holiness sects” ignore the divine injunctions completely, besides teaching positive error like the eradication of the old nature in the believer. Surely the Holy Spirit cannot be there in His fulness, as they claim.

Another one appears, whose name is known to us from the previous record.

Agabus, one who had likewise a gift of prophecy, came down from Judea. In chapter 11:27 he stood up and announced that there should be a great dearth. He made this prediction by the Spirit and it of course came true.

When he had come he took Paul's girdle and with it bound his own hands and feet and then he said:

“Thus saith the Holy Spirit, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.”

Here then another warning was given. It was the last and by far the strongest. Did Agabus really speak by the Spirit? The literal fulfilment of his predictive action furnishes the answer. The whole company, both his fellow travelers and the believers in Cesarea began to beseech him not to go up to Jerusalem.

Then came Paul's final declaration:

“What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”

One cannot but admire the wonderful determination and whole-hearted devotion which breathe in these words of the Apostle. He had indeed set his face like a flint to go up to Jerusalem, whatever the cost might be. And if the Holy Spirit had so solemnly warned him, and he rejected these warnings, the Lord in His own gracious way over-ruled it all to His own glory and to foreshadow what might be termed “the captivity of the Gospel.”

God permitted it all for His own wise purpose. He knows the end from the beginning. The blessed Gospel of the Grace and Glory of God committed to the Apostle Paul was soon to be set aside by man and the Judaistic form, that perverted Gospel, to gain the victory. And Paul himself arrested in Jerusalem given over into the hands of the Gentiles and sent to Rome.

“The will of the Lord be done” was the last word spoken before He went up to Jerusalem. And a blessed word it is to remember. The will of the Lord will be accomplished in the lives of His people in spite of all their failures. The whole path of all His people is marked out by Himself. What calm it brings to our troubled hearts if we but remember it always!

III. The Apostle's Arrival in Jerusalem and His Visit to the Temple.

“And after those days we took up our carriages, and went up to Jerusalem. There went with us also certain of the disciples of Cesarea, and brought with them one Mnason of Cyprus, an old disciple, with whom we should lodge. And when we were come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present. And when he had saluted them, he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord, and said unto him, Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are zealous of the law: And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs.

“What is it therefore? the multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that thou art come. Do therefore this that we say to thee: We have four men which have a vow on them; Then take, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads: and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law. As touching the Gentiles which we believe, we have written and concluded that they observe no such thing, save only that they keep themselves from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from strangled, and from fornication. Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself with them entered into the temple, to signify the accomplishment of the days of purification, until that an offering should be offered for every one of them” (Verses 15-26).

It was immediately after those days spent in Cesarea that the Apostle and his companions went up to Jerusalem.

As it was before one of the great feasts of Judaism, the road from Cesarea to the City of Jerusalem must have presented a lively picture as large numbers of Jews went up to the feast. Disciples of Cesarea accompanied them, and, as it was almost 70 miles to Jerusalem, the journey had to be made in two days. So they had to lodge in the house of Mnason a Cyprian one of the early disciples. Nothing else is reported of this last stage of the journey to Jerusalem.

When they reached their destination at last, they were heartily welcomed by the brethren. With what feeling must the Apostle Paul have entered once more the city of his fathers, which he was to leave as a prisoner! Great are the events, which subsequently took place.

On the day following the company paid a visit to James in whose house all the elders had assembled for the purpose of meeting with Paul and his friends. No doubt they were well informed of his purposed visit to Jerusalem.

Where were the apostles? They are not mentioned at all in this account; from which we may conclude that they were absent. And now once more the Apostle relates, what no doubt was dearest to the hearts of James and the elders, what God had wrought through His God-given ministry among the Gentiles.

It must have been a very lengthy account; for he rehearsed particularly, “or one by one” the things, which had happened in His great activity. James, however, does not seem to be the spokesman here as he was in the meeting in chapter 15. After Paul had spoken, **“they glorified God.”**

All had progressed nicely up to this point. But now the great crisis is rapidly reached. The meeting had been called in the house of James, and only the elders had been invited for a very good reason.

Reports had reached Jerusalem that Paul had taught the Jews among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, and even to deny children the covenant sign, circumcision.

Most likely the Judaizing element in the assembly of Jerusalem, the men who were so successfully overcome by the bold arguments of the Apostle at the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15, Galatians 2), the men who so strenuously taught, that unless the Gentiles became circumcised, they could not be saved - these men were responsible for the rumors.

What could be done to convince the multitude that all this was incorrect, that Paul after all was a good Jew? The church in Jerusalem had become strong; its membership numbered myriads (literal translation). But they were in a transition period. They had accepted the Lord Jesus Christ, and yet they held on to the law of Moses. They were all zealous for the Law. They kept all the ordinances of the Law, abstained from certain meats, kept the feast days, went to the temple, made vows, and purified themselves. If this great multitude comes together, say the elders to Paul, they will hear of his arrival. With the accusations made against the Apostle, a great disorder could not be avoided. To discover some way to solve the difficulty and avert the danger, the meeting had assembled in the house of James.

Now the rumors about Paul were indeed true. He had preached the Gospel as it had been given to him by the risen Christ. In that Gospel the law could not be recognized. He had taught the position of the believer in Christ and as such the believing Jew was free from the law. The Epistle to the Romans had been written by him through the Spirit of God several years before. And yet the Lord in His patience had borne with these conditions, which prevailed in Jerusalem.

The fullest teaching on the break which had to come between Christianity and Judaism had not yet been given.

The Epistle to the Hebrews furnished this argument and contains the solemn warning of the grave danger of apostasy from the Gospel by clinging to the shadow-things, which are past. To go outside of the camp and bear His reproach is the great exhortation given in that Epistle to these Jewish Christians. No doubt the Apostle Paul wrote that Epistle to his beloved brethren in Jerusalem. His heart was filled with love towards them. In his own soul he knew that all the commands of the law and the law itself had been abolished by the death of Christ. The ordinances had been nailed to the cross. The Holy Spirit foreseeing what would happen had warned him, as we have seen, not to go to Jerusalem. He went to the city and with this he stepped upon dangerous ground. He had left the way into which God had called him, and though it was his all-consuming love for his own brethren which was the motive, he became ensnared by the enemy.

The elders suggest to him that there were four men who had a vow on them. These he should take and purify himself with them as well as pay the charges.

This action, they reasoned, would not only demonstrate that the reports were untrue, but that he, the Apostle of Gentiles “**walketh orderly and keepeth the law.**” To make this temptation stronger, they re-stated that which had been agreed concerning the status of the believing Gentiles, according to the decision of the church council years ago. All was a most subtle snare. He was by that action to show that, with all his preaching to the Gentiles, he was still a good Jew, faithful to all the traditions of the fathers, and attached to the temple.

Without entering into an examination of what the vow was, and the purifying and offering connected with it, we see the Apostle falling into the snare. He did, as far as the record goes, without a moment's hesitation accept the suggestion of the elders, and for a number of days we see him a visitor to the temple conforming to the customs of the law. Where was prayer and direction from the Lord? Alas, he had gone his own way against the warning voices of the Holy Spirit!

And a strange sight it is to see the Apostle Paul back in the temple, going through these dead ceremonies, which had been ended by the death of the cross. A strange sight to see him, who disclaimed all earthly authority and taught deliverance from the law and a union with an unseen Christ, submitting once more to the elementary things, as he calls them in his Epistle to the Galatians **"the beggarly elements"**! And has not the whole professing church fallen into the same snare? What the results of this subtle and evil advice were we shall find in the next paragraph.

IV. The Uproar in the Temple. Paul Taken Prisoner.

"And when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews which were of Asia, when they saw him in the temple, stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him, crying out, Men of Israel, help: This is the man, that teacheth all men everywhere against the people, and the law, and this place: and further brought Greeks also into the temple, and hath polluted this holy place. (For they had seen before with him in the city Trophimus an Ephesian, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple). And all the city was moved, and the people ran together: and they took Paul, and drew him out of the temple: and forthwith the doors were shut. And as they went about to kill him, tidings came unto the chief captain of the band, that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. Who immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down unto them: and when they saw the chief captain and the soldiers, they left beating of Paul. Then the chief captain came near, and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and demanded who he was, and what he had done. And some cried one thing, some another, among the multitude: and when he could not know the certainty for the tumult, he commanded him to be carried into the castle. And when he came upon the stairs, so it was, that he was borne of the soldiers for the violence of the people. For the multitude of the people followed after, crying, Away with him. And as Paul was to be led into the castle, he said unto the chief captain, May I speak unto thee? Who said, Canst thou speak Greek? Art not thou that Egyptian, which before these days madest an uproar, and leddest out into the wilderness four thousand men that were murderers? But Paul said, I am a man which am a Jew of Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city: and, I beseech thee, suffer me to speak unto the people. And when he had given him license, Paul stood on the stairs, and beckoned with the hand unto the people. And when there was made a great silence, he spake unto them in the Hebrew tongue" (Verses 27-40).

The seven days connected with the vow of these men were almost ended when the Jews, which were in Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up all the people and laid hands on him. In all probability Paul was not known to many people in Jerusalem. The Jews who lived in the city may not have known him at all by sight.

But the city was filled with many Jews from Asia, that is the province of Asia, and as Ephesian Jews had come to Jerusalem for the feast, he did not escape their notice. They hated him and as they recognized him, they watched him closely and awaited their opportunity to do him harm. He was recognized in the city when a well known Gentile Ephesian, Trophimus, was in his company. They supposed that the Apostle had brought this Gentile Christian in the temple.

The outer court of the temple, which was called the Court of the Gentiles, was open to everybody. Then there was an inner court, which was known by the name of the Court of Israel. This court was separated from the outer court by the middle wall of partition. There were barriers and pillars with inscriptions in Greek and Latin, warning strangers under the penalty of death not to advance into that holy court. Inside the barrier was a high wall, which surrounded the inner court, and in this wall were doors (Verse 30). The eastern part of the Court was reserved for women; then a colonnade ran around the Court of the women: In its angles were chambers.

One of these was called the House of the Nazarites, where the Nazarites boiled the peace offerings, shaved their heads, and burnt the hair. Here most likely the Jews from Asia discovered the despised and hated Apostle. Now their hour had come to carry out the satanic desire of putting the Apostle out of the way. So they held him; then with a characteristic phrase - **“Men of Israel,”** they cried for help and shouted out their accusation - **“This is the man that teacheth everywhere all men against the people (the Jews), and the law, and this place.”**

This language reminds us of what we read in connection with Stephen, he too had been accused by the Jews in a similar manner. Perhaps in that very moment it all came back to the memory of Paul, for he was present when Stephen stood up to answer the accusations. And even then the words of the Lord, as the Jews seized hold on him, may have come into Paul’s heart: **“I will shew him what great things he must suffer for my Name’s sake.”**

He had great trials in the past, but now he stood on the threshold of still greater sufferings. But the chief reason these Jews of Asia gave for laying hold on Paul was a false accusation. They charged him of having polluted the temple by bringing Greeks, uncircumcised Gentiles, into that holy place. They had seen him with Trophimus, and took it for granted that Trophimus, and perhaps other Greeks, had followed him into the temple.

A fearful scene followed. The news spread like wildfire. It spread in a very few minutes throughout the temple courts, and to the crowds outside, and with their shoutings and gesticulations they soon attracted others, till the whole city was in an uproar.

The name of Paul and temple pollution must have been shouted in every direction. Perhaps some of the older Jews may have even then remembered him as Saul the Pharisee, who so many years ago had been such a prominent figure in Jerusalem. And a great crime it was to defile the temple. Stoning according to their law was the penalty, and that fate seemed to be imminent for Paul.

They dragged him out of the temple and the temple guard closed the doors. Then they fell upon him. They did not dare to stone him in the place where he was; the place outside of the city was reserved for that. So to avoid another pollution of the temple, they began to beat him. They were endeavoring to kill him.

But God watched over His servant. His life was not in the hands of the mob but in the Lord's own hands, and such is the case with all His people. In connection with the temple buildings was a castle, known by the name, "the fortress of Antonia." It was built upon a very steep rock and connected with the buildings below by stairs. This fortress was occupied by a Roman company of soldiers, a cohort with a chief captain (Greek: *Chiliarch*, commander of a thousand men). The great disturbance in the courts below attracted at once the attention of this officer and he rushed his men to the scene. With soldiers and centurions he came down the stairs, and their appearance brought the beating of Paul to an end.

And the next thing! Two chains are put about the Apostle. Agabus' prophecy is fulfilled. He is a captive now, "**the prisoner of the Lord**," as later he called himself. Taking the advice of the elders to appease the displeasure of the zealous law-keeping Hebrew Christians, and trying to show that he was a good law-keeping Jew, had led him into this place where he now finds himself.

It was all failure from beginning to end. The object was not reached. And now his great heart filled with love for his brethren, had to begin to learn the sad lesson what the Lord told him - "**they will not receive thy testimony concerning me.**" As the chains were put up on him, bruised and bleeding, may it then not have dawned upon him that his love for his Jewish brethren had led him in a way which was not the Lord's way?

It is a blessed study to compare the sufferings of Paul, the treatment he received from his brethren according to the flesh, his behavior, with that which happened to the Lord Himself in the days of His flesh. There is a correspondence and it is quite marked. Such a comparison shows the creature weakness and imperfection in Paul, and the absolute perfection of Him who, as to His office work, was made perfect through suffering.

The transportation of Paul into the fortress, however, was beset with many difficulties. One cried this and the other that, as the chief captain asked what Paul had done and who he was. The multitude cried again and again, "**Away with him**," - "**Away with him**," - the word which reminds us of another multitude, who rejected the Prince of Life and delivered Him into the hands of the Gentiles. So great was the crowd of people that Paul had to be lifted up by the soldiers in order to bring him by the stairway into the fortress on the rock. When about to be led into the castle, Paul addressed the chief captain in Greek. The captain was disappointed in this, for he thought he was a certain Egyptian, who had led four thousand murderers into the desert. Paul gives the Roman officer his pedigree. "**I am a man, a Jew of Tarsus**," and then requests the privilege of addressing the furious mob. This was permitted and taking a prominent place on the stairs, where he could be seen by all below, and when after beckoning to the people, silence had been secured, he addressed them in Hebrew. The break of the chapter at this point is unfortunate. The next chapter contains the first address of defence of the prisoner Paul.

~ end of chapter 21 ~

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