

Acts 21

Read Acts 21:1-6: Paul has put together a good team to run the church; but the enemy is trying every angle to unravel what God has built. Spiritual warfare gets dirty. Character assassination of the righteous is a current topic that we deal with. Misinformation about Paul and the gospel has been spread everywhere. How do we act in these situations? Are we called to defend ourselves? Yielding to God's direction and wisdom is the way. God will provide your advocacy. I have made the mistake of trying to correct false accounts. It never seems to work out. Paul and the elders have speeches prepared to correct the false narratives; but that all goes out the window here.

It seems like Paul has disciples and friends and saints lined up at every stop all along the way back to Jerusalem. Everyone he meets tells him that he really should reconsider his plan to return to Jerusalem. They all emphasize that he will surely be captured and incarcerated. He is literally entering the *mouth of the dragon* on purpose. Jerusalem has as much enemy presence as well-intentioned saints. We need to remember that holiness is with the LORD; not in the temple or in Jerusalem. Essentially, the true church activities are now being run out of Antioch. The Holy Spirit is moving throughout Asia at the moment. There are religious critics all over the place in Jerusalem. That is really not what God is looking for.

Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, ² saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. ³ Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. ⁴ For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. ⁵ But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. ⁶ They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷ greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' ⁸ But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. ⁹ Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. ¹⁰ And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. ¹¹ But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. ¹³ "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow

those who are entering to go in. ¹⁴ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation. (Matthew 23)

Were the saints led by the Holy Spirit; or were they wrong in dissuading Paul from returning to Jerusalem? Were they just concerned for him, while they recognized the necessity of following his directions from God? When Paul was commissioned, he was given the job to reach out to the Gentiles and to kings. Was Paul taking it upon himself to reach the kings (through his arrest and trials)? Did Jesus tell Paul specifically to go to Jerusalem?

¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. (Acts 9:15)

Believers can have conflicting opinions. For example, 1 Kings 13 describes a situation where a prophet was directed by God to do something, but another prophet persuaded him to deviate from the plan. The prophet deviated and was eaten by a lion for listening to righteous men instead of God. We should not conclude that well-intentioned believers can change what God has told us to do. We just need to make sure that it was God, not our imagination or self-will.

Read Acts 21:7-14: I know that God does not contradict himself. It is strange that the Holy Spirit seems to be telling everybody that Paul is heading for trouble; and that he should alter his course away from the conspiring Jews in Jerusalem.

Phillip is one of the seven deacons who were appointed to resolve unmet family ministry food distribution issues back in chapter 6. Now he is known as an evangelist; and he has raised 4 virgin daughters who are prophetesses. The path to serving God starts at the bottom. Nothing should be beneath us.

Read Acts 21:15-26: I have questions about the direction that James and the elders in Jerusalem give Paul here. Paul has been out in the field getting things done. I am not sure how productive James and the elders in Jerusalem are now. Paul was not too impressed years ago, when he submitted himself to them. Is God telling us that the apostles who stayed back in Jerusalem are getting stale in their faith?

2 Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. ⁶ But from those who were of considerable repute (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no favoritism)—well, those who were of repute contributed nothing to me. ⁷ But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised ⁸ (for He who was at work for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised was at work for me also to the Gentiles), ⁹ and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. ¹⁰ They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do. (Galatians 1)

I wonder if James's plan is from God, because it seems to have men's logic written all over it. Paul is a wanted man, dead or alive, by the religious Jews. James tells Paul to march into the Court of the Gentiles with four Greek men who have a vow they have made to God? This would be the riskiest thing he could do.

Religious Jews were following Paul wherever he went, trying to stop his message. They accused him of ignoring what Moses told the Jews to do and ignoring what God told Abraham about circumcision. Paul was actually telling people that the ceremonial observances were not the most important part. It would be like someone telling you that all you have to do is go to church, as opposed to someone telling you that you connect with God personally to make it count. Paul was taking their hope out of the physical ceremony, not telling them not to partake at all.

Paul is publicly clarifying that he approves the taking of vows by accompanying these men. These men may have been there for Nazirite vows. Paul's accompaniment was somehow supposed to show the concerned Jews that Paul was not instructing people not to ignore the religious customs. Paul was being accused of sympathizing with the heathen nations and diminishing what Moses said. Accompanying Gentiles to the Jerusalem temple, which was the seat of his critics seemed to be really tempting fate, if God did not tell him to do so. This exercise seems to be extremely provocative to his critics. It is a big risk for non-essentials.

Paul was right to advise the saints to let a lot of the *oral traditions* go by the wayside. The written traditions were what Moses and the prophets wrote. They are biblical. Oral traditions are only about the scriptures, by rabbis, and they are in violation to God's commands. The Mishna was an elaboration of scripture, that ultimately conflicted with scripture.

18 I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; 19 and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book. (Revelation 22)

*5 And the Pharisees and the scribes *asked Him, “Why do Your disciples not walk in accordance with the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with unholy hands?” 6 But He said to them, “Rightly did Isaiah prophesy about you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me. 7 And in vain do they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ 8 Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men.” 9 He was also saying to them, “You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. 10 For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘The one who speaks evil of father or mother, is certainly to be put to death’; 11 but you say, ‘If a person says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is, given to God),’ 12 you no longer allow him to do anything for his father or his mother; 13 thereby invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that.” (Mark 7)*

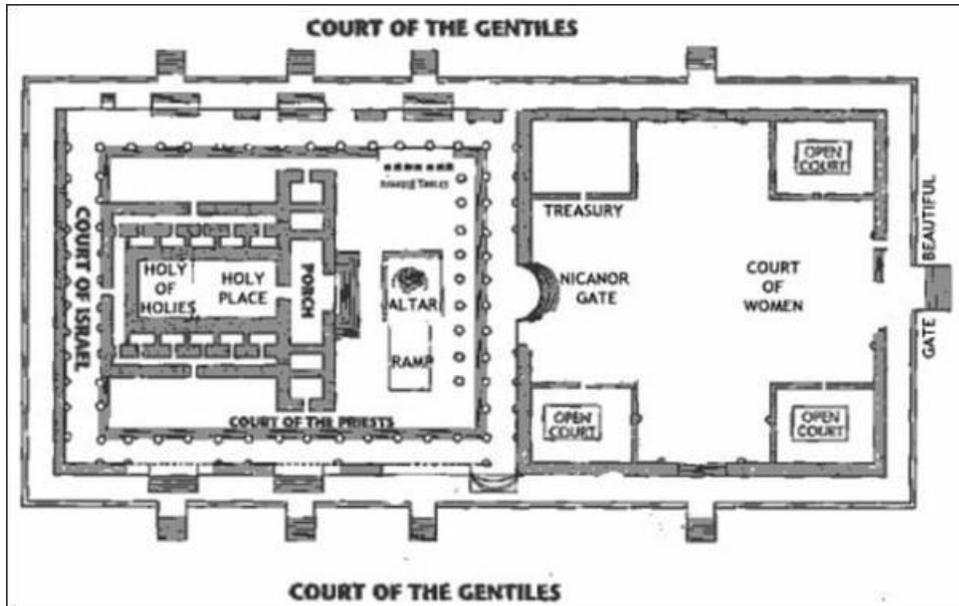
It is equally dangerous to add to scripture or take away from scripture. There are places in scripture where men zealous for God went beyond what God had directed them to do out of their zeal to take it *to the next level*. They thought they were putting a fence around the scriptures for the ignorant public.

There are places in scripture when men took their zeal too far. One of my favorite characters in the scripture was King Josiah. He was the greatest reformer in scripture. God used him like President Trump to overturn the filth and idolatry and the status quo corruption in the Kingdom. He went too far and attacked Pharaoh when God had not asked him to do so (2 Kings 23). He was killed by doing something moral; outside of God’s command designated for his life.

The church leadership had previously decided that Gentiles do not need to keep the whole Law, especially since the Jews could not even keep it. They were supposed to merely not eat blood or contaminate themselves with anything dedicated to idols or commit sexual immorality. All said, the church elders are pushing Paul to publicly clarify his support of the observances of the Law and the traditions, *to the degree that they do not conflict with scripture*.

Read Acts 21:27-40: Sure enough, Paul enters the temple grounds, and he draws the haters like flies. They go crazy when they see him bringing Gentiles into the

temple grounds at Jerusalem. They have been chasing him from city to city throughout Asia; and now he is right in front of them in the temple grounds. The court of the Gentiles was outside the court of the Jews.



A riot breaks out and they are all thrown outside of the temple grounds outer court and the gates are locked shut. Then the crowd attacks Paul. Fortunately, the Roman Commander hears about it and takes some centurions and soldiers to stop the uproar.

The Romans quickly concluded that Paul was the victim of a kangaroo court. The screaming accusers could not even align their accusations to make any sense. They created a false narrative about how Paul was an Egyptian attempting to overthrow Rome with 4,000 men out in the desert. It was just an attempt to carry out his character's assassination. We have that kind of tribalism and polarization in our society today. People begin with the notion that anything related to a demonized person is bad; so, whatever they say is contaminated.

Paul corrected the commander by pointing out that he was Roman citizen and a Jew from an upstanding Roman city of Tarsus. Like today's fake news; it is amazing how the public can be fed false narratives. The Commander is further amazed that Paul is addressing the crowd in Hebrew. The big question will be if the facts presented by Paul will persuade men; or if their desire to kill Paul was too strong to be *confused with the facts* and corrections. We see this problem all over our society today.

*Like snow in summer and like rain in harvest, So honor is not fitting for a fool.
² Like a sparrow in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying, So a curse without cause*

does not come to rest. ³ A whip is for the horse, a bridle for the donkey, And a rod for the back of fools. ⁴ Do not answer a fool according to his foolishness, Or you will also be like him. ⁵ Answer a fool as his foolishness deserves, So that he will not be wise in his own eyes. ⁶ One who sends a message by the hand of a fool Chops off his own feet and drinks violence. ⁷ Like useless legs to one who cannot walk, So is a proverb in the mouths of fools. ⁸ Like one who binds a stone in a sling, So is one who gives honor to a fool. ⁹ Like a thorn that sticks in the hand of a heavy drinker, So is a proverb in the mouths of fools. ¹⁰ Like an archer who wounds everyone, So is one who hires a fool or hires those who pass by. ¹¹ Like a dog that returns to its vomit, So is a fool who repeats his foolishness. ¹² Do you see a person wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him. ¹⁸ Like a maniac who shoots flaming arrows, arrows, and death, ¹⁹ So is a person who deceives his neighbor, And says, “Was I not joking?” ²⁰ For lack of wood the fire goes out, And where there is no gossip, quarreling quiets down. ²¹ Like charcoal to hot embers and wood to fire, So is a contentious person to kindle strife. ²² The words of a gossip are like dainty morsels, And they go down into the innermost parts of the body. ²³ Like an earthenware vessel overlaid with silver impurities Are burning lips and a wicked heart. ²⁴ One who hates disguises it with his lips, But he harbors deceit in his heart. ²⁵ When he speaks graciously, do not believe him, Because there are seven abominations in his heart. ²⁶ Though his hatred covers itself with deception, His wickedness will be revealed in the assembly. (Proverbs 26)