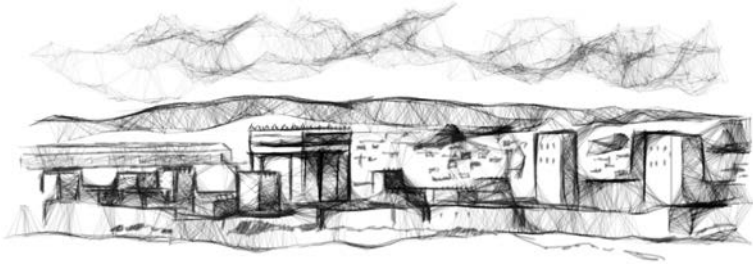


Arrest in Jerusalem



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Acts 21; Rom. 2:28, 29; Gal. 5:6; Acts 22; Acts 23:1–30; Matt. 22:23–32.*

Memory Text: “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, NIV*).

Soon after Paul's first missionary journey, it became clear that there was a fundamental disagreement in the church on how the Gentiles were to be admitted into the faith (*Acts 15:1–5*). Perhaps sensing a growing conflict, Paul conceived a plan to promote unity in the church. Because at the council he was asked to remember the poor (*Gal. 2:10*), he decided to invite the Gentile churches to provide financial aid to the brethren in Judea, the “collection for the saints” (*1 Cor. 16:1*), perhaps hoping that it could help build bridges between the two groups.

This could explain his determination to go to Jerusalem at the end of his third journey, despite the risks. On one hand, he had a genuine love for his fellow Jews (*Rom. 9:1–5*); on the other, he longed for a united church (*Gal. 3:28, 5:6*). As Jews and Gentiles were equally saved through faith, not through the works of the law (*Rom. 3:28–30*), any social alienation between them based on the ceremonial requirements of the law was against the inclusive nature of the gospel (*Eph. 2:11–22*).

Let's follow Paul as he enters this new phase of his life and mission.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, September 15.

Meeting the Jerusalem Leaders

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, he warmly was received by believers associated with Mnason, with whom he was to stay (*Acts 21:16, 17*).

In Acts 21:18–22, James and the Jerusalem elders expressed their concerns about Paul’s reputation among local Jewish believers zealous of the Mosaic law. They had been informed that he was teaching the Jewish converts who lived abroad to forsake Moses, telling them “not to circumcise their children or observe the customs” (*Acts 21:21, NRSV*).

This, of course, was not really true. What Paul did teach was that, in terms of salvation, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision meant anything, as both Jews and Gentiles were equally saved by faith in Jesus (*Rom. 2:28, 29; Gal. 5:6; Col. 3:11*). This is different from explicitly encouraging Jews to disregard the law and its requirements. Obedience is not, of course, in itself a synonym for legalism, though it could deliberately be twisted to mean just that.

Read Acts 21:23–26. How was Paul to demonstrate he still was a faithful Jew?

Paul was advised to be politically correct. He should show the falsity of the rumors about him by doing something very Jewish: sponsor the Nazirite vow of some Jewish believers. This vow was a special act of piety through which a Jew would consecrate himself to God.

Unfortunately, Paul yielded. Heroes, including the biblical ones, have their flaws, as we can see in the lives of Abraham, Moses, Peter, and several others. It could be argued that Paul was just following his principle of behaving like a Jew when dealing with Jews (*1 Cor. 9:19–23*), or that he himself is reported to have taken a vow not long before (*Acts 18:18*), though the precise nature of this vow is not clear. This time, however, it was a compromise, as it signified his endorsement of the legalistic motives behind the recommendation. The implication of such an attitude was exactly the one the apostle vigorously tried to oppose: that there are two gospels, one for Gentiles, of salvation by faith, and another for Jews, of salvation by works. “He [Paul] was not authorized of God to concede as much as they asked.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 405.

In our attempts to be relevant, how can we be careful not to make a similar kind of error?

Riot in the Temple

Having accepted the church leaders' suggestion, Paul would need to undergo a seven-day ritual purification to assist the completion of the men's vow (*Num. 19:11–13*). At the same time, Jewish tradition stipulated that any person coming from Gentile lands would be unclean and so unable to enter the temple. This is why Paul had to purify himself before going to the priests to give notice of his purification process related to the Nazirites (*Acts 21:26*).

Read Acts 21:27–36. What happened to Paul at the end of his seven-day period of purification?

A riot ensued, caused by those who stirred up the crowd against Paul, accusing him of attacking the most sacred symbols of Jewish religion, in particular of having desecrated the temple. As one of Paul's travel companions was a Gentile believer from Ephesus named Trophimus (*Acts 21:29*), they thought the apostle had introduced him into the temple's inner court, where only Jews could enter. If the accusation were legitimate, Paul would be guilty of a most serious offense. Along the wall that separated the outer from the inner court, there were signs in Greek and Latin warning Gentile visitors not to enter farther in, otherwise they would be personally responsible for their ensuing death.

“By the Jewish law it was a crime punishable with death for an uncircumcised person to enter the inner courts of the sacred edifice. Paul had been seen in the city in company with Trophimus, an Ephesian, and it was conjectured that he had brought him into the temple. This he had not done; and being himself a Jew, his act in entering the temple was no violation of the law. But though the charge was wholly false, it served to arouse the popular prejudice. As the cry was taken up and borne through the temple courts, the throngs gathered there were thrown into wild excitement.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 407.

When the news of the riot reached a Roman fortress, the Roman commander, Claudius Lysias (*Acts 21:31, 32; 23:26*), came with troops and rescued Paul before the crowd could kill him.

As the target of the attacks, Paul was arrested and bound with chains while the commander tried to inquire about what was going on. At the hysteric shouting of the crowd, he ordered the apostle to be taken to the fortress.

Rumors, false ones at that, helped start this riot. Why must we be so careful with the kinds of rumors we listen to or, even worse, spread?

Before the Crowd

Acts 21:37–40 tells what happened next. As Paul was being taken into the Roman fortress for interrogation, he asked the commander for permission to address the people, who were still frantically clamoring for his death.

As he addressed the commander in the Greek language, the latter thought Paul might have been a certain Jew from Egypt who had some three years before initiated a revolt in Jerusalem against Roman occupation. The revolt, however, was put down by the Roman forces; many of his followers were either killed or arrested, while the Egyptian escaped.

After saying that he was from Tarsus, not from Egypt, Paul was granted permission to speak. In his speech, he did not offer a detailed response to the accusations raised against him (*Acts 21:28*) but told them the story of his conversion, highlighting his devotion to Judaism, to the point of having persecuted believers in Jesus. When confronted with a number of revelations from the Lord, he had no choice but to follow them. This explained the complete turnaround in his life and his call to preach to the Gentiles. Rather than get into a theological discussion, Paul recounted to them his own experience and why he was doing what he did.

Read Acts 22:22–29. How did the mob react to Paul’s statement that he was an apostle to the Gentiles?

The decision to let Paul speak did not work out well. By referring to his commitment to the Gentiles, Paul seemed to be confirming the truth of the charges against him (*Acts 21:28*), and the crowd got riled up again.

The Roman commander may not have understood everything Paul said; so, he decided to have him examined by flogging. Yet, besides being a pure-blooded Jew (*Phil. 3:5*), Paul also had Roman citizenship, and when he mentioned this, the commander had to back down. As a Roman citizen, Paul could not be subject to that kind of torture.

Read Paul’s speech (*Acts 22:1–21*). What evidence do you see that besides defending himself Paul was also preaching to his fellow Jews? Why would he tell his conversion story? What is it about conversion stories that can have so much power?

Before the Sanhedrin

When the Roman commander realized that Paul did not represent any threat to the empire; that is, that the issue involved internal disputes of the Jews, he asked the Sanhedrin to take up the case (*Acts 22:30; 23:29*).

Read Acts 23:1–5. How did Paul start his defense before the Sanhedrin?

Paul's introductory statement was met with a slap on the mouth, perhaps because, as a prisoner, his reference to God sounded blasphemous. His impulsive reaction gives us a glimpse of his temperament. By calling the high priest a "whitewashed wall" (*Acts 23:3*), he could be echoing Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees' hypocrisy in Matthew 23:27. Yet, since Paul did not really know he was addressing the high priest, the possibility that he had bad eyesight is not to be entirely ruled out.

Read Acts 23:6–10. How did Paul ingeniously try to disrupt the proceedings?

The Sanhedrin was composed of both Sadducees and Pharisees who were opposed to each other on a number of issues, doctrine being one of them. The Sadducees, for example, whose scriptural canon included only the first five books of Moses (the Pentateuch), did not believe in the resurrection of the dead (*Matt. 22:23–32*).

Paul's statement (*Acts 23:6*), however, was more than a clever tactic to distract the Sanhedrin. Since his encounter with the resurrected Jesus on the Damascus road lay at the foundation of his conversion and apostolic ministry, belief in the resurrection was the real issue for which he was being judged (*Acts 24:20, 21; 26:6–8*). Nothing else could explain how he had changed from his former zeal to become what he was now. If Jesus had not been raised from the dead, then his ministry was pointless, and he knew it, too (*1 Cor. 15:14–17*).

That night, as Paul was in the fortress, the Lord appeared to him with this encouragement: " 'Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome' " (*Acts 23:11, NKJV*). Given the circumstances, such a promise might have been particularly meaningful to Paul. His long-cherished wish to preach in Rome (*Acts 19:21, Rom. 1:13–15, 15:22–29*) would still come to pass.

Transfer to Caesarea

Upset with the fact that they had not yet gotten rid of Paul by legal means, a group decided to orchestrate a plan through which they would ambush and kill him on their own.

Read Acts 23:12–17. What was their plan, and how was it thwarted? What does this teach us about how passionate people can be for causes that are wrong?

That more than forty Jews conspired together against Paul and bound themselves with an oath reveals how much hatred the apostle had aroused in Jerusalem. Luke does not give us the identity of these men, but they were extremists willing to do whatever it took to protect the Jewish faith from its alleged traitors and enemies. Such a level of religious fanaticism, coupled with a revolutionary and nationalistic fervor, was not uncommon in first-century Judea and its environs.

In some providential way, however, the news about the plot reached the ears of Paul's nephew. It is somewhat disappointing that we know almost nothing about Paul's family, but apparently he and his sister had been brought up in Jerusalem (*Acts 22:3*), where she married and had at least one son. Anyway, Paul's nephew—the diminutive *neaniskos* (*Acts 23:18, 22*) and the fact that he was taken “by the hand” (*Acts 23:19*) imply he was still a teenager—was able to visit him in the fortress and tell him the story.

Read Acts 23:26–30. What message did commander Lysias send governor Felix about Paul?

The letter provided Felix with a fair report of the situation. In addition, it shows how Paul was benefited by his Roman citizenship. The Roman law fully protected its citizens, who had the right, for example, to have a legal trial, in which they could appear before the court and defend themselves (*Acts 25:16*), and the right to appeal to the emperor in case of an unfair trial (*Acts 25:10, 11*).

Irrespective of Felix's reputation, he treated Paul in the proper legal manner. After a preliminary interrogation, he ordered him to be kept under guard until the accusers arrived.

Think about God's providence in Paul's life. How often have you humbly acknowledged God's providence in your own life despite the trials and suffering you might have gone through?

Further Thought: “On this occasion, Paul and his companions formally presented to the leaders of the work at Jerusalem the contributions forwarded by the Gentile churches for the support of the poor among their Jewish brethren. . . .

“These freewill offerings betokened the loyalty of the Gentile converts to the organized work of God throughout the world and should have been received by all with grateful acknowledgment, yet it was apparent to Paul and his companions that even among those before whom they now stood were some who were unable to appreciate the spirit of brotherly love that had prompted the gifts.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 399, 400.

“Had the leaders in the church fully surrendered their feeling of bitterness toward the apostle, and accepted him as one specially called of God to bear the gospel to the Gentiles, the Lord would have spared him to them. God had not ordained that Paul’s labors should so soon end, but He did not work a miracle to counteract the train of circumstances to which the course of the leaders in the church at Jerusalem had given rise.

“The same spirit is still leading to the same results. A neglect to appreciate and improve the provisions of divine grace has deprived the church of many a blessing. How often would the Lord have prolonged the work of some faithful minister, had his labors been appreciated! But if the church permits the enemy of souls to pervert the understanding, so that they misrepresent and misinterpret the words and acts of the servant of Christ; if they allow themselves to stand in his way and hinder his usefulness, the Lord sometimes removes from them the blessing which He gave. . . .

“After the hands are folded upon the pulseless breast, when the voice of warning and encouragement is silent, then the obdurate may be aroused to see and prize the blessings they have cast from them. Their death may accomplish that which their life has failed to do.”—Pages 417, 418.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 By going to Jerusalem despite knowing he would not be welcome, Paul put the interests of the church above his own personal interests. To what extent should we follow his example?
- 2 What can we learn from Paul’s compromise in Jerusalem? How can we be politically correct without surrendering the principles we live by? Or can we?
- 3 Church unity is always so important. How can we learn to work together, unified, even when we have different views of things?

Claiming 100 Baptisms

By ANDREW McCHESNEY, Adventist Mission

Kiyong Kwon had 20 church members when he planted his first church in South Korea, and he was delighted to see a young stranger show up for the first Sabbath service.

“Why did you come to this small church?” Kwon asked.

“I just don’t have any luck,” the guest replied. “But someone told me that if I went to a new church, it would bring me luck.”

Kwon offered Bible studies, and the young man was baptized.

But Kwon wanted even more members. One day, he prayed from morning to evening, “Please give me people. Give me souls to fill this church.”

The next day, a neighbor stopped Kwon. “Yesterday, I felt like going to church,” she said. “Please take me to your church.”

The day after that, Kwon got a phone call. “My sister is an Adventist who has wanted me to go to church for 10 years, but I have never gone,” the caller said. “But now I feel like going.”

Kwon studied the Bible with both women, and both were baptized.

More than 40 people were baptized that first year. A year later, when the 98th person was baptized, Kwon prayed for 100 baptisms. He then remembered a woman whom he hadn’t seen in three years. He found her running a children’s art school, and he visited her with flowers. “You should be that 100th person to be baptized at my church,” he told her.

When the woman agreed, Kiyong informed her that she needed Bible studies first and to expect him at her home the next evening. “Make sure your husband is there, too,” he said.

After Kwon left, the woman called her husband, a devout Buddhist and a business owner, who recently had decided to learn English. He had purchased several English-language books, including a Bible, and had been struggling to read the Bible at his office. In desperation, he prayed, “If you are the real God, send someone to teach me the Bible.”

At that moment, his wife called and announced, “Elder Kwon will come to our house tomorrow to teach us the Bible.”



“Her husband was shocked beyond words,” Kwon said.

The next day, Kwon found the married couple and their adult children eagerly waiting to study the Bible. The whole family was baptized.

KIYONG KWON, 56, left, has planted three churches in South Korea. Part of this quarter’s Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help plant the first Adventist church in Sejong, South Korea. Read more about Kwon last week and next week.