

CRAWFORD BIBLE COMMENTARY

BIBLE STUDY

Acts Chapter 21 — Paul Arrested in Jerusalem

A Verse-by-Verse Bible Study from the Crawford Standard Bible

Introduction

Acts Chapter 21 is a chapter about:

Obedience.

Suffering.

Prophecy.

Courage.

Christian liberty.

Religious misunderstanding.

False accusation.

Providence.

And:

Witness under pressure.

Paul is traveling toward Jerusalem.

He knows hardship awaits him.

Acts 20 already told us that the Holy Spirit had repeatedly warned Paul that:

Prison and hardships were waiting for him.

Now those warnings become increasingly specific.

Believers in Tyre urge him not to go to Jerusalem.

The prophet Agabus dramatically takes Paul's belt, binds his own hands and feet, and declares that the man who owns the belt will be bound in Jerusalem and handed over to the Gentiles.

Paul's friends begin weeping.

They beg him not to go.

But Paul answers:

“Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”

Eventually they say:

“The Lord’s will be done.”

Paul arrives in Jerusalem and reports everything God has accomplished among the Gentiles.

The leaders rejoice.

But another problem has developed.

Thousands of Jewish believers have heard rumors that Paul teaches Jewish believers to abandon Moses completely.

The Jerusalem leaders suggest a public act that may demonstrate Paul is not hostile toward Jewish customs.

Paul agrees to participate with four men completing vows.

Yet even this attempt at peace does not prevent conflict.

Some Jews from Asia see Paul in the temple.

They make accusations.

They assume he brought a Gentile named Trophimus into the restricted temple area.

Luke specifically tells us:

They had only:

Assumed it.

The accusation spreads.

The city erupts.

Paul is dragged from the temple.

The crowd attempts to kill him.

Then something unexpected happens.

Roman soldiers arrive.

The commander arrests Paul.

Yet that arrest actually saves Paul’s life.

The chains predicted by Agabus are now placed upon him.

But the Roman commander who thinks he is arresting Paul is also unknowingly preserving Paul for the next stage of God’s mission.

Paul then asks for permission to speak.

The commander is surprised that he speaks Greek.

Paul identifies himself.

Then Paul stands on the steps before the hostile crowd.

The man they were trying to kill is now about to preach to them.

Acts 21 therefore teaches an extraordinary truth:

God can turn persecution into a pulpit.

The chapter begins with Paul moving toward suffering.

It ends with Paul standing before the very crowd that attacked him, ready to bear witness.

The central truth of Acts 21 is:

Faithful discipleship follows the will of God even when suffering lies ahead, seeks peace without compromising truth, remains courageous under false accusation, and trusts God to turn hostile circumstances into opportunities for witness.

I. PAUL LEAVES THE EPHESIAN ELDERS

Acts 21:1

“After saying goodbye to the Ephesian elders, we sailed straight to Cos, then to Rhodes, and from there to Patara.”

The emotional farewell of Acts 20 is over.

The journey continues.

Cross References

Acts 20:37

The Ephesian elders had wept, embraced Paul, and expressed their deep affection for him.

Acts 20:38

They were especially grieved because Paul had said they would not see his face again.

Acts 27:2

Luke later records Paul’s sea journeys in similar geographic detail.

Spiritual Principle

Painful goodbyes do not cancel God’s next assignment.

II. THEY SAIL TOWARD PHOENICIA

Acts 21:2

“We found a ship sailing to Phoenicia, so we boarded and set sail.”

Luke continues giving precise travel details.

Cross References

Acts 11:19

Believers scattered by persecution had previously carried the gospel into Phoenicia.

Acts 15:3

Paul and Barnabas had traveled through Phoenicia while reporting Gentile conversions.

Acts 27:6

Roman travel later required Paul to transfer to another ship during his journey toward Rome.

Spiritual Principle

God’s providence often works through ordinary arrangements such as ships, roads, schedules, and travel plans.

III. THEY ARRIVE AT TYRE

Acts 21:3

“We passed by Cyprus, leaving it on our left, and sailed to Syria, landing at Tyre, where the ship was to unload its cargo.”

Tyre becomes another place of Christian fellowship.

Cross References

Acts 4:36

Barnabas came from Cyprus, an island connected with several stages of apostolic ministry.

Acts 11:19

The gospel had already spread into the region of Phoenicia.

Acts 15:39

Barnabas and Mark had previously sailed toward Cyprus.

Spiritual Principle

Wherever the gospel travels, it creates spiritual family in unexpected places.

IV. BELIEVERS WARN PAUL

Acts 21:4

“We found disciples there and stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit, they urged Paul not to go to Jerusalem.”

This verse requires careful interpretation.

The Holy Spirit had already revealed:

Suffering awaited Paul.

The believers appear to understand the danger through the Spirit and respond by urging Paul not to continue.

Yet Paul himself remains convinced that God is leading him onward.

Cross References

Acts 20:23

Paul had already said the Holy Spirit repeatedly warned him that prison and hardships awaited him.

Acts 21:11

Agabus would soon give a specific prophetic warning that Paul would be bound in Jerusalem.

Acts 21:12

Paul’s companions would also plead with him not to continue.

Important Doctrinal Note

The text clearly shows divine revelation concerning suffering.

The precise relationship between the Spirit’s warning and the believers’ conclusion that Paul should not go has been interpreted differently.

A careful reading allows us to distinguish:

The Spirit revealed the danger.

The believers, out of love, urged Paul to avoid it.

Paul believed his calling still required him to go.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

A warning from God may prepare us for suffering without necessarily being a command to avoid suffering.

V. THE CHURCH PRAYS ON THE BEACH

Acts 21:5

“But when our time was up, we left, and all the disciples, with their wives and children, came with us to the edge of the city. There on the beach we knelt and prayed.”

What a picture.

Men.

Women.

Children.

Missionaries.

All kneeling together.

Cross References

Acts 20:36

Paul had recently knelt and prayed with the Ephesian elders.

Acts 20:38

Those believers had also accompanied Paul during their painful farewell.

Genesis 31:55

Biblical farewells often included blessing and expressions of family affection.

Spiritual Principle

Prayer should surround both departures and difficult decisions.

VI. THEY SAY GOODBYE

Acts 21:6

“After saying goodbye, we boarded the ship, and they returned home.”

The farewell is simple.

The mission continues.

Cross References

Acts 20:37

Paul had already experienced an emotional farewell with the Ephesian elders.

Acts 20:38

Christian relationships made separation painful.

Ruth 1:14

Scripture repeatedly records deep emotional farewells between people bound by love.

Spiritual Principle

Obedience sometimes requires leaving people we deeply love.

VII. PAUL GREETES BELIEVERS IN PTOLEMAIS

Acts 21:7

“From Tyre we sailed to Ptolemais, greeted the believers, and stayed one day with them.”

Even a one-day visit includes Christian fellowship.

Cross References

Acts 11:19

The gospel had already reached this broader region.

Acts 18:22

Paul regularly greeted churches during his journeys.

Acts 21:3

This stop continues the journey southward from Tyre.

Spiritual Principle

Christian fellowship does not need to be long to be meaningful.

VIII. PHILIP THE EVANGELIST

Acts 21:8

“The next day we went to Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the seven chosen earlier.”

Philip returns to the story.

We first saw him in Acts 6.

Then Acts 8.

Now:

Years later.

Still faithful.

Cross References

Acts 6:5

Philip had been one of the seven respected Spirit-filled servants chosen in Jerusalem.

Acts 8:40

Philip continued preaching the gospel through many towns.

Acts 8:5

Philip had powerfully proclaimed Christ in Samaria.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

A strong beginning is good, but long-term faithfulness is better.

IX. PHILIP’S FOUR DAUGHTERS PROPHECY

Acts 21:9

“He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.”

Luke records their spiritual ministry without embarrassment or qualification.

Cross References

Joel 2:28

Joel foretold that in the outpouring of God’s Spirit, sons and daughters would prophesy.

Acts 2:17

Peter applied Joel's prophecy to the Spirit's work beginning at Pentecost.

1 Corinthians 11:5

Paul acknowledges women praying and prophesying within the life of the early church.

Spiritual Principle

The Holy Spirit gives gifts according to His will for the strengthening of God's people.

X. AGABUS ARRIVES

Acts 21:10

"After we had been there many days, a prophet named Agabus came from Judea."

Agabus had appeared earlier in Acts.

Cross References

Acts 11:28

Agabus had previously predicted a severe famine that later occurred.

Acts 13:1

Prophets and teachers were recognized ministries in the early church.

Ephesians 4:11

Christ gave various gifted servants to equip His people.

Spiritual Principle

God may use repeated warnings to prepare His servants emotionally and spiritually for what lies ahead.

XI. AGABUS PREDICTS PAUL'S BINDING

Acts 21:11

"He took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it, and said, 'The Holy Spirit says, "The Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and hand him over to the Gentiles."'"

Agabus uses a symbolic prophetic action.

This resembles Old Testament prophets.

Cross References

Jeremiah 13:1

Jeremiah used a belt as a prophetic symbol when God instructed him to act out a message.

Ezekiel 4:1

Ezekiel frequently communicated prophecy through symbolic actions.

Acts 20:23

The Holy Spirit had already warned Paul repeatedly of imprisonment and hardship.

Spiritual Principle

God sometimes prepares His servants for suffering before the suffering arrives.

XII. THE BELIEVERS BEG PAUL NOT TO GO

Acts 21:12

“When we heard this, we and the local believers begged Paul not to go to Jerusalem.”

Their response comes from love.

They do not want Paul hurt.

Cross References

Acts 21:4

The disciples in Tyre had expressed the same concern.

Matthew 16:22

Peter once tried to persuade Jesus away from the path of suffering.

Acts 20:37

Paul’s relationships with believers were emotionally deep.

Spiritual Principle

Love naturally wants to protect people from suffering, but love must ultimately submit to God’s calling.

XIII. “I AM READY TO DIE”

Acts 21:13

“But Paul answered, ‘Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.’”

Paul does not merely accept imprisonment.

He accepts the possibility of death.

Cross References

Acts 20:24

Paul had already said his life was not more valuable to him than finishing Christ's assignment.

2 Timothy 4:6

Near the end of his life Paul described himself as being poured out and approaching departure.

Philippians 1:21

Paul wrote that to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

“A Person Who Has Already Surrendered His Life to Christ Cannot Be Controlled by the Threat of Losing It.”

XIV. “THE LORD’S WILL BE DONE”

Acts 21:14

“Since he could not be persuaded, we gave up and said, ‘The Lord’s will be done.’”

This is where faith must ultimately rest.

Cross References

Matthew 26:39

Jesus prayed in Gethsemane that the Father’s will, not His own desire for relief, would be accomplished.

Luke 22:42

Jesus submitted Himself fully to the Father’s will even in the face of suffering.

Matthew 6:10

Jesus taught His disciples to pray that God’s will be done on earth.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Faith is not merely asking God to bless our preferred outcome; faith is surrendering to His will even when that will is costly.

XV. PAUL GOES TO JERUSALEM

Acts 21:15

“After this, we packed up and went to Jerusalem.”

The warnings are over.

Now comes obedience.

Cross References

Luke 9:51

Jesus Himself had resolutely set His face toward Jerusalem knowing suffering awaited Him.

Acts 19:21

Paul had earlier resolved in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem.

Acts 20:22

Paul described himself as compelled toward Jerusalem despite uncertainty about what would happen.

Spiritual Principle

Eventually discernment must become action.

XVI. MNASON PROVIDES HOSPITALITY

Acts 21:16

“Some disciples from Caesarea came with us and brought us to stay with Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple.”

Mnason represents quiet faithfulness.

Cross References

Acts 4:36

Barnabas was another believer from Cyprus who became deeply involved in gospel ministry.

Acts 11:20

Believers from Cyprus helped spread the gospel among Gentiles.

Hebrews 13:2

Christians are encouraged to practice hospitality faithfully.

Spiritual Principle

Hospitality is a genuine ministry because it supports those carrying the gospel.

XVII. PAUL IS WELCOMED IN JERUSALEM

Acts 21:17

“When we arrived in Jerusalem, the believers welcomed us gladly.”

Paul enters Jerusalem surrounded by Christian welcome.

Cross References

Acts 15:4

Paul and Barnabas had previously been welcomed by the Jerusalem church.

Romans 15:31

Paul had specifically prayed that his service in Jerusalem would be acceptable to the believers.

3 John 1:8

Christians are encouraged to support faithful workers for the truth.

Spiritual Principle

Believers can rejoice together even when difficult days are approaching.

XVIII. PAUL MEETS JAMES AND THE ELDERS

Acts 21:18

“The next day, Paul went with us to see James, and all the elders were present.”

The Jerusalem leadership gathers.

Cross References

Acts 15:13

James had previously played an important leadership role at the Jerusalem Council.

Galatians 1:19

Paul identifies James as the Lord's brother.

Acts 12:17

James had already been recognized as a significant leader in Jerusalem.

Spiritual Principle

Missionary ministry should maintain accountability and fellowship with church leadership.

XIX. PAUL REPORTS WHAT GOD DID

Acts 21:19

“Paul told them in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.”

Again:

God receives the glory.

Cross References

Acts 15:12

Paul and Barnabas had earlier reported the signs and wonders God performed among Gentiles.

Acts 14:27

They reported how God had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.

Romans 15:18

Paul refused to boast except concerning what Christ had accomplished through him.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

The best ministry report tells what God did through His servants rather than what His servants accomplished independently.

XX. THE LEADERS PRAISE GOD

Acts 21:20

“When they heard it, they praised God. Then they said, ‘Brother, you see how many thousands of Jews have believed, and they are all zealous for the law.’”

There is celebration.

But also complexity.

Thousands of Jewish believers remain culturally devoted to Jewish customs.

Cross References

Acts 2:41

Thousands of Jewish people had believed beginning at Pentecost.

Acts 6:7

Even many priests had become obedient to the faith.

Romans 10:2

Paul acknowledged the deep religious zeal found among many Jewish people.

Spiritual Principle

The early church contained believers from very different cultural backgrounds who needed wisdom in living together.

XXI. RUMORS ABOUT PAUL

Acts 21:21

“They have been told that you teach Jews living among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live by our customs.”

The issue is rumor.

Paul opposed circumcision as a requirement for justification.

But that is different from teaching Jewish believers that every Jewish custom is inherently sinful.

Cross References

Acts 15:1

Paul strongly opposed teachers who made circumcision necessary for salvation.

Galatians 5:2

Paul warned Gentiles against accepting circumcision as a requirement for justification.

Acts 6:13

Stephen had similarly faced distorted accusations regarding Moses and the law.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

A distorted version of someone's teaching can become more influential than what that person actually teaches.

XXII. THE PROBLEM MUST BE ADDRESSED

Acts 21:22

“What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come.”

The leaders know the rumor cannot simply be ignored.

Cross References

Acts 21:20

Thousands of Jewish believers were deeply sensitive to issues surrounding the law.

Acts 15:2

The church had previously addressed a major doctrinal controversy openly.

Acts 6:12

False or distorted accusations had previously stirred public unrest.

Spiritual Principle

Sometimes misunderstanding must be addressed proactively before it grows further.

XXIII. FOUR MEN HAVE TAKEN A VOW

Acts 21:23

“Here is our advice: There are four men who have taken a vow.”

The elders propose a practical demonstration.

Cross References

Numbers 6:2

Israel's law provided for voluntary vows involving special devotion to God.

Acts 18:18

Paul himself had previously completed a vow.

Numbers 6:13

The law described procedures for completing such vows.

Spiritual Principle

Voluntary cultural or devotional practices may be permissible when they do not become requirements for salvation.

XXIV. PAUL IS ASKED TO JOIN THEM

Acts 21:24

“Join with them in their purification rites, pay their expenses so they can shave their heads. Then everyone will know that the reports about you are false and that you yourself live in obedience to the law.”

Paul agrees to demonstrate that he is not an enemy of Jewish people or Jewish customs.

Cross References

Numbers 6:13

The completion of a vow involved prescribed ceremonial actions.

Numbers 6:18

Shaving the head formed part of the completion of certain vows.

1 Corinthians 9:20

Paul said that when ministering among Jews, he willingly adapted to Jewish customs when the gospel itself was not compromised.

Important Truth

Paul could participate in a Jewish custom.

What he could not do was teach that such customs justified sinners before God.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Christian liberty can accommodate culture, but it must never surrender the gospel.

XXV. THE GENTILE DECISION REMAINS UNCHANGED

Acts 21:25

“As for the Gentile believers, we have written them with instructions to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality.”

The leaders reaffirm Acts 15.

Gentiles are not being placed under circumcision or the Mosaic law as conditions for salvation.

Cross References

Acts 15:20

James had recommended these practical instructions during the Jerusalem Council.

Acts 15:29

The final apostolic letter repeated the same requirements.

1 Corinthians 8:1

Paul later addressed questions about food associated with idols and Christian conscience.

Spiritual Principle

Accommodation must not become doctrinal reversal.

XXVI. PAUL PARTICIPATES IN THE PURIFICATION

Acts 21:26

“Paul agreed. The next day he purified himself along with the men and went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.”

Paul willingly participates.

Cross References

Numbers 6:13

The law prescribed procedures connected with the completion of vows.

Acts 21:24

Paul had been asked to join the men as a visible demonstration against the rumors.

Numbers 6:9

Purification regulations existed within the vow system.

Spiritual Principle

A believer may surrender personal freedom in an attempt to remove unnecessary misunderstanding.

XXVII. PAUL IS SEIZED

Acts 21:27

“When the seven days were almost over, some Jews from Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the crowd and seized him.”

Ironically:

Paul is attempting peace.

Yet conflict erupts anyway.

Cross References

Acts 21:11

Agabus had predicted that Paul would be bound in Jerusalem.

Acts 20:19

Paul had repeatedly experienced plots from hostile opponents.

Acts 24:18

Paul later explains that he had been ceremonially purified when his accusers found him.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Doing everything reasonably possible to avoid unnecessary offense does not guarantee that opposition will disappear.

XXVIII. FALSE ACCUSATIONS ERUPT

Acts 21:28

“Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people, our law, and this temple. And now he has even brought Greeks into the temple, defiling this holy place.”

The accusations are sweeping.

Against the People

Against the Law

Against the Temple

Then:

A claim that Paul brought Gentiles into a forbidden area.

Cross References

Acts 6:13

Stephen had faced remarkably similar accusations concerning the law and temple.

Acts 24:5

Paul would later be accused of being a troublemaker throughout the world.

Acts 24:6

His enemies would repeat charges involving supposed desecration of the temple.

Spiritual Principle

False accusations often sound strongest when they combine fear, religion, and exaggeration.

XXIX. THEY ONLY ASSUMED

Acts 21:29

“They had seen Trophimus the Ephesian with Paul earlier in the city and assumed Paul had brought him into the temple.”

This verse exposes the weakness of the accusation.

They:

Saw Trophimus with Paul.

Then:

Assumed something else happened.

Cross References

Acts 20:4

Trophimus had been one of Paul’s traveling companions.

2 Timothy 4:20

Paul later mentions Trophimus as a known coworker.

Ephesians 2:14

Paul's gospel emphasized Christ breaking down hostility between Jew and Gentile.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

“Never Turn an Assumption Into an Accusation.”

Seeing one fact does not prove another.

XXX. THE CITY ERUPTS

Acts 21:30

“The whole city was in an uproar. People came running from all directions, seized Paul, dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the gates were shut.”

Jerusalem now resembles Ephesus.

A mob takes control.

Cross References

Acts 16:19

Paul and Silas had previously been dragged before authorities in Philippi.

Acts 19:29

The Ephesian crowd had seized Paul's companions during another riot.

Luke 4:29

A hostile crowd once attempted to kill Jesus.

Spiritual Principle

Religious emotion without truth can become violently destructive.

XXXI. THE MOB TRIES TO KILL PAUL

Acts 21:31

“While they were trying to kill him, news reached the Roman commander that all Jerusalem was in chaos.”

The situation has reached attempted murder.

Cross References

Acts 21:11

The prophetic warning of coming arrest is now unfolding.

Acts 23:27

The Roman commander later explains how he intervened and rescued Paul.

Acts 22:24

Paul would soon be taken into Roman custody.

Spiritual Principle

God can use an institution that does not serve Him spiritually to preserve the life of His servant.

XXXII. ROMAN SOLDIERS STOP THE BEATING

Acts 21:32

“At once he took soldiers and centurions and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.”

The arrival of Rome stops the immediate violence.

Cross References

Acts 16:22

Paul had previously suffered under civil authority in Philippi.

Acts 21:27

The mob had seized him in the temple.

2 Corinthians 11:23

Paul had endured repeated beatings and imprisonments.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

The same government that may imprison a believer can also become the means God uses to protect him.

XXXIII. PAUL IS BOUND WITH TWO CHAINS

Acts 21:33

“The commander arrested Paul, ordered him bound with two chains, and asked who he was and what he had done.”

Agabus’ prophecy is visibly fulfilled.

Cross References

Acts 21:11

Agabus had symbolically shown that Paul would be bound in Jerusalem.

Acts 22:24

The Roman commander continues questioning Paul.

Acts 26:29

Paul later stands as a prisoner while continuing to proclaim Christ.

Spiritual Principle

Prophecy prepared Paul for the chains but did not prevent the chains.

XXXIV. CONFUSION PREVENTS THE TRUTH FROM BEING KNOWN

Acts 21:34

“Some shouted one thing, others another. Since the commander could not learn the truth in the uproar, he ordered Paul taken into the fortress.”

This resembles Acts 19.

Cross References

Acts 19:32

During the Ephesian riot, different people shouted different things and many did not know why they were there.

Acts 22:24

The commander later continues trying to determine why the crowd is so violently opposed to Paul.

Acts 23:10

Another violent dispute later requires Roman intervention.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Truth is often one of the first casualties when crowds are ruled by emotion.

XXXV. PAUL IS CARRIED BY SOLDIERS

Acts 21:35

“As Paul was being carried up the steps by the soldiers, the crowd kept pressing.”

The hostility is so intense that soldiers must physically carry Paul.

Cross References

Acts 21:32

Roman soldiers had intervened to stop the beating.

Acts 22:22

The crowd’s hostility would continue even after Paul began his defense.

Acts 23:10

Paul would later require another military rescue from violent conflict.

Spiritual Principle

God’s servant may be physically weak and surrounded yet still remain within God’s purpose.

XXXVI. “AWAY WITH HIM!”

Acts 21:36

“Shouting, ‘Away with him!’”

The wording echoes the rejection of Jesus.

Cross References

Luke 23:18

The crowd cried for Jesus to be taken away while demanding another prisoner’s release.

John 19:15

Jesus’ enemies shouted for Him to be crucified.

Acts 22:22

Paul would soon hear the same demand repeated.

Spiritual Principle

Servants of Christ should not be surprised when they experience rejection similar in spirit to what their Lord endured.

XXXVII. PAUL ASKS TO SPEAK

Acts 21:37

“As they were about to take Paul into the fortress, he asked the commander, ‘May I say something to you?’ The commander replied, ‘Do you speak Greek?’”

Paul has just been:

Dragged.

Beaten.

Nearly killed.

Yet:

He wants to speak.

Cross References

Acts 22:1

Paul will soon begin a formal defense before the crowd.

Acts 26:1

Paul later again speaks in his own defense before political authorities.

Acts 24:10

Paul repeatedly uses legal opportunities as opportunities for testimony.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

A gospel-centered believer looks for an opportunity to witness even while recovering from the attack.

XXXVIII. THE COMMANDER HAS THE WRONG MAN

Acts 21:38

“Aren’t you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists into the desert some time ago?”

The commander has misidentified Paul.

Another assumption.

Cross References

Acts 5:36

Gamaliel had previously referred to political revolutionaries who gathered followers.

Acts 5:37

Judas the Galilean was another figure connected with rebellion.

Matthew 24:24

Jesus warned that false leaders and deceptive figures would arise.

Spiritual Principle

A person can be judged by an identity that was never his in the first place.

XXXIX. PAUL IDENTIFIES HIMSELF

Acts 21:39

“Paul answered, ‘I am a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city. Please let me speak to the people.’”

Paul calmly corrects the mistake.

Then asks:

Let me speak.

Cross References

Acts 9:11

Paul’s connection with Tarsus had been known since the beginning of his Christian story.

Acts 22:3

Paul will soon explain his Jewish background more fully.

Philippians 3:5

Paul elsewhere describes his strong Jewish heritage.

Spiritual Principle

Calm truth can be more powerful than emotional defensiveness.

XL. PAUL STANDS BEFORE THE CROWD

Acts 21:40

“The commander agreed. Paul stood on the steps and motioned for the crowd to be silent. When they grew quiet, he spoke to them in Hebrew.”

What a scene.

Minutes earlier:

They were trying to kill him.

Now:

They are listening to him.

Cross References

Acts 12:17

Speakers in Acts often motioned for silence before addressing a crowd.

Acts 13:16

Paul had previously signaled before delivering a major public message.

Acts 22:2

The crowd became even quieter when Paul addressed them in their own language.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

“God Can Turn the Steps of a Fortress Into a Pulpit.”

Paul’s chains do not silence him.

They position him.

XLI. WHAT ACTS 21 TEACHES ABOUT SUFFERING

Paul knew suffering was ahead.

Yet he continued.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

The presence of hardship does not automatically mean the absence of God's will.

Sometimes:

Obedience avoids suffering.

Other times:

Obedience leads directly through it.

XLII. WARNING IS NOT ALWAYS ESCAPE INSTRUCTIONS

Paul receives repeated warnings.

But the warnings prepare him rather than redirect him.

Spiritual Principle

God may tell us what is coming so that when it comes, our faith will not collapse.

XLIII. “READY TO DIE”

Paul's courage did not begin in Jerusalem.

It had been settled earlier.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

“The Decision to Be Faithful Must Be Made Before the Crisis Arrives.”

If obedience is decided only after danger appears:

Fear may decide for us.

XLIV. THE LORD'S WILL ABOVE OUR FEELINGS

The believers loved Paul.

They wept.

They begged.

Finally:

“The Lord’s will be done.”

Spiritual Principle

Love must ultimately release people into God’s will rather than attempt to control them through our fear.

XLV. PHILIP’S LONG-TERM FAITHFULNESS

Years earlier Philip:

Served tables.

Preached in Samaria.

Witnessed to the Ethiopian.

Now:

He is still serving.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Faithfulness is not measured by one dramatic season but by continuing with Christ through many seasons.

XLVI. PAUL REPORTS GOD’S WORK, NOT HIS OWN GREATNESS

Paul arrives and tells what:

God had done.

Spiritual Principle

A ministry report should produce worship of God rather than admiration of the minister.

The Jerusalem leaders respond:

They praised God.

XLVII. UNITY AMONG DIFFERENT CHRISTIAN CULTURES

Jewish believers retained many Jewish customs.

Gentile believers did not have to become Jews.

The challenge was:

How do both live together in Christ?

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Christian unity does not require every believer to have identical cultural practices; it requires shared loyalty to the same gospel and Lord.

XLVIII. PAUL'S PURIFICATION AND CHRISTIAN LIBERTY

Paul participates in Jewish purification customs.

Why?

Not to earn salvation.

Not because Christ was insufficient.

But:

To remove unnecessary offense.

Spiritual Principle

Christian freedom includes the freedom to surrender a preference for the sake of peace when truth is not compromised.

XLIX. ACCOMMODATION HAS LIMITS

Paul could participate in a vow.

But Acts 15 had already established:

Gentiles did not need circumcision to be saved.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

We may bend on preference, culture, and personal liberty—but never on the gospel itself.

L. FALSE RUMORS CAN BE POWERFUL

Paul's actual teaching was complicated.

The rumor was simple:

He hates:

Moses.

Jews.

The law.

The temple.

Spiritual Principle

Falsehood often travels faster because it removes nuance and replaces it with accusation.

LI. ASSUMPTION BECOMES ACCUSATION

Acts 21:29 is especially important.

They:

Saw Paul with Trophimus.

Then:

Assumed Trophimus entered the temple.

Then:

Accused Paul publicly.

Then:

A mob tried to kill him.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

“An Unchecked Assumption Can Become a Destructive Accusation.”

Before accusing someone:

Know the facts.

LII. RELIGIOUS ZEAL WITHOUT KNOWLEDGE

The crowd is passionate.

But passion is not enough.

Spiritual Principle

Zeal without truth can become dangerous.

Religious people can sincerely believe they are defending God while actually attacking His servant.

LIII. GOD USES ROME TO SAVE PAUL

The Roman commander does not understand the gospel.

He does not know Paul.

Yet:

His soldiers save Paul from murder.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

God's providence is not limited to people who knowingly serve Him.

God can use:

Officials.

Governments.

Laws.

Circumstances.

Even enemies.

LIV. THE ARREST BECOMES PROTECTION

Paul is arrested.

At first that appears negative.

But the arrest saves his life.

Spiritual Principle

Sometimes what looks like confinement is actually protection.

Paul's chains will eventually carry him toward:

Governors.

Kings.

Rome.

LV. THE PROPHECY COMES TRUE

Agabus said:

Paul would be bound.

Now:

Two chains.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

When God prepares us beforehand, fulfilled warning should strengthen our confidence rather than weaken it.

LVI. PAUL'S MISSION CONTINUES IN CHAINS

Paul's freedom decreases.

His witness does not.

Spiritual Principle

God's mission is not dependent upon ideal circumstances.

A prison can become a mission field.

A courtroom can become a pulpit.

Chains can become an introduction to rulers.

LVII. PAUL WANTS TO SPEAK TO HIS ATTACKERS

This is remarkable.

Paul does not say:

Get me away from these people.

He says:

“Please let me speak to the people.”

Crawford Bible Study Principle

“A Gospel Heart Can Still Desire the Salvation of People Who Have Just Tried to Destroy It.”

LVIII. THE POWER OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL CONNECTION

Paul addresses the people in their own language.

That earns attention.

Spiritual Principle

The message must never change, but wise messengers communicate it in ways their audience can understand.

LIX. THE HOSTILE CROWD BECOMES AN AUDIENCE

Paul goes from:

Victim.

To prisoner.

To speaker.

Crawford Bible Study Principle

Never decide too quickly that a hostile circumstance cannot become a gospel opportunity.

LX. SEVEN GREAT LESSONS FROM ACTS 21

1. God May Lead Through Suffering

Principle:

Hardship does not automatically mean we missed God's will.

2. Prophecy Can Prepare Believers

Principle:

God may warn His people so they are spiritually ready for what lies ahead.

3. The Lord's Will Must Come First

Principle:

Faith ultimately says, "The Lord's will be done."

4. Christian Liberty Should Promote Peace

Principle:

Believers may surrender personal freedoms to remove unnecessary offense without compromising truth.

5. Assumptions Can Destroy

Principle:

Never convert suspicion into certainty without evidence.

6. God Rules Over Hostile Circumstances

Principle:

The Roman arrest that bound Paul also protected Paul.

7. Persecution Can Become a Platform

Principle:

Paul's attackers became his audience.

LXI. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FOR PERSONAL STUDY

Question 1

Why was Paul determined to go to Jerusalem even though suffering was predicted?

Paul believed he was being led to Jerusalem and had already surrendered his personal safety to the calling of Christ.

He was prepared for imprisonment and even death.

Question 2

What did Agabus prophesy?

He used Paul's belt to demonstrate that Paul would be bound in Jerusalem and handed over to Gentile authorities.

Question 3

How did Paul respond when believers begged him not to go?

He said:

"I am ready not only to be bound, but to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."

Question 4

What did the believers finally say?

They submitted the matter to God and said:

“The Lord’s will be done.”

Question 5

Who was Philip?

Philip was one of the seven men chosen in Acts 6 and had become a prominent evangelist.

Years later, Acts 21 shows him still faithfully serving Christ.

Question 6

What did Paul report to the Jerusalem leaders?

He described in detail what God had accomplished among the Gentiles through his ministry.

Question 7

Why did Paul participate in the purification rites?

He sought to demonstrate that reports portraying him as an enemy of Jewish customs were false.

His participation was an act of accommodation, not an attempt to earn salvation through the law.

Question 8

What accusation caused Paul’s arrest?

His opponents claimed he taught against the Jewish people, law, and temple and falsely accused him of bringing Gentiles into the temple.

Question 9

What evidence did they actually have concerning Trophimus?

They had seen Trophimus with Paul earlier in Jerusalem.

They merely assumed Paul had later taken him into the temple.

Question 10

Who saved Paul from the mob?

Roman soldiers under the commander intervened and stopped the crowd from killing him.

Question 11

How was Agabus' prophecy fulfilled?

Paul was bound with two chains and placed in Roman custody.

Question 12

What did Paul do after nearly being killed?

He asked permission to speak to the crowd.

Instead of focusing only on escape, he looked for an opportunity to bear witness.

LXII. PERSONAL APPLICATION

Acts 21 asks several searching questions.

Am I Willing to Follow God When Obedience Is Costly?

Paul was.

Do I Expect God Always to Remove Suffering?

Sometimes He prepares us to endure it.

Can I Honestly Pray:

“The Lord’s will be done”?

Am I Willing to Surrender Personal Freedom for Christian unity?

Paul did.

Do I distinguish between biblical truth and cultural preference?

Acts 21 requires that wisdom.

Do I repeat rumors without knowing the facts?

Paul suffered because people did.

Do I turn assumptions into accusations?

His enemies did.

Do I follow crowds emotionally?

The Jerusalem mob did.

Can I see God’s hand even in an unwanted circumstance?

Paul’s arrest actually saved his life.

Do I look for opportunities to witness under pressure?

Paul did.

LXIII. A CRAWFORD BIBLE STUDY PRINCIPLE

“Do Not Confuse God’s Warning With God’s Absence”

God warned Paul:

Chains are coming.

That did not mean:

God had abandoned him.

Principle

The God who tells you a storm is coming is still God when you enter the storm.

LXIV. ANOTHER CRAWFORD BIBLE STUDY PRINCIPLE

“Settle Your Loyalty Before the Chains Arrive”

Paul said:

“I am ready.”

He had already made the decision.

Principle

Conviction formed in quiet moments becomes courage in dangerous moments.

LXV. ANOTHER CRAWFORD BIBLE STUDY PRINCIPLE

“Never Build a Verdict on an Assumption”

They saw:

Paul with Trophimus.

They assumed:

Paul brought him into the temple.

They concluded:

Paul defiled the temple.

Then:

They tried to kill him.

Principle

One careless assumption can become a chain of destructive conclusions.

LXVI. ANOTHER CRAWFORD BIBLE STUDY PRINCIPLE

“Peace Is Worth Pursuing, but Truth Is Not for Sale”

Paul made a major effort to remove misunderstanding.

But he never taught:

The law saves.

Circumcision saves.

Ceremony justifies.

Principle

Biblical peacemaking bends wherever conscience allows but stands immovable wherever the gospel requires.

LXVII. ANOTHER CRAWFORD BIBLE STUDY PRINCIPLE

“Your Arrest May Become Your Assignment”

Paul’s arrest looks like the end of freedom.

But it opens a new ministry stage.

He will testify before:

The Jewish crowd.

The Sanhedrin.

Felix.

Festus.

Agrippa.

Eventually:

Rome.

Principle

God can use the circumstance you would never choose to place you before the people you could never otherwise reach.

LXVIII. ANOTHER CRAWFORD BIBLE STUDY PRINCIPLE

“Do Not Waste the Platform Hidden Inside the Problem”

Paul is battered.

Bound.

Misunderstood.

Yet he says:

“Let me speak.”

Principle

A gospel-centered believer asks not only, “How do I get out of this?” but also, “How can Christ be proclaimed through this?”

LXIX. FINAL APPLICATION

Acts Chapter 21 begins with:

A journey.

It ends with:

Chains.

But those chains do not represent the defeat of God’s mission.

They become part of it.

Paul had already said:

“My only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus gave me.”

Now that conviction is tested.

Warnings come.

Friends weep.

Agabus prophesies.

Jerusalem waits.

Paul goes anyway.

Why?

Because Paul had reached a place of surrender.

He could say:

“I am ready not only to be bound, but to die.”

That kind of courage does not come from loving pain.

It comes from loving Christ more than personal safety.

Acts 21 also teaches us about Christian unity.

Paul was willing to participate in Jewish customs to remove unnecessary offense.

He did not need those ceremonies for salvation.

He knew Gentiles did not need them.

But he could voluntarily participate when the gospel was not compromised.

That is mature liberty.

Sometimes maturity says:

I have the right.

But:

I do not need to use that right.

Then the chapter gives a serious warning about rumors.

Paul's enemies:

Saw one thing.

Assumed another.

Accused him of a third.

And nearly killed him because of it.

How much damage begins with:

“I heard.”

“I assumed.”

“Someone told me.”

“It must be true.”

Acts 21 says:

Be careful.

Truth matters.

Evidence matters.

Facts matter.

Then:

The Roman soldiers arrive.

Paul is arrested.

At first:

That sounds bad.

But without the arrest:

The mob may have killed him.

The chains become protection.

That is providence.

God can hide deliverance inside something that looks like defeat.

Finally:

Paul stands on the steps.

Bruised.

Bound.

Surrounded by soldiers.

Facing people who wanted him dead.

And he asks:

“May I speak?”

That is Acts 21.

The man in chains is still free enough to preach.

The mob has not silenced him.

The attack has given him an audience.

The prison journey is beginning.

But so is another phase of witness.

Therefore:

Follow God when the road is difficult.

Listen when He prepares you for suffering.

Surrender your future to His will.

Seek unity.

Do not compromise truth.

Refuse gossip.

Reject careless assumptions.

Trust providence.

Remain courageous.

And when trouble gives you a platform:

Speak for Jesus.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Thank You for Acts Chapter 21.

Thank You for Paul's example of courage and surrender.

Teach us to follow You even when obedience is difficult.

When You warn us about hardship, help us prepare rather than panic.

Give us faith to say:

"The Lord's will be done."

Help us love Jesus more than comfort.

More than safety.

More than reputation.

More than life itself.

Give us wisdom concerning Christian liberty.

Help us distinguish between:

Truth and tradition.

Doctrine and culture.

Command and preference.

Give us humility to surrender personal freedoms when doing so promotes peace without compromising Your Word.

Protect us from rumors.

Protect us from gossip.

Protect us from assumptions.

Help us never accuse someone without knowing the truth.

Give us courage when misunderstood.

Give us grace when falsely accused.

Help us trust Your providence.

When circumstances look like defeat:

Remind us that You may be working through them.

When one door closes:

Show us the platform hidden inside the problem.

When we feel surrounded:

Keep us faithful.

When we are rejected:

Help us still desire the salvation of those rejecting us.

Give us Paul's heart.

After pain:

Let us still speak.

After accusation:

Let us still testify.

After chains:

Let us still proclaim Christ.

Use every circumstance for Your glory.

And may our lives say:

We are ready to follow Jesus wherever His will leads.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Key Verse

“But Paul answered, ‘Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.’” — Acts 21:13

Central Truth

Faithful discipleship follows the will of God even when suffering lies ahead, seeks peace without compromising the gospel, refuses to be ruled by rumors or fear, and trusts God to transform persecution, false accusation, and even imprisonment into opportunities to witness for Jesus Christ.

Acts 21 in One Sentence

Paul continues toward Jerusalem despite prophetic warnings of suffering, willingly accommodates Jewish customs to remove unnecessary offense without compromising the gospel, is falsely accused and nearly killed by a religious mob, but is rescued through Roman custody and turns his arrest into another opportunity to testify for Jesus Christ.