

ACTS

PART FOURTEEN: ACTS 21:17-23:11



ACTS

God's Mission

God's People

God's Power

"THE PLOT AGAINST PAUL"

Acts 21:17-23:11

I. The Relational Frame

Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you **teach all the Jews** who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs."

It is **highly unlikely** that Paul would tell Jewish believers not to circumcise their boys, since, again, he saw no value in it one way or the other. Here's what he actually says about it in Galatians 5:6: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself in love."

The believers who are 'zealous for the law' are basing their assessment of Paul and his ministry on an **assumption** about **rumours** they've heard.

Instead of kindly seeking clarity, they act from assumptions about Paul's work and his motives.

Jesus himself warns us: "**Do not judge,**" Jesus says, "and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. "Forgive, and you will be forgiven."

- Luke 6:37

"Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it." (James 4:11a).

Examples of slander from the Bible, including: "to question legitimate authority, as when the people of Israel 'spoke against God and against Moses' (Num 21:5); slandering someone in secret (Ps 101:5); bringing incorrect accusations (1 Peter 2:12; 3:16).

- Douglas Moo, James



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Take Home 1: Following the way of Jesus means that, rather than make assumptions, judge motives, or begin by believing the worst of others, we ask for clarity, refuse to slander and don't pass on rumors.

II. Wide-Angle, "Big Picture" Frame

How could Paul participate in a Jewish purification act like this if he believed it was all fulfilled in Christ?

The Gospel Frame: Paul knows that Jesus "fulfills" all the requirements that God has for us – he lives the life we couldn't live, in absolute obedience to the Father's will, and then he dies the death we should have died, in our place, substituting his life for ours – paying for our sin – in order to free us for life with God, to bring us together under God's gracious, kingdom reign.

"An act...symbolizing purification through immersion in water – a regular Jewish practice – would not have contradicted Paul's conviction that the full purification of both Jewish and Gentile sinners has been achieved by the sacrificial and atoning death of Jesus (Rom 3:25), cleansing sinners who believe in Jesus from their sin"

–Ekhard Schnabel

Why does Paul go ahead with the "purification rites"?

"Paul's "law-observant" actions were guided by his principles of cultural flexibility and avoiding offence."

– William Larkin

Paul goes ahead, submitting to the request of the leadership

in Jerusalem, it speaks to his deep desire to humble himself in order to maintain the unity of the church.

See 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Note Paul's motivating factor. He is free – but that freedom is not for himself. It's not self-indulgent. It's what allows him to, well, be a "slave to everyone." What an incredible paradox: his freedom allows him to be slave of all.

This reflects the way of Jesus; how God acts: "For even the Son of Man – speaking of himself – did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many." - Mark 10:45

"a truly free spirit such as Paul's is not in bondage to its own freedom."

– F.F. Bruce

Take Home Two: What freedom is for

Like Paul, we are willing to be flexible on non-essential issues:

1. For the sake of not causing offence – to maintain the connection between believers – *and*
2. For the sake of not bringing the Gospel of Jesus into question, but in order to see others come to a living faith in the Living God.

What's our freedom for? Not for self-indulgence, but for service. To make Jesus known, and to build up the community of faith.

III. Telling Our Story (in Light of God's Big Story)

In the midst of a riot, Paul cares enough about the glory of God to share his story of how Jesus changed him. He also speaks of how Jesus sent him to the nations – to the Gentiles: “The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, “Rid the earth of him! He’s not fit to live!”

– Acts 22:22

Take Home Three:

God’s heart for all nations is a ‘unifying theme’ of the whole Bible. Being a missional people:

1. Is *our* heart for all people too? This text tells us that it must be, for that’s what God is up to. Maybe the challenge for you is to step into that place of prayer; of asking God to give you a heart that all people might know him. And maybe that will lead to offering further support to missions as well?
2. Take Courage. “The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.”- Acts 23:11
3. Everyone who has a relationship with God has a story to tell. When you share your story, you open the door for someone to consider that this might just be true. Some may not believe they could have a similar story. But sharing *your* story is a key starting place. And remember: when we do share our story, Jesus is there with us. So “Take courage!”

Reflection and Life Group Discussion:

Read Acts 21:17-26.

- What assumptions do those Jewish Christians who are ‘zealous for the law’ make about Paul?
- In the message, Pastor Dave notes that instead of kindly seeking clarity, these folks act from assumptions about Paul’s work and his motives. What issues does this pattern of ‘assumption’ often cause (See James 4:11)?
- Jesus himself warns us: “Do not judge,” Jesus says, “and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. “Forgive, and you will be forgiven” (Luke 6:37). How would living like this impact the unity of the Christian community and the witness we have to the rest of the world?
- Even amid unfair accusation, Paul demonstrates a maturity and wisdom that lead him to enact a plan that



includes participating in a Jewish purification rite. Certainly, there was a process of discerning what the best course of action was on Paul’s part. Here he displays the sort of cultural flexibility, for the sake of unity and ongoing faithful witness, that he speaks of in **1 Cor 9:19-23**.

In what ways might we need to adopt that same sort of flexibility in our current moment? How do you need to use your freedom? Name an example of where you may need to adopt this same posture.

- The next scene of the story has a riot break out around Paul by unbelievers, who are now trying to kill him. What is Paul’s response to this crowd? **Acts 21:37-22:1**. Paul then narrates his own conversion story. It ends with his commission, by Jesus, to take this good news to the Gentiles. The crowd again is furious with this idea.

Paul uses every opportunity to point people to the saving work of Jesus, knowing his clear call (see Acts 20:24). Under all this pressure, we read that Jesus “stood near Paul and said, ‘Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.’” (23:11).

How do you think that encouraged Paul? How might this also be a word for you and I, in our time?

Prayer: Take a few moments to pray for those in your group. Maybe share one request of where you need to hear the words “Take courage!” over you, and one area of ministry to others where you need God’s grace to empower you.

Pastor Dave