



## **Don't Forget – It's All About Christ**

*Series: Acts -- Worldwide Witness to the Worth of Jesus Christ*

Acts 21:15-22:29

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Beloved, I want you to open your Bibles this morning to Acts 21 and verse 15. Rather than have you stand and read the fullness of this text, I want for us to jump right into the story. We are looking at like 55 or so verses this morning and so we need to move quickly and we really need to pay attention to all that we are studying.

Let me say from the beginning that the timing of God is always perfect and especially so this morning. How appropriate that we would be looking at this text during football season. For all of us who are football fans cheering on our favorite football teams, we know what it is to be "armchair quarterbacks" or "armchair coaches," right? We watch the games and maybe the quarterback throws a bad interception and we say something like "Why did he throw the ball to that guy who was double covered; he never should have thrown that pass, so and so was wide open." Or the coach calls a play that blows up and we say, "What a dumb play. How could he call that play, he should have fill-in-the-blank." It's easy to second-guess the QB when we aren't the guy facing 290 lb. linemen trying to separate us from the ball and our senses or to second-guess the coach when the pressure to win isn't squarely on our shoulders. And to some degree, that is what I feel like this morning as we look at this text, like an armchair QB. I wasn't in Paul's shoes, wasn't in James' shoes in the situation that we are going to look at this morning and yet, to some degree we must think critically and seriously about what we will see unfold before us. Faithfulness to Christ and the pursuit of righteousness demands it.

In this text that we are looking at today, Paul is finally coming to Jerusalem and I want you to remember what his mindset is as he comes to the Jewish church that is there. Paul was on a mission, a mission to deliver relief funds from the Gentile churches to the church in Jerusalem that was suffering greatly due to the famine and to some degree because of persecution for the gospel, although, as we will see, it seems as if they were trying to get along with the Jews as much as they could, even if it meant compromising on the gospel. There is no way to

understate the importance of this offering from Paul's perspective. Not only did the Jerusalem church need relief funds from the Gentile churches to survive, but Paul also know that this offering was a perfect way to solidify the unity and the bond of love between the Jewish and Gentile Christians. There is no denying the tension and the suspicion that existed between the Jewish and Gentile churches. This offering was the best way, Paul thought, to establish real unity between both of these churches...that if he brought this gift to them, which the Gentile churches had sacrificed and scraped to put together, that the fears and concerns, worries and suspicions would evaporate. That is what is chiefly on Paul's mind.

But there was even more to this. Paul was also constrained by the driving desire to refresh and renew the Jerusalem church by ministering the grace of God to them by preaching and teaching the Word of God and he also had the Spirit-driven desire to preach the gospel to his lost Jewish kinsmen during Pentecost. He had the desire, at first, to bear clear witness to Christ. Unfortunately, as we will see in this text, that focus on Christ will be completely lost for a time. Pick it up with me in verse 15:

“After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge. When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly.” (Acts 21:15–17, ESV) Leaving Caesarea, they come to Jerusalem and particularly to the house of a fellow believer named Mnason, a native of Cyprus, a Greek-speaking Jew, a brother who was not caught up in the drama that we will see is going on in the Jerusalem Church. There Paul and the brothers that he brought with him from the Gentile churches he had planted in Asia and in Macedonia are greeted warmly and with joy. On the next day, Paul goes up with the love-gift from the Gentile churches to meet with James.

“On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.” (Acts 21:18–21, ESV) Now what in the world is going on here?

Paul goes up to the church and meets with James, the leader of the Jerusalem church and with all of the elders there. Peter and John, commentators tell us, are not in attendance but are off on other missionary enterprises elsewhere. Now, we would imagine that Paul brought along the love-gift for the church there, the gift that he had such hopes would serve as the bridge for unity between the Jewish and Gentile churches and yet there is no mention of the gift made at all. Do you find that as curious as I do? I mean, it couldn't be missed. It's not like Paul brought a check along with him; it would have filled many heavy sacks with gold and with silver and yet there is no mention of it. No word of thanks from James, no word of gratitude to God, no word of recognition of the sacrifice of the Macedonians, for instance whom Paul speaks of in 2 Corinthians 8 saying: "for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—" (2 Corinthians 8:2-4, ESV) Something is clearly not right in the church in Jerusalem. One of the surest signs of spiritual life and vitality is gratitude and thanksgiving and it is completely absent from this account.

With no mention, no acknowledgement of the gift at all, Paul launches into a testimony of the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. There was much to tell. Numerous churches had been established, miraculous works of God had been manifested, the Gentile church was growing by leaps and bounds, the gospel was spreading with power and the worth and glory of Christ was being made manifest throughout the world. Paul doesn't boast of himself or of his successes, he gives all the glory and credit to God, seeing himself as only an instrument of God – an extraordinarily blessed but unworthy instrument. That is how Paul saw himself. As he would later write of his role: "Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ," (Ephesians 3:7-8, ESV)

The response of the Jewish church, I have to tell you, strikes me as curious and honestly, disappointing. At first, Luke says they glorified God. But then, immediately, in the very next breath, they all said to him: "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs."

Paul had just related to them powerful testimony of the work of God among the Gentiles, and in almost a childish way, they feel the need to point to the fact that there are many thousands of new believers from amongst the Jews – almost it seems in an effort to validate themselves. It makes you wonder just how sincere their praise of God for His working of grace among the Gentiles really was.

There are some really troubling things here. Let me just point them out. First, look at the way that James describes these “Jewish converts.” James would have been doing the talking here as the leader of the group. What does he emphasize about these people – they are zealous, excited, passionate about the Law, about the ceremonial worship Law of God – and about Jewish customs. They were zealous about the OT feasts, the Sabbath regulations, ritual vows, and dietary regulations and of course, circumcision. And they seem to be ok with that. Does that strike any one as odd? It does me. It would be like me describing our church as being “zealous and passionate for the Southern Baptist Convention,” or “zealous and passionate for reformed theology.” There is no mention of Christ at all...not at all. Christ is utterly absent. I just have to say this. It makes me wonder how many of these converts were truly saved. And it particularly troublesome that James and the elders of Jerusalem do not see this as a problem. But there is more.

They are suspicious of Paul, suspicious of his motives, suspicious of his preaching and ministry suspicious of what he has been teaching the Jews who lived in Gentile lands regarding the Law of Moses, and circumcision and Jewish customs. Apparently there has been a whispering campaign against Paul in the Jerusalem church. He isn't Jewish enough. He has forgotten his heritage.

Now let's think about this for a moment. What did Paul really teach? He did teach that the Jews had been delivered from the Law of Moses in the sense that all of the sacrifices of the OT, all the sacrificial pictures had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. There was no more need for those OT sacrifices of bulls and lambs and goats because Christ was the final, the supreme sacrifice for sin and the only way of atonement and peace with God. Sin was fully and finally dealt with in Christ for all who would repent of their sins and trust in Christ. But Paul did not set aside the moral law of God any more than Christ did. All Christians are indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God

who leads us by His Word and by His power into conformity to the holiness and righteousness of God as shown to us in moral law of God.

As for circumcision, Paul did not forbid that custom as it regarded the Jews. If they wanted to circumcise their children as testimony to their Jewishness or any other custom for that matter, Paul had nothing to say about that. Paul did teach, however, and rightly so that no one is saved by circumcision, as he said in Galatians 6:15: “For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.” (Galatians 6:15, ESV) The real question for anyone was “Are you a new creation in Christ?” “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, (that is, by faith in Him and His death for our sins and resurrection for our forgiveness) he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” (2 Corinthians 5:17, ESV)

So what is going on here? Now, to be fair, there were some issues here that we need to see. For the leaders in the church of Jerusalem, who had spent their entire lives there they understood things more from a Jewish perspective than a God perspective. The break from Judaism to Christianity for them was not like the break for Jews who lived in the Gentile nations or the pagans who came to Christ. For them, it was easier to make the break from the synagogue, in the case of the Greek speaking Jews, or from pagan temple worship in the case of the Gentiles. But for the Jews living in Jerusalem, to make the break from the Temple or from the synagogue or from Jewish religious practices – like feast days and ritual vows and sacrifices – would have been more difficult.

But there is more to it than that. I see in this text a horrible display of Jewish spiritual pride. In these words I hear a description of a people who were Jewish first and Christians second. And there was no little resentment over the fact that the center of gravity had moved away from Jerusalem. The church in Antioch had become more important. The number of predominantly Gentile churches far outnumbered the church in Jerusalem. That was hard for them to stomach. God was saving the Gentiles, perhaps, but the sense that we get is that to their way of thinking they were still the chosen of the chosen, the elect within the elect, the spiritual cream of the crop. They felt like Paul was not giving them the juice they deserved; he wasn't concerned with important Jewish stuff.

Here was Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, seeing great blessing from God in the preaching of the Word and they were suspicious of him. Here was Paul who had risked his life for the gospel, who had risked his life to bring this church a tangible expression of his love and of the love of the Gentile churches, who had been changed by the power of the gospel, and the response that Paul gets from the Jewish elders is that people have been talking and the Jewish believers don't trust Paul and, Derek Thomas, a man I deeply admire for his biblical understanding, says that we should be reading into this: "And neither do we!" There has been a systematic campaign of whispering in the church in Jerusalem about Paul. And accusations without any merit had been given credence and belief despite Paul's demonstrated character.

Can you imagine the blow this must have been to Paul, the kick in the gut that this must have been? He had to have felt completely betrayed. It is one thing to be opposed by the world but quite another to be slandered and gossiped about by people in the professing church, for them to believe the worst about you and not even seek out the truth. Paul's reputation with the Jerusalem church was in tatters. He had been treated with suspicion and hatred, a victim of lies and slander and false allegations and James and the elders of the church had done nothing about it. All of this despite his constant faithfulness and love toward them. It's just not right. Where is the love from this church? Where is the grace? Where is the benefit of the doubt in light of Paul's demonstrated character? Where is the gratitude for the gift? I find it hard not to be angry with James and with the elders. They had allowed Paul to be maligned and slandered and gossiped about and done nothing about it. Instead, by their silence, they had given strength to the lies. More than that, even worse than that, they had clearly failed to do what they should have done in the church and preached Christ and Him crucified, putting Christ at the center of everything, preaching how He is the fulfillment of the Law, making much of Christ and little of being Jewish, preaching how "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." (Romans 10:4, ESV) If you can be pleased that they great number of people in the church are zealous about Jewish law and customs and not Christ, that's a big problem. This church in Jerusalem is messed up and there is a complete failure in leadership. This is what happens when a people are allowed to ignore Christ and make much of the things that are eternally insignificant. James and the elders, however, have a great solution, so they think.

"What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law." (Acts 21:22-24, ESV) The solution to this mess, from their perspective,

can be boiled down to this: Act more Jewish, Paul. Just act more Jewish, that's the answer. Be more traditional.

This all seems so contrived, so put on, doesn't it? Here is how Paul can fix this. In the church there were some guys that had taken a Nazarite vow, an OT vow of thanksgiving to God, that needed to be completed with their heads being shaved and with a series of elaborate and very costly sacrifices in the temple. The plan, then, is for Paul to purify himself and to pay for all of the expenses for the sacrifices and such for these men. That way, Paul can show that he is a good Jew who has not forgotten his roots and can give the appearance that he lives his life in strict observance of the ceremonial law. In other words, all of this is designed to give the appearance that Paul still highly regards the ceremonial laws of the OT, the ceremonial laws that Christ had already fulfilled. Now the question is what does this mean that Paul was to purify himself? Let me tell you. This rite of purification was a ritual that Jews who had been out of the country and had come into contact with Gentiles, were required to do when they came back to Jerusalem and intended to take part in the worship service in the temple. They had to cleanse themselves from Gentile defilement.

So get this with me. Rather than seeing the visit of Paul to Jerusalem as an opportunity for Paul to teach and explain how Christ has made the OT sacrificial system obsolete, how Christ should be the center of church's spiritual life, how Christ should be the focus of their zeal, how the ceremonial law has been fulfilled by Jesus, rather than having Paul teach on the full blown nature and blessings of salvation in Christ, they propose this scheme to puff up the already puffed up professing Jewish Christians, and to spin Paul in a different light to them, to show everyone that Paul is really on the "right side" here.

Just to show how understanding they are, they repeat the things that had been discussed years ago – years ago – at the Jerusalem Council in chapter 15. "But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality." (Acts 21:25, ESV) The clear inference is this – they weren't asking too much of Paul here. The Gentiles, aren't being asked to do anything – the fact that they are even mentioning this decision so long ago is telling in itself – only Paul. "Just be more Jewish, Paul and everyone who has had questions will rally to your side. It really isn't too much to ask." And, as much as it pains me to say this, Paul goes along with it.

“Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.” (Acts 21:26, ESV) This is a little confusing so let me clarify. The idea is that Paul went up to the temple to announce his intentions – to begin this process of purification and then to pay for the offerings associated with the men who had taken the Nazarite vow.

What is Paul thinking? Well, let’s try to put ourselves in Paul’s mindset. He sees himself as in a no-win situation. He is so concerned about establishing unity between the Jewish and Gentile churches and because he is, I think he fails to see this as clearly as he should have. Probably from Paul’s perspective, he is thinking along these lines: They had already established back at the Jerusalem council, and James had agreed, that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. That’s first. Then Paul, just thinking about it from his own perspective, thought he could go along with the purification request. He knew that it had nothing to do with salvation and that it would be no stumbling block to him to worship God according to this Jewish custom. He knew that it had no gospel significance to him at all.

Moreover, he probably thought that this conformed to his own policy of becoming all things to all men that he expressed in 1 Cor 9. “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.” (1 Corinthians 9:20–23, ESV)

But there is a bigger picture at stake here. As the Apostle of grace, as the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul’s actions compromised and confused some crucial biblical truths. Why should believers in Jesus Christ, whose blood cleanses us from all sin, go through a ritual of purification in order to worship Him? Second, it would be one thing for Paul to set aside his liberty in Christ and to adopt some Jewish customs that would allow him to preach the gospel to the lost, but this issue is with supposed Christian Jews who were valuing Jewish rituals over Christ, and who needed to be humbled of their pride, not encouraged in it, and to value Christ more than being



Jewish. Another issue is what this would say to the Gentiles that had come to Christ under his ministry. This would cause them great confusion. For instance, to the Galatians, Paul had forcefully taught that the ceremonial law was given to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. “So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:24–28, ESV) It sure wouldn’t seem that way if Paul went through with this. The ceremonial law would be elevated above the saving work of Christ. Are you cleansed and brought near by the blood of Christ or not or do you need to go through ritual washings over and over again. Paul is not thinking clearly.

Look, here is the truth. While unity is important, it must be based in Christ, in the truths of the gospel, or it is not true biblical unity. Leaving out or ignoring the truths of the gospel in order to win people, even though they may be offensive, results in people coming into the church who are not truly saved. There is good reason to question whether these Jews whom who had believed and were zealous for the Law and whom Paul was desperately trying to appease were truly saved. At best, they were very immature believers who desperately needed some straightforward and unapologetic preaching and teaching about Christ. And at the risk of sounding like an armchair quarterback, this is exactly what Paul should have done. He should have preached his letter to the Galatians. This Jewish church needed to hear: “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified ” (Galatians 2:15–16, ESV)

Christianity is all about Christ and in all of this maneuvering and human wisdom that we have seen, Christ is being completely forgotten, completely ignored. There is no mention of Christ at all and God will not have it. He will act to put the focus directly back upon Jesus and upon the gospel. No less a preacher, no less a faithful herald of the gospel than James Montgomery Boice says of this: “This, what Paul did here, was hypocrisy. It was compromise. He was going to offer a sacrifice? In front of the very priests who had killed, who had crucified Jesus? It is,” Boice says, “a turning of his back on the sufficiency of Christ.” The greatest proof that Paul was wrong was that God, who is sovereign over the details of our lives, intervened before Paul was able to offer

the sacrifice in the temple and prevented him from doing it through a riot and by this he brings Paul to his senses.

I'll just read this next section and make some comments as we go before we come to Paul's testimony. "When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia (unbelieving Jews probably from Ephesus who were always hounding Paul's steps) , seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place."(That sounds familiar, doesn't it? the exact accusations that were being made by the Jewish believers in the Jerusalem Church) For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion (I have a question. Where are James and all of the elders? Where are the Jewish believers that Paul was trying to placate? Where are they now?). He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, for the mob of the people followed, crying out, "Away with him!"(So much for winning a hearing from the people, so much for accentuating his Jewishness in order to be heard) As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, "May I say something to you?" And he said, "Do you know Greek? Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?"(The tribune is shocked to hear Paul speak Greek. He doesn't expect it at all) Paul replied, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people.'" (Acts 21:27-39, ESV) This beating that was intended to deprive Paul of his senses, rather brings him to his senses. He realizes, I think, in this moment, his massive mistake in obscuring the gospel by trying to appease the unappeasable. He realizes his error in elevating the concerns for the Jewish ceremonial law and the Jewish customs over the Lord Jesus Christ. And grateful for the second chance to proclaim Christ, Paul does some of his best preaching.

“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.” (Acts 21:40–22:2, ESV) Paul, given the chance to address the masses now assembled, speaks to them in Hebrew, the language of the people. They fall silent

“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.” (Acts 22:3–5, ESV) To all who were wondering about Paul’s Jewishness, he comes right to the point. He is a Jew and in fact, he was a better Jew than any of them gathered there. He was brought up in Jerusalem, sat at the feet of the revered rabbi Gamaliel, learned to love and defend the law more zealously than anyone. He was a Pharisee and blameless as far as the law went. He kept all the feasts, all the rituals, all the sacrifices. He attacked and sought to destroy the church of Jesus Christ, imprisoning and even killing a multitude of men and women. All of the Jewish leaders, if they were honest, could testify to the passion and zeal of Paul for the law. He was so determined to rid the earth of Christians that he got letters from them, authorization to go to Damascus and arrest anyone who was a follower of Christ. No one could honestly say that Paul did not revere the Law and the temple. Their accusation that Paul wasn’t Jewish enough was ridiculous.

And notice what he does here. Graciously, Paul attributes the mob’s beating him to their zeal for God. They thought that they were defending the Jewish temple against defilement from the Gentiles, and defending the Jewish people and their sacred laws from this traitor. But all of this religious zeal on the part of Paul and the Jews to whom he was speaking had not reconciled either of them to the God of Israel. In fact, it was this very zeal for religion that had led the nation to kill her Messiah! And now, religious zeal was motivating these same Jews to attempt to kill the messenger that Messiah had sent to tell them the way of salvation. But zeal for the law saves no one. He continued:

““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 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.” (Acts 22:6–11, ESV) To the Law-loving, law-revering man who deserved death and eternal judgment for persecuting the church purchased and saved by the blood of Jesus Christ -- God’s Son -- God showed mercy. Christ confronted him in all of his Jewish pride and cast him to the ground, blinding him by His glory as the only begotten Son of God and Savior of sinners, the Holy one of God, and making him to see with spiritual eyes the truth of Christ’s glory and the truth of the gospel of grace. Led blind into Damascus, he tells us what happened next.

““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.’” (Acts 22:12–16, ESV) Paul relates how, miraculously, he had received His sight through the gracious ministry of Ananias. Then, he tells of the words that would define the rest of his life. The God of Israel had appointed – had given orders and a command to Paul – to know the will of God – His eternal plan of salvation. He had appointed him, opened His eyes to see the Righteous One that Isaiah the prophet spoke of, the servant of the Lord who would “make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.” (Isaiah 53:11, ESV) Paul beheld Christ in all of His righteousness and realized that despite all of his attempts at law keeping and making sacrifices, he was utterly unrighteous. He had heard the voice of Christ calling Him to faith and to repentance – all by the grace of God. And he had been saved and chosen by God to be a witness of Christ to every man, woman and child that there is salvation in none other than Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Paul had almost forgotten that calling when he came to Jerusalem.

Then Ananias had commanded him, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to call upon the name of Christ and be saved, to have all of His sins washed away – something that the law could never offer or do – and to be baptized into Christ by faith, following Christ as Lord. It was not the law

that saved, not Jewishness that saved, not any human attempts at righteousness and goodness that saved, no rituals or vows that saved, no offering of bulls and goats that saved, but the blood of Jesus Christ shed for the forgiveness of sins and believed in for salvation. And then Paul makes the point that as a blood bought, saved soul, he was not his own but was Christ's to command.

““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.’ ”” (Acts 22:17–21, ESV) Paul desired to preach the gospel to the Jews in Jerusalem, to see them come to faith in Christ. He thought he was especially equipped to do that very thing in light of his past. But when he returned to Jerusalem after his three years in Arabia, he was in the temple praying when he saw a vision of Jesus telling him to get out of Jerusalem quickly, because the Jews would not accept his testimony about Christ. Rather than staying somewhere and preaching to a people who not receive his message, God appointed Paul to go and preach the gospel of God's grace to the Gentiles. That is why Paul went to the Gentiles preaching salvation in Christ apart from the works of the Law – because of the hardness of the Jew's hearts.

What a grace from God to allow Paul to set the record straight – for the unbelieving Jews in Jerusalem who were still holding to the Law and who had rejected Christ as Lord, but also for the professing Jewish Christians who were still stubbornly holding to the Law and their Jewishness as more valuable than Christ the Lord. The response is predictable. When Paul said all of these things, his Jewish audience went into a frenzy. Luke tells us:

“Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.”(Again, there is no mention of James or the elders or the Jewish church standing with Paul at all) And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this. But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, “Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman

citizen and uncondemned?” When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, “What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen.” 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.” 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 22:22–29, ESV)

We will pick up the story there next week. But what do we learn from this text this morning? What should we take away and ponder. Much for sure, but let me give you three things to really think about this morning.

1) God is sovereign over every detail of our lives and we can be thankful that He is. Paul and James had really messed things up, obscuring Christ and trusting in human wisdom. The clarity of the gospel was in real danger, but God acted to ensure that the testimony of Christ would not be clouded or confused, that Christ would receive the testimony and honor from Paul, at least, that He deserves. That’s good news for us. We can trust that whatever is going on in our lives as followers of Christ, God is actively involved so that the testimony of Jesus Christ and our own spiritual good will come out in the end. Again that is good news for us. None of us does it right all the time. We make mistakes; we can make a mess of things, we can make a mess of our lives, a mess of our witness, a mess of our walk, but God can and does graciously bring us to our senses, humbles us, disciplines us, and puts us in a place where we must really depend upon Christ, really believe in Him. And as Paul wrote in Romans 9:33, “as it is written, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”” (Romans 9:33, ESV)

That is good news for Christians who may sometimes lose their way, but it also especially good news for you who are here this morning who may think that you have made such a mess of your life that there is no getting out of it. I say to you on the authority of Christ that if you will humble yourself and confess your sins, trusting in Christ as the only Savior of sinners, if you will believe in His death on the cross for you and His resurrection from the dead for your forgiveness, God can take what may seem to be an insurmountable mess and make of your life something beautiful in His sight – a life lived under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

2) In light of the mindset of the Jewish Church, their spiritual pride and self—sufficiency -- we all need to ask ourselves, what is it that we are zealous for? Paul wrote in Romans 12:11, “Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.” (Romans 12:11, ESV) When Paul calls us not to be slothful in zeal but to be fervent in spirit, he is really saying the same thing in two ways. Do not be slothful – don’t be lazy, don’t be distracted, don’t be apathetic, lazy or idle in your pursuit of Christ but be diligent. Pursue Christ and His purposes in you. The writer of Hebrews puts it like this: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12:1–2, ESV)

Fervent means “to be full of energy, to be on fire with zeal and enthusiasm for the things of God.” It is a warning against settling into comfortable ruts in our spiritual lives or being distracted and zealous for anything more than Christ. The idea is that believers are to continuously be "hot" for the things of the Lord. It is the idea of stoking our passion for God, for His Christ, for his grace, for the works of God, for obedience and faithfulness to Him and His calling upon us

The Puritan Richard Baxter wrote even in the 1650’s: It is a most lamentable thing to see how most people spend their time and their energy for trifles, while God is cast aside. He who is all seems to them as nothing, and that which is nothing seems to them as good as all. It is lamentable indeed, knowing that God has set mankind in such a race where heaven or hell is their certain end, that they should sit down and loiter, or run after the childish toys of the world, forgetting the prize they should run for. Were it but possible for one of us to see this business as the all-seeing God does, and see what most men and women in the world are interested in and what they are doing every day, it would be the saddest sight imaginable.

Let’s not consume our passion on what is trivial. Let’s aim purely and only at the glory of God, seek his honor and favor, and direct everything we do and say by His Word and be people whose great overarching ruling passion in life is to belong to Christ, to love Christ, to know Christ, to obey Christ, to trust Christ, and to glorify Christ.

3) Let us never forget, Christianity is first and foremost about Christ. What was at issue in this situation in Jerusalem was the gospel. At issue here is who is Jesus Christ? “Who do men say that I am?” It's the same question today, isn't it? It's the prevailing question. It's the issue: Who is Jesus Christ? What do you make of Jesus Christ? Who is Jesus Christ in reality and who is Jesus Christ to you? And that is the question that all men and women and children must answer. He eclipses ethnicity, religious tradition, morality, all of it. Who is Jesus Christ and what has He done and how should you respond – these are the questions that matter most.

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