Text: Acts 21:27-40
Title: Paul Arrested
Truth: God providentially protected His servant Paul and provided an opportunity for him to minister to a hostile crowd and Roman soldiers.
Date/Location: Wednesday March 5, 2025 at FBC

Introduction

We now come to my least favorite part of Luke's history of the early church. It is a frustrating account of injustice and lack of moral leadership. In fact, it is strikingly similar in those regards to the injustice perpetrated upon Jesus at the hands of the Jewish leaders and the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Sadly, this is the way things happen in real life.

I. Mob Injustice, v. 27-31

A. Paul was minding his own business, doing a good by work by following the advice of the leadership in the Jerusalem church. Their goal was to make clear that he had not forsaken Moses and is not against the Jews who continue to follow customs from the Old Testament law. This served to correct the false impression of some people. He was nearing the end of the week-long purification ritual which they would complete with an offering.

B. But there were some Jewish men who jumped to conclusions. They were from out of town, from Asia, where Paul had recently ministered. Many Jews in areas where Paul ministered hated him. We saw earlier in Acts how often Paul was threatened with death.

They did not know that Paul was at the temple to make sure people could not accuse him of "teaching against the people, law, and temple," which is exactly what *they* were accusing him of.

They assumed—incorrectly—that Paul had bought Greeks into the temple and defiled it, something Paul knew was forbidden. We can safely presume that he did not do that. They had seen him in the *city* of Jerusalem, but not in the temple, with a man from Ephesus called Trophimus (on whom, see Acts 20:4, 2: Tim. 4:20).

A Gentile could come as far as the Court of the Gentiles, but no farther. To come beyond that was punishable by the death

penalty. Two inscriptions have been found that were affixed to the wall dividing the Court of the Gentiles from the inner court. The text reads this way (translated from Greek): "No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Any one who is caught trespassing will bear personal responsibility for his ensuing death."[1]

The Romans even allowed the Jews to execute this penalty on people who trespassed, even Roman citizens.

C. They were so convinced, and so ignorantly zealous, and so arrogant, that they went right to stirring up a crowd and restraining the apostle. Without following Jewish law to investigate what Paul was doing or had done, they incited violence and arrested him. The claimed, without proof and against evidence of what was happening at that very time in Paul's life, that he teaches against the Jews, the law, and the temple, *and* that he brought a Gentile in. From the Jewish perspective, you can see how they would say such things, for anything that would undermine their 'tradition' would be considered an attack, regardless of whether it was well-founded, say on portions like Isaiah 53 or Psalm 110.

Their charge against him is just like the charges against Stephen in Acts 6:13-14, which led to his death by stoning.

D. Additional people joined in the mob and dragged Paul out of the temple. They were going to kill him, quite possibly by the traditional method of stoning and/or with a physical beating.

E. Luke notes in verse 30 that, "immediately the doors [of the temple] were shut." Some see a symbolic significance here. Bruce writes, "For Luke himself, this may have been the moment when the Jerusalem temple ceased to fill the honorable role hitherto ascribed to it in his twofold history. The exclusion of God's message and messenger from the house once called by his name sealed its doom: it was now ripe for the destruction which Jesus

[1] F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 409.

had predicted for it many years before (Luke 21:6)."[2] The Jewish door was shut to Christians. This is a hard line of demarcation that separated the two faiths forever after that point and became the "you are not welcome mat" in front of the temple. Christians are different: we welcome Jewish people into our churches and faith whenever they wish to come.

F. The uproar was so large that the city's Roman guards (effectively the police force) quickly became aware of what was going on.

II. Rescued by the Romans and Questioned, v. 32-40

A. Since the Roman soldiers were tasked with maintaining peace and order, they went down immediately with many dozens of soldiers, possibly 200 or more. They took charge of the situation and rescued Paul during a beating that the crowd was giving him. The "rescue" consisted of arresting Paul and inquiring what was happening.

Two flights of stairs connected the fortress to the outer court of the temple. It was constructed this way for quick access in the case of a riot in the temple.

B. The crowd was no help in answering as there was not a single spokesperson and they had no unified response.

It is interesting is that although the commander guessed that Paul was a criminal, he was not going to kill him without a trial and proof. The Romans had a system of law and people had some benefit of defending themselves in a decent and orderly setting.

C. The commander took Paul and the other soldiers back to their barracks. The barracks were arranged in such a way that the soldiers lived up higher than the street level, so they had to climb the two flights of stairs. Paul had to be carried (in a quite undignified manner, I am guessing) by the soldiers because the crowd was still trying to violently kill him. They wanted him to disappear off the face of the earth!

[2] Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 410.

Notice please the shout of the people in verse 36: “Away with him!” This is an echo from about 25 years earlier, which we read in John 19:15: “Away with Him, away with Him!” That earlier crowd added another phrase in their hatred of Jesus: “Crucify Him!”

D. When they were atop the stairs and about to go indoors, Paul asked if he could speak to the commander. Think of his composure moments after being beaten. He probably looked quite a sight! But he was ready to preach “out of season” if he could.

E. The commander responded with his own false supposition, namely that Paul was an Egyptian. The Egyptian presumably would not know the Greek language, instead using Demotic with some Coptic.

F. Three years before, this Egyptian was a rebel who led 4,000 other murderers with him to the Mount of Olives, telling them they would soon be able to capture the city after its walls fell (like Jericho) and then they would kick out the Romans. He snuck away while Felix sent troops against the insurrectionists.

We would call these people terrorists. They would stab Romans and pro-Rome Jews to kill them, often using a crowd as cover and a method of escape. Perhaps, the commander thought, Paul was one of those, apprehended by the crowd before he could murder someone.

G. The apostle Paul was laboring as a Christian, not breaking any Jewish law, nor breaking any Roman law, but he was being falsely accused by the Jews of the former, and by the commander of the latter. Such wrong understandings amount to persecution.

Paul replied that was not the case at all. Instead of being from Egypt, he replies, “I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia,” and a Roman citizen. He was far from being an Egyptian terrorist! His manner and language immediately informed the commander that his previous idea had been wrong.

H. Paul asked if he could speak to the people, planning to give something of a defense and testimony of what he was doing in Jerusalem. Providentially, he had quickly achieved some level of trust with the commander who granted him permission.

I. Furthermore, under providential influence, the people quieted down and listened to him as he spoke in Hebrew.[3] This was remarkable because the people would have been more accustomed to Greek, or perhaps Aramaic. Hebrew was the language of the synagogue and its use in this context would have been out of place, surprising, and attention-arresting. It helped Paul gain a hearing for at least for a couple of minutes.

Conclusion

For the next 21 verses, Paul tells his story. We will see that in our next study.

MAP

[3] Commentator Bruce believes this is a reference to a closely related language, Aramaic, which was more commonly in use at the time.