



RIOT, ARREST AND DEFENSE IN THE TEMPLE

SERIES: LIFE UNLEASHED

Acts 21:40–22:29

45th Message

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Having completed our series “Does it Matter,” we will now return our attention to the hair-raising drama in the book of Acts, which by divine coincidence puts flesh and blood on many of the themes we explored over the summer. If you were with us in the spring, you may remember Paul’s boundless energy, evangelizing and planting churches throughout Asia Minor and Greece. Some have estimated that in his three journeys, Paul travelled close to 8000 miles. But when Paul arrives in Jerusalem everything changes. He becomes the victim of a riotous crowd, is arrested and bound, and endures five trials that transport him from Jerusalem to Caesarea and finally to Rome. Paul the evangelist now becomes Paul the apologist, giving a defense in five trials. His defense concerns the revelation he has received (meaning, what Paul teaches is not apostasy from Judaism, but rather its fulfillment), and the integrity of his character. He is not a revolutionary, but a law-abiding Roman citizen.

Luke devotes six chapters (nearly 200 verses) to these trials, giving us a clue to their theological importance. John Stott notes that, even though Paul’s sufferings were not redemptive like Christ’s, there are significant parallels. “Both Jesus and Paul

1. were rejected by their own people, arrested without cause, and imprisoned;
2. were unjustly accused and willfully misrepresented by the false witnesses;
3. were slapped in the face in court;
4. were the hapless victims of secret Jewish plots;
5. heard the terrifying noise of a frenzied mob screaming ‘Away with him!’ and
6. were subjected to a series of 5 trials—
 - a. Jesus by Annas, the Sanhedrin, King Herod Antipas and twice by Pilate

Paul by the crowd, the Sanhedrin, King Herod Agrippa II and by the two procurators, Felix and Festus.”¹

In his first speech, Paul gives us the second of three versions of his encounter with the risen Christ. If Luke wants us to hear Paul’s conversion three times, it suggests that he intends for us not only to take it to heart, but to learn it by heart. Why? I would answer, it is because apologetics matters! As Luke Timothy Johnson notes, “Paul is a ‘prime witness of the resurrection,’ on whose credibility a great deal rests.”²

I. Riot and Arrest in the Temple (21:27–39)

Paul’s first defense follows a riot instigated by Jews from Asia, who falsely accused Paul of bringing “Trophimus, a Gentile representative from Ephesus past the barrier that separated the Court of the Gentiles from the temple courts reserved for Jews alone.”³ The accusation was a serious one and punishable by death. The rumor that Paul desecrated the temple ignited the people’s fury. They quickly seized

him and dragged him out of the inner courts and into the outer court of the Gentiles, where they beat him mercilessly. He would have died had not the Roman commander of the cohort, called the “tribune,” intervened. The tribune was Claudius Lysias, whom Luke portrays as an honest, open-minded Roman soldier, governed by rules of law. The tribune was stationed in the Fortress of Antonia, which overlooked the temple and housed a Roman garrison. It was his supreme responsibility to preserve the peace. When the news of violence reached him, he immediately dispatched soldiers to stop the violence. He arrested Paul and bound him in chains, but he was unable to determine who he was or what he had done from the enraged crowd. With considerable difficulty the soldiers were forced to carry Paul through the bloodthirsty mob screaming, “Away with him!” (Luke 23:18, 21).

Once inside the barracks, Paul, now bruised and bloody, respectfully asked the commander, “Am I permitted to speak?” The commander was startled when he heard his prisoner speaking fluent Greek. He had assumed Paul was the Egyptian terrorist who three years earlier had unsuccessfully led a large band of assassins to overthrow Jerusalem, then disappeared back into the wilderness. Paul assured the commander he was no revolutionary, but a well-educated Jew from Tarsus, no ordinary city. Once again he humbly asked for permission to speak to the people.

Before we hear his defense we need to stop and consider: Why would Paul want to speak to misguided Jews who beat him at every opportunity? It is surprising he can speak at all! Reflecting on this, Tom Wright gives the only possible reason—he loved them.

He quite probably recognized some faces in the crowd, people he had studied with 20 or more years before, and perhaps there were some relatives there as well. This great, angry, violent mob as the people of whom he had said that he had great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart, and could wish that he himself would be cut off from the Messiah for their sake (Rom 9:25). Of course he wanted to speak to them. He had never stopped praying for them (Rom 10:2)⁴.

Like his master before him, Paul wept over Jerusalem and the destruction that loomed over it and wanted to give his people every chance to repent.

II. Paul’s Defense Before the Crowd (21:40–22:27)

A. Paul’s orthodoxy and zeal for his faith

And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying: “Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.” And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said: “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict

manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.” (21:40–22:5 ESV)

I would like to highlight the major points of Paul’s defense and then consider the implications his apologetic has for our lives and the advance of the gospel. Like all of Paul’s defense speeches, it is a masterpiece of rhetoric, designed not only to acquit him of the false charges, but also to present the living Christ before his hearers in a rational, persuasive way. The first obstacle Paul must overcome is how to secure a hearing with a mob that, just moments before, was screaming with rage and beating him bloody and raw. This is no easy task. You may recall when Paul wanted to address the angry mob in Ephesus (Acts 19:31), the Asiarchs thought it was much too dangerous and prevailed upon him not to do so. In this case however, elite Roman troops will stand beside him, guaranteeing his safety.

If you had been in the crowd that day, consider how shocking it would be to see the prisoner, bloodied and beaten, escorted back outside the Fortress Antonia and placed on the platform overlooking the temple. As he raises his hand a hush falls over the crowd. Then he humbly and respectfully addresses the crowd as one of your own (“brothers and fathers”) and in your native tongue of Aramaic. (Keener notes, “‘brothers and fathers’ is respectful and conciliatory. ‘Brothers’ emphasizes ethnic solidarity. ‘Fathers’ is a respectful title for elders or people of rank.”⁵) Stunned in silence, you are now at least willing to give Paul a hearing. This is a retrial, after he has endured a kangaroo court with its false testimony, condemnation and would-be execution without due process. Who does this? Who voluntarily subjects themselves to the maddening crowd again and again? Paul does, because he has a story to tell. He wants people to hear not for his sake, but for God’s. The first lesson in apologetics is that the character of the messenger is as important, if not more so, as his or her message.

Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect. (1 Pet 3:14–15)

Once he has their attention, Paul doesn’t strike back with propositions or ethics. No, he does what Jesus always did. He simply tells his story, beginning with his birthplace and pedigree. When you want to talk about God with an outsider you must always start with history. Ours is the only religion that is rooted in history—a history before history began—and subsequently a salvation history whose roots go back 4000 years. A history overflowing with concrete facts, divine interventions, prophetic promises, countless fulfillments of judgment and salvation, and most importantly, firsthand eyewitnesses and a hope so strong our forefathers did not flinch in the face of death.

Paul places himself right in the center of that history. He was born a Jew in Tarsus to parents who, as Pharisees, sought the best rabbinic education for their son. At the age of thirteen they sent him to Jerusalem to study at the feet Gamaliel, one of the best-known Pharisees of his generation. Paul’s letters demonstrate the fruit of his rigorous education in the Scriptures and “display advanced training in rhetoric and composition. . . . He directly quotes the Scriptures (not

including allusions) more than ninety times, without the benefit of a concordance and presumably usually without the benefit of ready access to written biblical scrolls in the home where he dictates his letters.”⁶ Paul is not an Egyptian terrorist; he is a Hebrew scholar of the highest caliber.

But Paul was not just an academic. He was a scholar on fire, consumed with holy zeal for God’s property and reputation. As he witnessed the spread of the apostles’ message about Jesus, his zeal was stirred to the boiling point. He saw this new sect as a cancer posing a serious threat to Israel’s most sacred institutions—the Law and the Temple. Operating under the jurisdiction of the chief priests in Jerusalem, he fully believed he was enforcing God’s Law. Thus Paul became the chief persecutor of the church, hunting down, arresting and executing believers, not only in Jerusalem, but also in foreign cities as far away as Damascus. “I was zealous just like you,” Paul is saying. “Just as you are displaying your zeal by wanting to kill me, I was displaying my zeal by seeking to kill Jesus’s followers” (in 22:4).⁷ Furthermore, this is public knowledge for which the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear witness.

You’ll never win an argument unless your audience feels that you identify with them and are empathetic to their point of view.

B. Paul’s encounter with the risen Christ

“As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’ Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand (lit. “hear”) the voice of the one who was speaking to me. And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.’ And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.” (22:6–11)

Thus far the crowd was with him as he built common ground with his Aramaic-speaking audience. But now he must explain how he came to a radically new understanding. The answer is that it did not come from his own desire or initiative. It took nothing less than a direct encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus to transform his views. The encounter totally overwhelmed and undid him. “His fanatical opposition was overcome in a moment.”⁸ A heavenly light more brilliant than the noonday sun shone around Saul and his companions. The entire party fell to the ground. Then Paul heard a voice in Aramaic, which only he heard, calling his name twice: “Saul, Saul,” (typical of a theophany; Gen 22:11; 46:2; 1 Sam 3:4) and demanding to know why he was persecuting him. The one who spoke to him identified himself as Jesus of Nazareth, and commanded him, “Rise, and go to Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do” (22:10). The one who came with the authority of the chief priest to arrest and bind others is now blind and no longer in control of anything. Others must lead him by the hand to Damascus, where he will await further instructions. In a similar fashion to the conversion of Cornelius, it takes the coordination of multiple visions to accomplish the divine purpose, which strengthens and validates Paul’s testimony.

C. Paul's commission through Ananias

“And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, came to me, and standing by me said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’” (22:12–16)

Paul regained his eyesight and was commissioned through the ministry of Ananias, a devout Jew with a well-known reputation. With renewed vision Paul is told that it was the God of our fathers that appointed him to see the Righteous One, thereby linking the risen Christ with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Paul's radical turnabout was not a change of religion, but rather a new understanding that fulfillment of Israel's hopes and dreams is found in the resurrection of the person of Jesus, who is now reigning as Israel's Messiah and Lord of the world. Keener comments,

When Paul recounts a vision of the risen Christ (22:7–10), his probably stunned audience hears him out. Paul is presenting to them new evidence that Jesus does in fact appear to people alive, a controversial claim that the Pharisees, who have apparently heard of it in reports about Paul's speech, are soon after willing to grant as a possibility (23:9). That Paul's claims about Jesus appear credible suggests the depth of the Jerusalem church's witness during the intervening years (21:20)⁹

D. Paul's vision in the temple

“When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’ And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.’ And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’” (22:17–21)

But Paul doesn't stop there. He moves from his initial encounter and calling to a more detailed affirmation of the controversial aspect of his calling. In the temple, where one would expect only a true vision, he again sees Jesus, who tells him to “Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.” Paul objects, naively believing that his testimony will have credibility because everyone knows how zealous he was in persecuting the church. But God will not change his mind and says, “Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.”

III. Violence and Rescue (22:22–29)

A. The crowd's violent reaction (22:22–24)

In self-fulfilling prophecy, the moment Paul mentions the word “Gentiles” all hell breaks loose. (When I say “hell,” I mean literally all the forces of evil). Up until now the crowd tolerated the ideas of Jesus and the resurrection, but to accept Gentiles on equal footing with the Jews was the height of apostasy. A riot ensues with the crowd screaming murderous shouts, tearing their clothes and throwing dust in the air. The scene ends as it began, with Paul being rescued

from the crowd by the Roman tribune, who is now losing patience. Unable to speak Aramaic, he was at a loss to know why the people were shouting, so he ordered Paul to be brought back to the barracks to be flogged to get to the truth of the matter. This was the Roman way of extracting truth from prisoners. Though Paul had earlier been beaten with rods by the Romans and five times received 39 lashes at the hands of the Jews, being flogged was far more brutal.

The scourge (Lat. *flagellum*), an instrument of Roman inquisition and punishment, consisted of leather thongs studded with pieces of metal or bone and fastened to a wooden handle. Its use often crippled for life and sometimes killed.¹⁰

B. The Romans abide by the law (22:25–29)

As Paul is stretched out on the rack, he has an interesting conversation with the centurion. “Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?” The question sends a lightning bolt of trauma through the centurion, who immediately went to the tribune with the information.

So the tribune came and said to him, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?” And he said, “Yes.” The tribune answered, “I bought this citizenship for a large sum,” [F. F. Bruce suggests, “the implication being that the privilege must have become cheap of late if such a sorry-looking figure as Paul could claim it.”¹¹] Paul said, “But I am a citizen by birth.” So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him. (Acts 22:26–29)

Twice Claudius Lysias rescues Paul, first from being lynched now from being flogged. Once again when Paul is under attack, levelheaded Roman officials, who are governed by law and justice, vindicate Paul and treat him as a citizen should be treated.

IV. Reflections

To grasp the full significance of Paul's defense, we have to think about it from two angles. First, what would be the impact on Paul's initial audience of non-believers, who thought they had life and morality figured out?

It demonstrates that conversion can be a train wreck. Paul, like his audience, thought he had everything figured out. Then he was literally ambushed, blinded and knocked flat. He didn't reorient for days. For those in our era who come to faith after childhood, Paul's experience is a powerful metaphor. Finding and deciding to follow Jesus can upend your world. As with Paul, it redefines one's entire foundation for life. You can be expelled from your community. Family relationships and friendships can break. Gaining new purpose through Christ is wonderful, but the process of losing the old purpose can be tumultuous.

Understanding this helps guard us from being naïve about the task of evangelism and what it takes to win someone to Christ, especially in cross cultural situations. Nabeel Qureshi was the eldest son of Pakistani immigrants and grew up as a devout Muslim in a loving, secure home. In his book, *Seeking Allah Finding Jesus*, he explains,

There is a simple reason I never listened to street preachers: They didn't seem to care about me...Effective evangelism requires relationships. In my case, I knew of no Christian who truly cared about me, no one who had been a part of my life through thick and thin. I had plenty of Christian acquaintances, and I'm sure they would have been my friend if I had become a Christian,

but that kind of friendship is conditional. There were none that I knew who cared about me unconditionally. Since no Christian cared about me, I did not care about their message.¹²

Fortunately Nabeel found such a friend in college. David Wood was an intelligent, thoughtful and devoted Christian. For six years they developed a deep and abiding friendship with intense study of the Koran and the Bible. Through years of conversations and debates along with interactions with gifted apologists, Nabeel's faith in the reliability and authority of the Qur'an began to crumble, while the authority and reliability of the Scriptures started capturing his heart. But then he came to that terrible crossroads, when following Jesus made perfect sense, but the suffering it would cause for the family he deeply loved was incalculable. The thought of it tore his heart apart. Like Paul, he needed a personal encounter to do something he did not want to do. He asked God for not one or two but three dreams, which he received, and he gave his life to Christ. He became an outstanding apologist for Jesus, lecturing to students at more than 100 universities before he passed away from cancer at age 34. But the betrayal his parents felt was so deep, it never healed.

Secondly, what does Paul's defense do for us as believers?

1. It authenticates Paul as a prime witness and apostle, following in Jesus' footsteps. It establishes his character and credibility, which breathes new life and meaning into his writings throughout the New Testament. When we hear Paul's impassioned testimony, it reminds us how precious his letters are and how we ought to give ourselves to them. It reminds us they were written by someone who loved Jesus, loved people, grieved for the lost, was full of the Holy Spirit, had a supernatural understanding of God's will, and would be gladly beaten for the opportunity to offer you eternal life.

2. It reveals the character of God in Paul, evoking our hearts to love God, whose loyal love keeps reaching out even in the face of constant rejection. Just as Paul was so desperate to testify to those who repeatedly beat and slandered him, so is God desperate to connect with all the people he made in his image. He doesn't give people one single shot at faith and then turn away, hard-hearted, if they reject it. He nudges people again and again, repeatedly risking rejection, because he loves his children that much. We as believers can't be effective witnesses if we don't internalize this.

3. Lastly, it reveals that telling others about Jesus isn't safe. It's risky. It's not enough to be a believer in Jesus; you must be a follower of Jesus, which means you have to be about the business of the kingdom. You have to go where Jesus goes and embrace those he is calling from all nations. The easy path is to just keep our faith "private." Paul would have been a lot safer if he had just kept his mouth shut. So why does Paul insist on pushing the envelope beyond what the Jews can accept? Why did he have to say, "go to the Gentiles?" Why not focus on what they might agree upon and let it go?

Paul's speech offers a final opportunity for the gospel to challenge Jerusalem to accept all of God's plan and spare it the destruction that Jesus promised at the hands of the Gentiles (Luke 21:24). The seasons allotted to the Gentiles over Jerusalem were now at hand (21:24), and a prophet's role was to summon them to repentance before judgment's coming.¹³

It's not enough to intellectually believe that Jesus was raised from the dead and Lord of the world. If he is Lord and we confess to be his followers, we must embrace God's mission for the whole world. If a church is not a missional church and embracing those whom God is bringing into the kingdom, that church will die. The "Kingdom Train" is on the move, and we must make sure we're on it before it leaves the station.

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Heb 13:20-21)

1. John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 336-37.
2. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP5 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 393.
3. Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts*, EBC 9; ed. Frank E. Gaebelien and J. D. Douglas; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), paragraph 52303.
4. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part Two*, Chapters 13-28 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 154.
5. Craig S. Keener, *Acts*, An Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 3:3204.
6. Keener, *Acts*, 3:3210, 3212.
7. Keener, *Acts*, 3:3210, 3222-23.
8. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 375.
9. Keener, *Acts*, 3:3210, 3228.
10. Longenecker, *Acts*, EBC 9; paragraph 52195.
11. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 446.
12. Nabeel Qureshi, *Seeking Allah Finding Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 120-21.
13. Keener, *Acts*, 3:3210, 3228.