
November 15 : Scriptures Acts 14-16

SUMMARY

As we continue our *Cruisin' Through the Bible*, we begin chapter 14 in the middle of Apostle Paul's first missionary journey. Before we start, let's talk about what an apostle is.

The word "apostle" comes from the Greek word *apostello* (to send). The best way to understand the idea of a "sent one" is to learn how they functioned in a 1st c. Jewish community and synagogue life. The Hebrew word is *shaliach*, also meaning "to send." How did the *shaliach* function in the 1st century? Very much as they do today. A *shaliach* is an official representative of a Jewish group or ministry sent out to accomplish a task. In terms of what we're reading about Paul, a *shaliach* represents a synagogue, its leaders, and its congregation. In Paul's case, he and Barnabas were sent out from Antioch for a task – to share the Good News of Israel's Messiah, Jesus. That's why the two went from synagogue to synagogue to tell their fellow Jews about Jesus. As representatives of the new stream of messianic Judaism nicknamed the Way, Paul and Barnabas were also de facto representatives of the "mother synagogue" in Jerusalem, to whom they would soon report about their work among the Diaspora, Jews living outside of the biblical homeland of Israel.

A *shaliach* was sent by a synagogue's leadership for many reasons, such as gathering Jews and proselytes to start a synagogue (in our terms, church planting), offering organizational assistance to a growing or struggling congregation, exercising spiritual or administrative discipline on behalf of a regional authority, and carry funds/resources as support to other Jewish communities.

A *shaliach* is invested with all the authority and power of the sending agent or agency. To receive a *shaliach* is to receive the one who sent him. Are you getting the picture yet? Yes, Jesus was on an apostolic mission from His Father: "Truly I tell you, whoever receives anyone I send receives me, and *the one who receives me receives him who sent me*" (John 13:20).

Paul was 1) called by Jesus as His agent and was "My chosen instrument to take My name to Gentiles, kings, and Israelites" (Acts 9:15). As such, Paul was invested with Jesus' authority and power to act on His behalf. This commission is why Paul could claim the same authority as the original Twelve Disciples/Apostles, even on the same level as Peter. However, a *shaliach* is not above the authority of those who physically sent him.

Therefore, Paul worked with and under the Jerusalem messianic community's leadership.

Apostles are one of the *five equipping gifts* from Jesus to His people "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ's fullness" (Ephesians 4:12-13). Sadly, due to a gross misunderstanding of how prophets and apostles functioned within the early messianic community, coupled with antisemitism screening out and ignoring all things Jewish in later centuries, the apostolic and prophetic function has largely been ignored or denied. However, today's missionaries often function as apostles do. Missionaries aren't commonly called by that name because many denominations fear calling people apostles because of the mystique surrounding the original Apostles. Many Christians mistakenly believe the original 13 Apostles (the Twelve plus Paul) were the Bible's only apostles.

But that's changed with further scholarship and a greater understanding of 1st-century Christianity's Jewish roots. Once people discover how the Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors, and Teachers functioned in Jesus' day, they're open to all five equipping gifts and actively ask God to release more believers into those functions.

Sadly, some who call themselves apostles and prophets miss the mark because they lack understanding of the equipping gifts. 1) They think they're apostles or prophets but are using the titles as honorifics, like calling someone Reverend or Pastor or Elder So and So. Or 2) they are genuinely called to be apostles or prophets and don't understand that they are called to equip the body for works of ministry and other functions of the 1st c. but think their function is primarily to lead. That's why we hear of Apostle So and So, who is the "head" of the "regional Apostolic/Prophetic Council." Were the Apostles and Prophets the heads of Jesus' community? As you'll see, Peter, Paul, and the others were *under* the authority of Jesus' half-brother James/Jacob, the President and Chief Rabbi of the Jerusalem community. Chew on that for a while! Okay, enough said. To the text!

Apostles Paul and Barnabas are on their mission to tell the Diaspora Jews in Asia Minor about Jesus. They arrive at Iconium and, as usual, go to where their Jewish compatriots gather – the synagogue (14:1). Both Jews and God-fearers believe and come to faith in Jesus when they hear Paul's words. However, the unbelieving Jews oppose their message (14:2). Does that frighten the Dynamic Duo away? Nope. They let Jesus work through them to confirm their message through signs and wonders (14:3). Gee, just like it says in Mark 16:17-18. But things get really hot for them, and under threat, Paul and Barnabas wisely depart for Lystra (south) and Derbe (southeast) of Iconium.

Things get even more wondrous and wild. The two guys heal a man who is lame from birth, and the Gentile pagan crowd draws the wrong conclusion. Rather than taking the Gospel to heart, the crowd assumes Paul and Barnabas are *epiphanies*, physical manifestations of the gods Zeus and Hermes (14:11-13). (Well, that didn't go as expected.) Rather than lead Gentiles *from* their pagan gods, the two apostles are *called* pagan gods. Paul and Barnabas desperately try to dissuade the crowd and barely do so while proclaiming there is only One God. However, the jealous unbelieving Jews from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium appear and stir up the crowd against those heretical messianic Jews resulting in Paul's stoning and being left for dead outside of the city (14:19). Thankfully, the messianic disciples of Lystra rescue Paul, take him back into the city and then send him off to Derbe. Paul has now experienced what Jesus told Ananias, "I will show him how much he must suffer for My name" (Acts 9:16).

Both then and now, after a *shaliach* plants a synagogue, it's common for the *shaliach* to revisit their work to see how the community is doing. Let's put that in Christian terms. After a missionary plants a church, it's common for that church planter to revisit their work to see how the church is doing. The *shaliach*/apostle wants to know if the community is thriving or needs help with anything else. After Paul and Barnabas preach in Derbe, resulting in many disciples, they return to their new disciples in Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch, the towns where they were persecuted for preaching Jesus. Do you think the persecution has ebbed? Nope. Paul has to strengthen and encourage the disciples with the vital message, "It is necessary to go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (14:22).

So, once a Jew or God-fearer came to Jesus, did they stay in their synagogue? If the unbelieving Jewish community was willing to tolerate the believers, likely yes, although the believers also met by themselves in homes to worship Jesus as they should. But many times, it appears the believers were "excommunicated" for their heresy that Jesus is Yehovah in the flesh, much as Jesus was when he faced the Sanhedrin (John 10). The "easy" part of Paul's job was working with Jews who already had a well-established faith community system. When Paul reached converts among the Gentiles with no background in Judaism, synagogue life, and function, Paul organized them along those lines.

In Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch, all Paul needs to do is appoint elders to lead and guide the Jewish believers as they assembled as a messianic community outside of their former synagogue (14:23). From those cities, Paul and Barnabas head south to the region of Pamphylia and the coastal city of Perga and next to the city of Attalia (14:24). From there the two head back home by ship to Antioch to make their apostolic report to

their sending agency about the Lord taking a harvest for Himself from among the Gentiles (14:28).

In chapter 15, we reach another pivotal moment in the messianic community. After Paul's first missionary journey, where many God-fearing Gentiles received Jesus as their Savior and Messiah, a dispute arises about *what* the Gentiles should do to be saved (15:1).

According to Jewish tradition, based on the Torah, if a Gentile was to convert to Judaism and join God's kingdom people, a male Gentile must be circumcised. *What's fascinating is there is no Torah command about a male being circumcised to convert to Judaism.* "Actually, there is no explicit commandment in the Torah requiring circumcision (or immersion) for proselytes. The Talmud—the Oral Law—is where the laws and debates about initiation rites are found. There was general, though by no means universal, agreement among the rabbis that male converts must undergo both circumcision and mikveh [immersion in a ritual bath]. (Women only have to immerse)" and "Given the historical and religious significance of *brit milah*, the idea that an uncircumcised man can be a Jew seems like a logical impossibility. However, the case has been made that, like the uncircumcised Russian Jews who embraced their birthright after immigrating to the United States or Israel, uncircumcised converts may be seen as Jews in need of circumcision—but Jews nonetheless" (myjewishlearning.com/article/the-covenant-of-circumcision/).

Even though there's no specific command for a male to be circumcised to join God's people, there are Torah commands requiring circumcision. 1) If a male child is born to a Jewish couple (any descendant of Abraham's family line), he must be circumcised on the 8th day (Genesis 17:10-14). Circumcision proved a man was "of the Abrahamic family." All natural-born Jewish males must be circumcised per the Torah, but circumcision alone doesn't make a man a Jew. 2) If a male Gentile slave wanted to participate in the Passover celebration, he was required to be circumcised and "become like a native of the land" because no uncircumcised man could eat the Passover lamb (Exodus 12:48).

As a result, circumcision was extended to include a proselyte male converting to Judaism, i.e., adopting into Abraham's household by faith, not natural birth. All Gentile converts, male and female, must also be immersed in water as a sign of the inner transformation from Gentile to Jew, in other words, *reborn as a Jew following the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*. Yes, that's where the idea of being "born again" originated. It wasn't invented by Jesus (John 3:3-8) or the early messianic community (Acts 8:12; 1 Peter 1:23). In fact, on the day of Pentecost/Shavuot, *Jewish people* needed to be immersed in water as a requirement to affirm the Holy Spirit's inner transformation in the New Covenant (Acts 2:38).

So, these are the two sides of the salvation dispute. On the one hand (per the believing Pharisees), if a Gentile believes God's word about Jesus and is saved, then they are converting to a messianic sect of Judaism. Therefore, the men must be circumcised to be saved, the men and women must undergo water immersion as usual, and then be required to follow the Torah as Jesus taught it as their guide for faith and practice with the Holy Spirit's help. On the other hand, trusting God is all that was needed to come to be saved, as the other side argued (15:1). However, water immersion (as usual) and learning the Torah as Jesus taught it for faith and practice were still required by both sides. In short, must the converting Gentile men be circumcised to be saved? Peter's experience showed that God didn't require circumcision for salvation because the Lord gave the believing Gentiles His Holy Spirit as evidence of them being saved (Acts 10:44-47). By the way, did you catch the comparison between the circumcised and the uncircumcised in the Acts 10:44-47 narrative?

So why all this backstory to Acts 15? Because the primary messianic community leadership (President and Chief Rabbi James) is about to make a ruling *that will be binding on all messianic congregations from that moment forward, and it will involve more than just circumcision, as you'll see.*

Some Jewish believers from Jerusalem come to Antioch, where the Jewish-Gentile messianic community is growing strong. Ah, but the believing men haven't been circumcised "per the Torah." Remember, circumcision for conversion isn't part of the Written Torah but is from the Oral Torah, a compendium of man-made laws *based on* the Torah. Paul and Barnabas disagree with the pro-circumcision-for-conversion guys, and an official decision must be made. So Paul, Barnabas, and other Antioch leaders go to Jerusalem to settle the matter. Along the way, they tell the Gentile Phoenician and Samaritan messianic communities how the Gospel is spreading far beyond their borders.

When the Antioch team arrives in Jerusalem, they give their report. Pharisee party believers (yes, the early church had Pharisees and Sadducees that were saved) argued that the Gentile believers must be circumcised "and to command them to keep the law of Moses" (15:5). Now there are the two fundamental issues to be decided. *Circumcision as necessary for salvation and mandatory Torah observance afterward.* The Jerusalem Council convenes for a historic decision regarding faith and doctrine for all messianic believers.

Peter's case comes down to "God made the decision already. Gentiles are saved by faith as we were. The Holy Spirit is proof. Why are you imposing the Torah on the Gentiles in a way that even we Jews who have lived Torah our whole lives find it tough to follow?"

Gentiles are saved by faith through God's grace" (15:7-11). Paul and Barnabas then back up Peter's testimony.

James makes his decision. Based on God's word that prophesied the Gentiles would come to Him when He raises King David's line again, which He did through Jesus (Amos 9:11-12; Isaiah 45:21), the ruling for all messianic communities regarding the Gentiles is 1) no idolatry, 2) no sexual immorality, 3) no spilling of innocent blood, 4) and they are to keep kosher (food that's been strangled). These rules primarily address Gentile behaviors and practices regarding pagan worship. They also address the Big Three I's that God says defiles the land – Idolatry (Ezekiel 36:18), Immorality (Leviticus 18:24-25), and Innocent Blood (Numbers 35:33). The "eating anything that's been strangled" not only reinforces the blood prohibition God gave to Noah (Genesis 9:4), but it is also part of the kosher laws (Leviticus 17:13).

What is James saying to the Gentiles? "Congratulations! You're saved by faith and don't need to be circumcised. However, since you are joining the messianic community, which is Jewish, we require these basics as your starting point; You're done with idolatry, sexual immorality, and improperly handling blood, whether for worship or food." Pretty simple, right?

But what about the Pharisee believers' 2nd point, "and to command them to keep the law of Moses"? James rules this way, "For since ancient times, Moses has had those who proclaim him in every city, and every Sabbath day he is read aloud in the synagogues" (15:21). Get it? James let stand the rule that the Torah is every believer's guide for faith and practice. And why wouldn't he? James' half-brother was Jesus, *who also upheld the Torah (as He taught it) for faith and practice for all His disciples, every person who follows Him, and that means Jews and Gentiles.*

Let me be clear. We don't follow the Torah to be saved. We learn it and follow it *because* we're saved. James' statement shows us he assumes Gentiles will go to synagogue to learn how to live their new faith through Torah education under the Holy Spirit's teaching.

This awesomely wise decision creates the bridge between Jewish and Gentile believers. The Council drafts an official letter to Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (15:23), binding on all believers. And notice how James words it, "*For it was the Holy Spirit's decision— and ours— not to place further burdens on you beyond these requirements...*" (15:28). It was God's decision, and we leaders are affirming it. The result of the settled decision is encouragement and rejoicing (15:31). Judas and Silas, two prophets from Jerusalem,

strengthen and encourage the believers at Antioch and return home. Paul and Barnabas remain at Antioch to strengthen the community.

But not all is well. Paul and Barnabas decide to go on a 2nd missionary journey to check up on their synagogue/church plants. Barnabas wants to take John Mark along with them again. But do you remember when John Mark left (i.e., bailed on, deserted) Paul and Barnabas at the beginning of their 1st missionary journey (13:13)? Paul wants nothing to do with the quitter because he knows how tough it got during their travels and doesn't want John Mark on the team. This sharp disagreement leads to Paul and Barnabas parting company. Barnabas and Mark sail to Cyprus while Paul chooses Silas (the prophet and one of the letter bearers from Jerusalem) and sets out for the Asia Minor congregations (15:40-41). See? Even the best teams are not immune to disagreements which sometimes necessitate separation. Such issues don't surprise the Lord. Separation can be needed to keep God's mission going and ensure believers' peace.

In chapter 16, Paul reaches Lystra and Derbe, where he had been mistaken for the Greek god Hermes and received brutal persecution from some of the jealous non-believing Jews. Paul hears of a disciple, Timothy, of whom the believers speak highly (16:1). Paul selects Timothy for the team *and circumcises him!* What? Wasn't that question already decided? Wasn't Paul on a mission to tell his congregation about the Jerusalem Council's decision about circumcision? Yes. This isn't a salvation matter. This is about acceptance. Since Timothy had a Jewish mother and a Gentile father (16:3), the expectation was he should have been circumcised because he was of Jewish lineage. In ancient times, Hebraic/Jewish heritage was determined by the father's family line. Today, it's determined through the mother's lineage. Paul removes any potential source of contention or offense (other than the Gospel) to reach Jews and Gentiles. Once that's settled, Paul and Timothy travel to Paul's church plants to give them the Jerusalem elders' decision. And to be a bit cheeky, I'm sure all the Gentile male believers breathed a sigh of relief.

Okay, so grab your Paul 2nd missionary journey map (Bible or online) and follow along. From Lystra, Paul's team moves west through Asia Minor, and, interestingly, the Holy Spirit prevents them from sharing the Gospel in that area. Instead, once they reach Troas, the Holy Spirit gives Paul a vision of a man from Macedonia (Greece) who calls Paul and his team to come and preach God's word about Jesus in Macedonia (16:9-10). Paul complies, and off they go!

The team has now expanded to Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Dr. Luke. How do we know Luke has joined them? Because of 16:10, "After he had seen the vision, *we* immediately

made efforts to set out for Macedonia." Luke changes from the 3rd person to the 1st person plural form. Luke includes himself in the official record from here to the end of Acts.

The team goes from Samothrace to Neapolis and the big city of Philippi (16:12), "a Roman colony and a leading city of the district of Macedonia." FYI, Philippi was a big city, but Thessalonica was the capital.

So, why does Paul go down to a river on the Sabbath expecting to find a Jewish place of prayer? If there were a synagogue in town, Paul would have gone there for Sabbath. Since there was no synagogue with a ritual bath, a source of "living water," such as a river, would be the next best place to find Jews immersing themselves for ritual purity before they began their Sabbath prayers and worship (16:13).

Note, too, that Paul encountered only women at the river. This confirms there was no viable synagogue since an official synagogue requires a *minyán*, the official 10-man core group, to start one. Down at the river, a wealthy woman, Lydia, responds to Paul's Gospel message, is baptized, and invites Paul to stay with her. How do we know Lydia is rich? Since purple fabric production was highly labor-intensive, it was a costly fabric reserved for royalty and other wealthy people. Lydia was "a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira" (16:14). So, Paul has an open door in Philippi and, later, Thyatira.

On another day, as Paul and Silas are on their way to the place of prayer, a demon-possessed slave girl rats them out, "these men, who are proclaiming to you a way of salvation, are the servants of the Most High God" (16:17). Was the demon wrong? Nope. But she was an irritant, and her words might have confused people, making them think that Paul and the demon-possessed girl were connected. In short, an evil spirit is trying to sabotage Paul and his God-given mission. There's an excellent way to deal with a demon – cast it out in Jesus' name – and it immediately leaves. Yay, that's great, except for the guys profiting enormously off the girl's demonically-inspired fortune-telling (16:16, 19). Yes, demons can give occult information that looks like God's work, but they can't predict the future. Knowing the future belongs to God alone, but that doesn't stop the enemy from faking it to draw people away from God and into spiritual bondage.

Paul's exorcism gig brings an antisemitic reaction from the slave girls' owners. They charge that not only was Paul disturbing the peace (which the slave girl had been doing) but that they were also Jews "promoting customs that are not legal for us as Romans to adopt or practice" (16:21). As my Study Bible puts it, "The practice of variant religion was not illegal in the Roman Empire, but any activity [religious or otherwise] that risked sparking civil unrest was frowned upon." Frowned upon? They stripped Paul and

Timothy's clothing, beat them with rods, and chucked them into prison with their feet in the stocks (16:22-24).

But God has the last word, and it's a ground-breaking one. Actually, it's an earthquake. As Paul and Silas are "praisin' the Lord" at midnight with the other prisoners listening in, an earthquake hits, and everyone is free, but no one leaves, probably due to Paul and Silas' example. Paul prevents the jailer from killing himself for fear that any prisoners have escaped. Paul's actions prove their obedience to Roman civil law, and their praises convict the jailer of the genuineness of their faith. The jailer takes the two jailbirds home, bandages their wounds, and the jailer's whole family is saved and baptized. What's funny is that Paul and Silas return to prison in the morning from their overnight God-enabled furlough (16:36).

In the morning, the magistrates tell the jailer to release the troublemakers, but Paul's not going that easily. With a tasty bit of return justice, Paul informs the magistrates of their little problem. You see, it's *illegal* under Roman law to do what the magistrates had done to Paul, a Roman citizen (16:37). Rather than turn in the authorities to the other authorities, Paul has a simple request: Publicly escort the aggrieved, falsely accused and wrongfully beaten and abused apostles out of jail. Ah, a little public humbling. I love it! The magistrates have had enough of the situation and "urge" Paul and his team to leave town. The team does so, but not without spending their final hours with the new believing brothers and sisters to encourage them.

You may wonder how the newly formed messianic communities continued after Paul and his team departed. That's simple. Messianic Judaism was the revelation of Jesus as Israel's Messiah. There was no need to start a new faith practice. Messianic communities were built upon the preexisting structures and practices of the local Jewish community. The Jews who became believers would acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah while continuing their usual worship and community life centered on their local synagogue. There was no need to invent something new. So, it was an easy transition from being a Jew to a messianic Jew, apart from the persecution it brought in some cases. If that happened and the messianic believers were "excused" from the local synagogue as heretics, those believing Jews and Gentiles would meet in homes until they could organize another official synagogue centered around Jesus.

INSIGHT

Many Christians believe Jesus did away with the Torah and that God's Law has little to say about how to live as a Jesus-follower. *Au contraire, Pierre*. As I've written, Jesus absolutely affirmed the Torah. He's the Author of His Torah and knows how to interpret

and apply it perfectly. For that, we've been given the Holy Spirit to help us. Therefore, it's a big surprise to most Christians today when they learn that Jesus expects us to know and live His Torah. Furthermore, believers are shocked to learn the Jerusalem Council affirmed the same thing by making the core laws mandatory while assuming the Gentile believers would go to synagogue to learn how to live God's way, "For since ancient times, Moses has had those who proclaim him in every city, and every Sabbath day he is read aloud in the synagogues" (15:21). Following the Torah was a given for every disciple of Jesus.

My hope and prayer are that as you go *Cruisin' Through The Bible*, you will have read the Torah and seen the great wisdom of God's commands and begun to let them guide your life. Remember, we don't follow them to be saved. We follow them to show we're saved, for Jesus expects us to prove our rebirth by learning to live like Him, our Torah-observant Messiah and Savior.

November 16 : Scriptures Acts 17-19

SUMMARY

After the joyously traumatic events in Philippi, Paul and his team set out for the central city in the region, Thessalonica. They pass through Amphipolis and Apollonia. Cool names, huh? Better than Oblong, Illinois, Coward, South Carolina, and Whynot, North Carolina. Yes, those are real cities. (The funny thing is I know some of you are searching online for them right now.)

Anyway, the team arrives in Thessalonica and goes to the synagogue on Shabbat (the Sabbath, 17:1). As usual, Paul gets right to the point with his Jewish compatriots and God-fearing Gentiles. "On three Sabbath days reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer and rise from the dead: 'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah'" (17:2-3). As has happened previously, many Jews, Gentiles, and "many leading women" trust God and are saved. And as usual, local non-believing Jews incite a riot to cause trouble for Paul and the team. Not finding the team, the rioters grab some messianic brothers and haul them before the court.

The charge against the messianic Jews is fascinating. The messianics know Jesus is Israel's Messiah, and they also know that Jesus ascended to heaven and isn't vying for the kingship of Israel at that time. You and I know Jesus' kingship over Israel will come at the time of the Father's choosing (Matthew 24:30-31, 36). But suppose a person has a "natural" mindset. In that case, the believers' declaration of Jesus' messiahship means there's a challenge to the rule of Caesar in Judea (17:7). This charge is a dangerous one, especially to those who have already "turned the (Roman) world upside down." Imagine that. The Gospel is already noticeably affecting the Roman world.

For safety's sake, the messianic congregation sends Paul and Silas west-southwest to Berea, about 45 miles away. When they arrive, guess where the two go? Yup, to the synagogue. So, why? Because the synagogue is more than a place of worship. The synagogues in Jesus' day functioned very much as they do now, as a place of worship, prayer, instruction, and a neighborhood community center. When a Jew moved to a new town or city, they would immediately look for a synagogue because it would be located in a Jewish neighborhood. Due to Jewish law, a synagogue must be within a prescribed walking distance from one's home. Therefore, a synagogue would be surrounded by a Jewish neighborhood. Today, depending on which stream of Judaism a Jew follows (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstruction), how the distance law is interpreted and applied varies. By the way, I learned from the late Dr. Dwight Pryor

(hebraiccollege.org/academics/course-contributors/dwight-pryor/) that the tradition of church steeples came from the synagogue practice of having a flagpole at the building so newcomers to the town could easily find the Jewish Community Center, the synagogue. TYL – Today You Learned.

In keeping with the Jewish tradition of intense Bible study, the Bereans accept Paul but also check him out. They “received the word with eagerness and examined[a] the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (17:11). Now, *that’s* the attitude we should have as Jesus’ disciples. Deep divers into the Bible and checking out what we learn, especially online. The Bereans see that Paul is correct and place their faith in Jesus. But again, the persistently persecuting Jews from Thessalonica find out that Paul is in Berea and travel the 45 miles to agitate the crowds. The messianic community shuttle Paul out of Berea to the coast and off to Athens while Timothy and Silas remain behind and catch up with Paul as soon as possible (17:14-15).

Once in Athens, Paul again goes to the synagogue to present the Gospel to his fellow Jews. But he also goes to the Athens marketplace to meet with the Greek citizens and share about Jesus (17:17). Why? Because the city was full of idols. What an excellent opportunity for Paul to challenge the entire Greek pantheon with the news of the One True God and His Son, the Savior of the Jews and Gentiles!

Some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers wonder who this, as the Greek puts it, “seed-picker” is and what he’s talking about. A “seed-picker” is a derogatory term for “one who picks up and retails scraps of information; a gossip; a babbler” (Mounce Greek Dictionary). In other words, a *pseudo-intellectual*.

Who were these two groups of philosophers? Don’t worry. We won’t get too far into the weeds. Here’s what David Stern (The Jewish New Testament Commentary) says about the Epicureans and Stoics and how they relate to Acts 17.

“The followers of Epicurus denied the existence of a purposeful God and believed the universe originated by chance from a falling rain of atoms. They mocked the popular (pagan) gods and mythology. Their view of the soul was materialistic: it dissolved and dissipated at death. Thus the aim of life was gratification, not pursuit of higher or externally given moral and spiritual interests. Gratification could be gross and sorted if one was so inclined, or aesthetic and refined. Today’s successors to the Epicureans speak of “doing your own thing,” and their unabashed selfishness is rarely ameliorated by the common qualification usually honored in the breach, “so long as it doesn’t hurt anybody else.”

Stoics were pantheists for whom "God" was merely a word standing for some vague spirit of reason in the universe. They understood the soul to be corporeal and, at death somehow absorbed into this blurry "God." All the major Eastern religions and certain seemingly Western offshoots have at bottom a similar theology, that there is no transcendent God who created and rules the universe independently of human beings and their imaginings. The Stoic moral code was in some ways higher than that of the Epicureans, but for them, the highest morality was an austere apathy and unconcern, which regarded itself as superior to passion as well as circumstance. Many alienated people today repressed the genuine hurt and guilt they ought to feel and attempt to elevate their alienation into philosophy, thus ending up with a version of stoicism. In this philosophy pleasure is not good, and pain is not evil, for nothing really matters. "Reason" becomes a guide, but when "Reason" finds nothing left to live for, suicide becomes the "reasonable" action – the first two leaders of Stoicism died by their own hand."

There you go. The Athenians formally invite Paul to share his beliefs for their evaluation. How does Paul "meet them where they live?"

"He appealed to the Athenians' religious inclinations (17:22-23), drew upon observable data from nature to discuss the attributes of God (17:24-26), marshaled insights from pagan poets (17:27-29), and identified God and the need for humans to repent in preparation for the day in which God will judge the world in righteousness through Jesus Christ, whom God vindicated by raising him from the dead" (17:30-31) (Study Bible). Sorry for the long quotes, but I couldn't have said it better.

Predictably, some mock Paul, some want to hear more, and some believe. Did Paul stress out about this? Nope, he takes it as it is, as should we.

Thankfully, Paul isn't run out of town this time. In chapter 18, Paul travels to Corinth, just to the west of Athens, where he meets a Jewish husband and wife, Aquila and Priscilla, who had just been expelled from Rome (18:2). This happened under Emperor Claudius' edict in 49 A.D., apparently after some dispute involving the Jewish community threatened the civil quiet of Rome. Based on one source, the dispute arose between messianic and non-believing Jews, but that's not firmly established.

To support himself, Paul teams up with the messianic Jew Aquila to make tents. On the Sabbath, Paul does his usual thing, talking with the Jews and Gentiles in the Corinthian synagogue about Jesus. When Timothy and Silas catch up with Paul, he dedicates himself to full-time preaching and teaching about Jesus, which causes the usual commotion from the Jews who refuse to accept his message about the Lord. We again come to a pivotal

moment. Paul becomes angry over his fellow Jews' resistance and blaspheming of Jesus. From this time forward, Paul dedicates his ministry to reaching the Gentiles who were more receptive to the Gospel (18:6). Paul leaves the synagogue. He begins a home-based congregation at Titius Justus' house, and remarkably, the synagogue leader, Crispus, joins Paul! With that, the Corinthian Congregation was birthed and flourished in a very pagan and immoral city.

In the face of the threats from the local Jewish community, the Lord appears to Paul and encourages him to hang in there because Jesus has a lot of people who will come to Him in Corinth (18:10). Paul stays for 18 months, and during that time, another threat arises. The non-believing Jews unite to go after Paul, haul him before Gallio, the area's proconsul, and try to condemn Paul for "persuading people to worship God in ways contrary to the law" (18:13). Gallio is unimpressed, and the Jewish community's plan backfires. Gallio recognizes that Jewish law is outside his jurisdiction and couldn't care less about it. He drives out Paul's accusers, and the tribunal beats the synagogue leader, Sosthenes, Crispus' replacement.

After Paul's year-and-a-half stint in Corinth, he, Aquila, and Priscilla travel back to Antioch through Cenchrea, where Paul ends a Nazirite vow. How do we know it was a Nazirite vow? Because it's the only one that ends with a visit to a barber (Numbers 6:18). Paul and the party continue to Ephesus, where counter to his declaration in the Corinthian synagogue, Paul debates with the local Jews about Jesus (18:19). After strengthening his fellow believers, Paul leaves Aquila and Priscilla at Ephesus and travels to Caesarea (on Judea's coast), and then to Jerusalem to give the leadership his report. After that, he travels north to Antioch.

Paul begins his 3rd missionary journey in chapter 19 (grab your maps again!) and travels west through Asia Minor to the regions of Galatia and Phrygia, confirming, strengthening, and establishing the believers.

And now we meet Apollos, a believing Jew from Alexandria, Egypt. Not only can he speak eloquently, but the text says he handled the scriptures with excellence (18:24). Apollos arrives in Ephesus and begins to share his faith in Jesus with zeal and skill accurately – *except* – he didn't know about Jesus' command to immerse believers in Jesus' name after conversion, i.e., make new believers an official part of Jesus' messianic community (18:25). He only knew about John the Baptist's immersion in water to demonstrate repentance, not Jesus' baptism nor the baptism of the Holy Spirit. As David Stern puts it, "He had not experienced the full significance of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and *had not been filled with the Ruach HaKodesh*" (Jewish New Testament

Commentary). So, Aquila and Priscilla pull Apollos aside, teach him more accurately about Jesus, and then unleash him Achaia, where Apollos becomes exceptionally effective in his apologetics ministry to the Jews, “demonstrating through the Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah” (18:28).

Speaking of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, chapter 19 shows us an exciting situation to help shape our theology. We know a person cannot be saved without the Holy Spirit's work. Under the New Covenant transformation process, the Holy Spirit enters a new believer and resides within them (Ezekiel 36:27). That's a solid biblical fact. But what do we see here in Acts 19? After Apollos leaves Ephesus, Paul arrives to find disciples, meaning born-again believers in Jesus. Something in his talk with these believers tells Paul they are saved but haven't received the Spirit's empowerment which is a biblical expectation for all believers (Acts 1:5, 8; Mark 16:17-18).

Yes, there is a debate about this, and I'll let you study that on your own. The following is how I understand it, having come into the “Baptism of the Holy Spirit” through the Charismatic Renewal in the 70s. I'm going to use created language to describe it.

- 1) The Baptism OF the Holy Spirit. This baptism is the Holy Spirit's work of immersing us *into* the Body of Christ, connecting us to Jesus, and making us a part of God's people. This is *salvation* and results in spiritual fruit, a productive life for the Lord (John 15:5)
- 2) The Baptism IN the Holy Spirit. This baptism is Jesus' work of immersing us *into* the Holy Spirit for supernatural power as God's people. This is *empowerment* and results in spiritual gifts, supernatural works of God through us (1 Corinthians 12, 14; 1 Peter 4:10).

The empowerment of the Holy Spirit can happen at salvation or after salvation. It happened simultaneously for the disciples on Pentecost and at Cornelius' house. For the Samaritan and Ephesian believers, the Holy Spirit hit them *after* conversion (Acts 8:14-16, 19:5-6). What's different about the Ephesian believers from the Samaritan believers is that they were saved but not baptized in Jesus' name, which places them under Jesus' authority.

So putting Apollos and the Ephesian believers' example together, we can be saved and follow Jesus. However, water immersion is an obedient act by which we show that we've taken on Jesus' authority over us, and after that, He gives us His power to use according to His will. That's how I see it, and I'll let you wrestle with that.

After seeing the Holy Spirit empower the Ephesian believers, Paul goes to the synagogue and argues with his fellow Jews about Jesus and the new way of God's kingdom for three months (19:9). When those who reject the Way become abusive, Paul leaves them and hosts lectures about Jesus for two years in the Lecture Hall of Tyrannus where Jews and Greeks could hear God's word as it spread throughout all of Asia Minor.

Speaking of God's power, there's no doubt it was operating during Paul's ministry in Ephesus. However, toward the end of Paul's Ephesian tenure, things really started ramping up against the kingdom of darkness. The Holy Spirit is so strong through Paul that people are healed from sickness and disease and delivered from demons by the mere touch of cloth that touches Paul. Seeing Jewish Paul exercising power in Jesus' name, a group of "itinerant Jewish exorcists also attempted to pronounce the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits" (19:13).

Big mistake.

As I've said before, one must be *under* the Lord's authority to exercise the Lord's authority. If not, then using Jesus' name as these foolish Jewish exorcists did is simply using Jesus' name as a word in a magic incantation. Yes, some Jewish exorcists weren't believers (Matthew 12:27), and it's possible to cast out demons without having a relationship with Jesus (Matthew 7:22). In the former case, you run the risk of the demon turning on you as these foolish exorcists found out. In the latter case, you may succeed in driving out demons, but you may join them in hell when you die. Best case? Get to know Jesus first, then storm the gates of hell *with* Jesus!

This incident becomes well-known, and Jesus' proven supremacy over the powers of darkness causes many occultists in Ephesus to turn to the Lord and destroy their occult manuals (19:18-19), and God's word tears through the region!

Do you remember the accusation against Paul and his team in Thessalonica that they had "turned the world upside down"? Well, it happens now in Ephesus. While Paul plans his homeward trek, a slight disturbance occurs. Because so many worshipers of the goddess Artemis (Diana) are rejecting idolatry and turning to Jesus, the idol trade is suffering, and idol makers are losing income (19:25-27). Demetrius warns the idol-makers that Paul and the Way threaten their livelihoods. That's all it takes. A riot breaks out. Two of Paul's co-workers are dragged into the Ephesian Amphitheater. Paul is prevented from trying to calm the crowd for fear of his safety. When a Jew named Alexander is pushed forward to make peace, the crowd recognizes him as a Jew and goes crazy. Why? Because Jews say there is only one God and Artemis is not Him. So, that attempt goes nowhere (19:33-34).

Finally, a lowly city clerk quells the uproar. He tells the crowd, 1) "Everybody knows how great our goddess is, and we have an image (a meteor?) that fell from heaven, which is her image. 2) The people of the Way haven't broken any laws or directly attacked the goddess. So, if the idol merchants have a case against Paul and his team, take them to the courts. In the meantime, take a chill pill and go home because you're on the edge of being lawbreakers yourselves." And with that, chapter 19 ends.

INSIGHT

That phrase, "These men who have turned the world upside down," intrigues me. What did Paul and the people of the Way do to turn the world upside down? They prayed, boldly shared God's word about Jesus, lived righteous and godly lives, and backed up their words with the Holy Spirit's power. There was no need for corporate-type machinations or slick presentations: only God's word and power.

One of the best things about persecution and deprivation is that it drives Christians back to the basics. We can no longer rely on jazzy spiritual presentations and non-confronting appeals to bring people to Jesus. As my friend says, "Many worship services in the U.S. today are rock concerts followed by a TED talk." A. W. Tozer wrote, "Worship is no longer worship when it reflects the culture around us more than the Christ within us."

Maybe we're not turning the world upside down because the church and most Christians are the ones who are upside down. We put the least important things at the top and the most important at the bottom.

"The church that is man-managed instead of God-governed is doomed to failure. A ministry that is college-trained but not Spirit-filled works no miracles" (Leonard Ravenhill).

November 17 : Scriptures Acts 20-21

SUMMARY

With the fracas in Ephesus safely behind him and having encouraged the Ephesian elders, Paul continues to head west to Macedonia. He travels south to Greece through Philippi, Amphipolis, Thessalonica, Berea, to Corinth. From Corinth, Paul retraces his route through those same cities (avoiding a plot against him) back to Troas, on the west coast of Asia Minor (20:5).

Paul met with the believers in Troas on the evening of the first day of the week. So, when was that? It was likely Saturday evening after the Sabbath ended at sundown and the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, Sunday, began. The Lord's Day refers to the day of the week Jesus rose from the dead. This practice of meeting Saturday evening makes a lot of sense for the messianic believers because they would attend their regular synagogue prayer and study times from sundown Friday to Saturday and then retire to the homes of their fellow believers for encouragement, worship, prayer, and study.

I can understand Paul's long-winded teaching session. He was a treasure trove of biblical knowledge under the Holy Spirit's control, and with his looming departure, Paul wanted to encourage the believers as much as possible in the time he had left. However, I also understand why the young man, Eutychus, fell asleep (20:9). I remember many times as a pastor watching a few members of my congregation nodding off during the message, and I didn't preach all that long. Can you imagine sitting in the warm upper room of a home with limited airflow and oil lamps sucking up oxygen, especially while having a great dinner with friends? I can see you shaking your head. Or are you nodding off, too?

Anyway, Eutychus falls out of the window and dies. Paul picks up the dead man, "embraces him" (read prays for Eutychus), and the young man returns to life. Not to let death and a miracle put him off his stride, Paul continues until morning and departs (20:11), leaving behind a delighted family with a son brought back from the dead. I know. When you read this, it's almost like a "Cool, another miracle," laid-back account. You know, "A guy dies, he's brought back to life, let's eat" kind of thing. But given the power of the Holy Spirit through Paul, it's not difficult to believe such miracles happened frequently.

Luke's account moves rather quickly because Paul is hurrying. The Apostle wanted to reach Jerusalem by Shavuot/Pentecost (20:16). The reason being that all Jewish men were required to travel to Jerusalem for the annual Three Pilgrim Feasts of the Lord – Passover (early spring), Shavuot/Pentecost (late spring), and Tabernacles (Autumn) (Deuteronomy

16:16-17). Because of Pentecost's approach, Paul wants to bypass Ephesus (20:16) probably to avoid being detained by another bout of civil unrest or perhaps, as my Study Bible suggests, to avoid being hindered by the Ephesian believers whom he loves and who love him. As a compromise, Paul summons the Ephesian elders to meet him at Miletus for a farewell speech.

Paul reminds them of his faithful service to Jesus by speaking the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, even when faced with significant threats. He preached his God-given message of "repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus" (20:21). Paul knows that while the Holy Spirit is compelling him to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost, he will be walking into trouble, even arrest, imprisonment, or being killed. But that doesn't matter to him. All that matters is that he finishes the race that Jesus set before him (20:24). Paul knows that he will never see them again, but he's been faithful to give them everything they need to continue serving the Lord faithfully. Paul also knows that the Ephesian believers will be attacked and challenged not just by outsiders (as Paul knows) but even by those from within the messianic community (20:29-30). He warned them about this during his three-year discipleship course in Ephesus.

But now that Paul is departing, they aren't going to carry on the work alone. God's grace is enough to help them and see them through their work and final reward. Finally, Paul testifies that he hasn't done this for financial gain, but he supported himself as an example to the elders. Then with lots of hugs, kisses, and tears, Paul sails for Jerusalem.

Chapter 21 opens with Paul and his team sailing past Cyprus to Tyre, where they stop for a week to meet with the believers. Verse 4 says something curious, "*Through the Spirit they told Paul not to go to Jerusalem.*" Okay, hold on. Didn't Paul just say in the last chapter, "I am on my way to Jerusalem, *compelled by the Spirit*" (20:22)? So which is it, go or not? Is God contradicting Himself? I don't think God contradicted Himself when you consider what else Paul said in 20:23, "the Holy Spirit warns me that chains and afflictions are waiting for me." Since God cannot contradict Himself, this leads me to believe the Holy Spirit *was* compelling Paul to go to Jerusalem and arrive by Pentecost and had already told him about the troubles to come. The Tyrian believers aren't prophesying by the Spirit. They're getting a word of knowledge that confirms what Paul already knows is coming. *They* ask Paul not to go to Jerusalem because of what the Holy Spirit has shown them. The revelation isn't a warning *per se*. It's a confirmation to further prepare Paul for what he's facing.

After taking their leave, Paul and the team sail to Ptolemais, south of Tyre, and then disembark at Caesarea. They stay at Philip the evangelist's home with his four unmarried,

prophetically-gifted daughters. Another prophet arrives, Agabus, whom we've met before, who accurately predicted the famine in the Roman world (11:28). Not only does he confirm the same word Paul and the Tyrian believers received about the Apostle's future troubles, Agabus gives some details. Yes, Paul is definitely walking into trouble, for "A fact must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (Deuteronomy 19:15). And so, Paul leaves Caesarea to go up to Jerusalem.

When the Jerusalem leaders debrief Paul, I find their response fascinating. While Paul reports on the remarkable inroads the Lord has worked among the Gentiles (21:19), the leaders rejoice but focus on how many Jews who've come to the Lord through Paul's ministry (21:20). There's an undercurrent to their words, "how many thousands of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law." And then they come to it, "But they have been informed about you—that *you are teaching all the Jews* who are among the Gentiles to abandon Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or to live according to our customs" (21:21).

In other words, "*We leaders of the messianic Jewish movement* know you're encouraging the Jews who start following Jesus to remain Jewish in faith and practice, but the non-Jewish community thinks you're teaching them it's okay to now live like the Gentiles. We know this isn't true."

What likely started as a rumor about Paul (the one who walked away from accepted Judaism into a heretical messianic sect) has apparently morphed and grown into gossip and slander that Paul was telling other Jews they could do the same. The three accusations – doing away with the Torah, circumcision, and Jewish Oral Law (the traditions) – were akin to walking away from Judaism entirely.

The Council's solution is sound. "Now that you're here, you have an excellent opportunity to prove them wrong. Go to the Temple and help your fellow Jewish believers to complete their Nazirite vow according to the Torah (21:24). Then everyone will see the charge is nothing and that you're Torah observant (21:25)."

We must understand that the messianic believers, the Jewish Christians, *never* abandoned their Jewish lifestyles when they declared their faith in Jesus. After they were saved, they continued to worship at the Temple, observe the Torah, and follow Jewish traditions when they didn't contradict Jesus' teachings. As for the Gentiles, the messianic Jewish community did what it could to help ease them into their new Jewish faith. How different things are today! When someone Jewish comes to Jesus for salvation, we immerse them

in church life and teach them denominational doctrines. Wouldn't it be better to let Jews remain Jewish under the promised New Covenant with Jesus for salvation?

Paul agrees and accompanies the men to the Temple. They "purify" themselves (water immersion before entering the Temple grounds (21:26) and follow the procedure. However, some non-believing Jews from Asia happened to be in Jerusalem for the Feast of Shavuot/Pentecost. *Their mandatory pilgrimage from Asia made it dangerous for Paul to go to Jerusalem because they knew him, the apostate troublemaker who had thrown their synagogues and communities into chaos! And he dared step foot in God's holy Temple? Outrageous!*

And the tumult begins. The outraged Jews from Asia level five lies against Paul, any of which would set off a riot. They say 1-3) Paul teaches against the Jewish people, the Torah, and the Temple, and 4-5) has brought Gentiles into the Temple, defiling it. During a pilgrim feast, these accusations are highly inflammatory! The crowd rushes Paul, and they drag him out of the Temple precincts and slam the doors of the Temple shut (21:30). Thankfully, the Roman commander hears about the riot breaking out in the Temple and rescues Paul. When he realizes Paul is not a certain insurrectionist who previously stirred up trouble, the commander grants Paul permission to speak to the crowd. Hopefully, a fellow Jew's words of defense would calm the situation better than the Roman guards would.

INSIGHT

God's leading by His Holy Spirit can be a tricky thing sometimes. He may impress on us what to do or where to go, but circumstances, other believers, or our doubts seem to contradict His guidance. Even God's revelatory gifts can seem to get in the way. Should this discourage us from seeking the Lord's guidance in all things? Not at all. The more we do so and the more He speaks to us, the better we learn to discern His voice. Knowing God's voice might have been easier for Paul since he heard Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:4) and spent 17 years in Arabia in the school of the Spirit (Galatians 1:17).

Spending time with the Lord in His word, experimenting with God's direction, developing a sensitivity to the Holy Spirit, and having close mature Christian brothers and sisters can help hone our hearing and keep us on track as the Lord directs us.

November 18 : Scriptures Acts 22-24

SUMMARY

Paul begins his address to his fellow Jews in the Temple. Why does he address them in Hebrew (22:2)? It establishes Paul's credentials as a Jew and a scholar. Paul got their attention, and he would be speaking the language of the multitudes of Jews present. Also, it disassociates him from the Roman guards and on the side of the people.

Paul begins with his bona fides to counter the false accusations against him. He's a Jew, a Roman citizen, who studied Gamaliel I. Oh yeah! They all know about Gamaliel I, the Elder. He was a grandson of Rabbi Hillel, one of Judea's two most prominent rabbis. Gamaliel was an influential Pharisee who sat on the Sanhedrin in the days when the Way began (c. A.D. 30) and, at this time of Paul's speech, had been deceased for about three years. Paul tells the crowd how zealous he is for God and His Word (22:3), so much so he had personally overseen the persecution of Jesus' followers, to which the remaining members of the Sanhedrin of those days can attest. Therefore, Paul's authority was well-connected to the most Torah-upholding body in the world. Paul's reply answers their charges that he speaks against the Torah.

But then something happened, Paul says, and he relates his Damascus road experience of physically encountering the risen Jesus and hearing His words.

As Paul continues, one of the details he emphasizes is his visit from "Ananias, a devout man according to the law, who had a good reputation with all the Jews living there" (22:12). So, Paul not only studied under one of the most accomplished rabbis in the Judaism of his day, another Jew, a follower of Jesus and having a good reputation, healed him. Paul's reply answers their charge that he speaks against the Jews.

Further, Paul relates Ananias' words commissioning him as Jesus' messenger, to be "a witness for him to all people of what you have seen and heard." After his immersion in Jesus' name, Paul affirmed Jerusalem and the Temple. He returned home and went to the Temple, answering their concern about speaking against the Jewish center of worship. He prayed there until the Lord told him to take the message to the Gentiles because the Jews of Jerusalem would reject his testimony about Jesus. That's too much for the Temple crowd; they've heard enough. Paul's words "strike at the heart of Jewish nationalism" (Study Bible), and his "Jesus theology" put the Gentiles on par with the Jews. No way! It's time to kill Paul and stop his blasphemy (22:22).

Now the Roman guard gets involved. The last thing the Romans need is another riot during a Feast of the Lord with hundreds of thousands of potential combatants milling about the Temple grounds. All because of this one unruly Jew, Paul. And so the Roman interrogation begins (22:24). Why? Possibly because the Roman commander didn't understand Paul's Hebrew words. I guess they can't just ask Paul to use the Greek language to tell them why the people are so upset with him. They elect to use the scourge, the same torture instrument Pilate used on Jesus, to "encourage" Paul to tell the truth.

There's just one little problem. Paul tells the centurion he's a Roman citizen. Upon questioning, all those in the interrogation room immediately stop and withdraw. Why? Because Roman citizenship has its privileges and protections. Paul was bound and about to be whipped, even though no charges had been brought against him. That's a gross misuse of the Roman commander's authority and a severe violation of a Roman citizen's right. "By questioning the whipping Sha'ul (Paul) was saving the commander as well as himself an unpleasant experience" (JNTC, Jewish New Testament Commentary). Yeah, no kidding! But that doesn't let Paul off the hook, according to the commander. He follows protocol by taking Paul to the Sanhedrin to get their ruling on the situation and the charges for Roman prosecution (22:30).

Chapter 23 moves from mob justice to official justice, a hearing before the Sanhedrin. Paul likely looked around the room at the 70 men and High Priest in attendance and recognized some faces from years earlier. David Stern (JNTC) points out that this is an informal hearing, not a trial.

Paul begins by proclaiming, "I have lived my life before God in all good conscience to this day." In other words, "as God is my witness, my conscience is clear." Paul's declaration sets off the High Priest. How dare Paul invoke God when he's obviously lying! So, the High Priest orders Paul to be struck in the face. Paul strikes back with a stinging rebuke, "You corrupt-o-crat! You look pure outside, but inside you're filled with moral rot." Why would Paul dare say that to the High Priest? Because Paul knows the system, and even though the following words imply Paul doesn't know who the High Priest is, he does. Anyone living in Jerusalem would know, especially the person addressing the whole Sanhedrin in session. That makes Paul's subsequent response particularly smarmy.

Those standing next to Paul: "Do you dare revile God's high priest?"

Paul: "The High Priest, you say? Can't be because I wouldn't have spoken against the leader of the Jews as the Torah says" (22:5). Paul brazenly implies that he was acting more

in line with the Torah and the High Priest had. See what I mean about being smarmy? Remember, Paul's not perfect, and it's clear his flesh started to exert itself during the "family" dispute.

Knowing this will go nowhere, Paul decides to mess up the proceedings. As a well-versed and experienced member of the Pharisees, Paul drops a truth bomb based on fundamental and intense theological disagreements. "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. I am being judged because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead!" (22:6). He deflects the proceedings into a dispute about Jesus as a resurrection issue which instantly wins him Pharisee support. "For the Sadducees say there is no resurrection, and neither angel nor spirit, but the Pharisees affirm them all" (23:8).

Paul got his desired response. The whole place erupts into contention, with the Pharisees and the Sadducees leaping into the theological fray over the resurrection of the dead. Nothing like a ruckus to mess up a hearing. Good play, Paul.

As things get more contentious, the Roman commander wisely chooses to remove Paul and leave the Sanhedrin to fight among itself. Under guard, Jesus appears to Paul and tells him His purpose – to send him to Rome to testify about Jesus in the center of the Imperial power of the known world. Meanwhile, forty particularly stirred-up Jews solemnly vow not to eat or drink until they send Paul to meet his God face to face (23:12). They scheme to have the commander bring Paul to the Sanhedrin under pretenses. Along the way, they'll kill Paul. Thanks to God, Paul's nephew gets wind of the plot and clues in the commander, who wisely spirits Paul away at night to a safer place, Caesarea on the Mediterranean Sea coast, with an escort of four hundred and seventy soldiers (23:23), ten times the number of the Jewish assassins. The military entourage takes Paul to see Felix.

Who was Governor Felix? "Antonius Felix was formerly a slave but was promoted by Claudius Caesar to the office of governor. The Roman historian Tacitus described Felix as 'cruel, licentious, and base.' While in Judea, Felix was attracted to Drusilla, a daughter of Herod Agrippa I. The fact that Drusilla was already married made no difference to Felix. He enticed her away from her husband, Azizus, and they later married" (gotquestions.org/Felix-in-the-Bible.html). Wow. Another stellar Roman ruler. To be fair, Luke puts Governor Felix in a better light, although he does document corruption in Felix's character (hoping for a bribe, 24:26)

The Roman commander sends a letter along with the escort explaining that he had apprehended Paul during a mob action. He brought Paul to the Jewish elders for examination but soon realized it was simply a dispute over their Jewish law (See? Paul's

ploy worked!), and nothing more needed to be done. But news of a plot came to him, so he decided to pack Paul off to Felix for a hearing with Paul and his accusers to see if further action was warranted.

Paul arrives, and when Felix learns he is from the Roman region of Cilicia, he promises a hearing when Paul's accusers arrive. The official inquiry commences in Chapter 24.

In this corner are Ananias, the High Priest, accompanying elders, and a lawyer named Tertullus (24:1). After schmoozing Felix, Tertullus charges that Paul is "an agitator among all the Jews throughout the Roman world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes. He even tried to desecrate the temple, and so we apprehended him." The rest of the accusing party joins in the accusatory chorus against Paul. We know that the Romans were strong on keeping the *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace, and civil unrest was harshly addressed.

And in this corner, Paul. He starts his defense by acknowledging Felix's familiarity with the Jewish nation and having been a judge for many years (24:10). Paul contends the accusation of civil incitement is false, along with their other charges (24:12-13). What's true is that Paul follows Jesus and everything about it *that lines up with God's word, specifically the Torah and the Prophets* (24:14). A significant component of the Way is the resurrection of the dead, in which Paul's accusers also believe. Plus, Paul's conscience is clear about any wrongdoing, and he wasn't in the Temple to pick a fight. It was the Jews from Asia that started the whole thing. Therefore, *they* should be present to make their case (24:19), or the Jews who are present should declare what wrong Paul had done when he spoke of the resurrection of the dead in front of the Sanhedrin.

Felix knows about the Way, the Nazarene sect, Jesus-wish followers of Jesus, and His messianic Jewish community. So, how would Felix, a former Roman slave sent to the backwater province of Judea, know about the Way more than one would expect from a typical Roman governor? Likely because of "his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish" A-ha!

Felix adjourns the hearing until the commander, Lysias, who handled Paul's situation, arrives to give his testimony. Felix needs more than just a "he said, he said" back-and-forth testimony. Meanwhile, since Felix and Drusilla are familiar with the Way but want more insight into the relatively new sect of Judaism, they invite Paul to a private audience to talk about faith in Jesus (24:24). But when the topic moves toward sin and righteousness and judgment, the reputedly corrupt Felix gets uncomfortable and dismisses Paul (24:25) while at the same time, Felix hopes Paul slips him a little moolah

as a bribe to let him off the hook. He keeps inviting Paul for “conversation” to give him ample opportunities to make it worth Felix’s while.

Two years later, Paul is still in custody! But Felix’s term is up, and he leaves Paul in prison as a parting gift to the non-believing Jews.

INSIGHT

Paul isn’t afraid to stand for truth and call out people for their unrighteousness, regardless of their station in life. One key is maintaining a clear conscience so that no one has anything apart from faithfulness to Jesus to pin on you. As for standing up for Jesus as Paul did, let’s follow his example of freely acknowledging Jesus for who He is (24:14) and follow Peter’s advice to “regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.” (1 Peter 3:15). Then, like Paul, leave the results in the Lord’s hands no matter where it takes you.

November 19 : Scriptures Acts 25-28

SUMMARY

And here we arrive at the last reading in Acts. Congratulations! Chapter 25 picks up with Porcius Festus' arrival in Judea to assume the governorship after Gov. Felix's departure. As the new governor, it makes sense for Festus to travel to Jerusalem, Judea's central city. Once he arrives, he's immediately met by a contingent of leaders who ask him to try Paul in Jerusalem. Of course, they're not interested in putting Paul on trial, only ambushing and killing him along the way. Festus wisely tells them they can send their representatives to Caesarea if they want to see Paul prosecuted (25:5), which happens a little over a week later.

Again, the Jewish leaders present charges that can't be proved, and again, Paul states that he has not done anything wrong regarding the Jewish people, the Temple, or Caesar. Of course, the new governor wants to kiss up to Judea's leadership, so he asks Paul if he wants to face charges in Jerusalem. Yeah, right, and Paul can guess what will happen to him there. He knows he has a much better chance in Rome than in the hornets' nest of Jerusalem. Therefore, Paul appeals to Caesar's court (25:11), which was the right of every Roman citizen since it was made a Roman law in 509 B.C. (Stern, JNTC).

It's interesting how the Lord's plans and our desires often meet. Jesus had told Paul that he would go to Rome (Acts 23:11), and Paul also wanted to go there (Romans 1:8-15). That makes sense since Rome was the center of the Gentile world then. A contingent of Jews from Rome witnessed the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Shavuot/Pentecost and was saved (Acts 2:10). It would be right in line for an emissary (an apostle) from the mother congregation in Jerusalem to have their representative make it to Rome to strengthen the Lord's work among them.

But before Paul departs for Rome, the Lord arranges another hearing with Festus, Herod Agrippa II, and his sister, Bernice (25:13). Herod Agrippa II was the last of the Herodian kings, and his kingdom covered most of Judea by the time of this incident. Therefore, it was clever of Festus to invite Agrippa II to hear Paul's case since the king's domain involved Jerusalem and the Temple, including choosing who the High Priest would be to serve in the Temple. Judging Paul's case would help strengthen Agrippa's relationship with the Jewish authorities.

But don't get any idea that Herod Agrippa II was godly. He and he and his sister, Bernice, had a rather, shall we say, "interesting" relationship. According to David Stern, "Bernice was Agrippa's sister, so their relationship was incestuous. Felix's wife, Drusilla, was (the)

sister of both. Bernice was later mistress of two emperors, Vespasian and (his son) Titus, and almost became Empress. Obviously, she had long since given up whatever vestiges of Jewish religion and morals she might have once had." Can you say, "Soap opera?" Yuck.

Festus talks to Agrippa II about the prisoner Felix left behind, a Jew named Paul, who had a dispute with the Jewish leaders. Festus claims he saw no crimes committed and it was about religious matters and some dead guy Paul claimed was alive. But rather than go to Jerusalem, the prisoner exercised his right to be heard in Rome. Since the Herodians had ruled Judea from before Jesus was born to the present time, Agrippa II had no doubt heard of Jesus and the Way and all the trouble that had swirled around this messianic sect of Judaism. Just as Agrippa II's great-uncle, Herod Antipas, was interested in talking to Jesus, Agrippa II now wants to hear from Jesus' disciple, Paul (25:22). The hearing commences the next day with much pomp and circumstance and many leaders in attendance. Festus wants help from King Agrippa II to determine what charges should accompany Paul to his trial in Rome (25:26-27).

Paul begins his defense before the august crowd in chapter 26. This event is not a formal trial since that's going to take place when he eventually appears before the court in Rome. Paul is defending his life as a Jew, a Pharisee, and a witness to Jesus' resurrection. He starts by acknowledging that King Agrippa II is "very knowledgeable about all the Jewish customs and controversies" (26:3). Therefore, the king would know Paul is no slouch. The Apostle won't have to give a lot of backstory as he speaks.

Paul continues his bona fides as a stringent Pharisee, as those in Jerusalem could attest to if they would. The matter at hand is a debate about the resurrection of the dead, which the Pharisee sect freely recognizes in scripture and within God's purview. Paul recounts that he went about zealously persecuting the Way as a heretical sect, and as he did so, the risen Jesus appeared to him on the Damascus road. At this point, you may notice that Paul's account has some differences between what's been recorded in chapters 9:3-19 and 22:5-16. Is Paul embellishing his story? I don't think so. What he tells are different facets of the same encounter. Some see Paul emphasizing certain aspects of it according to whom he's speaking. Paul is sharing his testimony with the Judean ruling class – a king, a governor, military commanders, and prominent men of the city (25:23), likely Jew and Gentile, since Caesarea was an important port for travel and trade. Therefore, Paul speaks as a Jew who grew up in a Gentile Roman city and was highly educated among the Jewish academics in Jerusalem.

Paul segues from his encounter with Jesus to the Lord's commission as His servant and witness (26:16). He's only doing what Jesus told him to do. Furthermore, Paul relates Jesus said to him that his primary mission is to reach the Gentiles with the news of God's salvation, "to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a share among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (26:18). BAM! Paul has just performed his commission by speaking these words to Agrippa, Festus, and all the others in attendance.

As Paul was obedient to Jesus' commission, he received significant pushback from his fellow Jews. Because he was preaching "that they should repent and turn to God, and do works worthy of repentance" (26:20), the Jewish authorities tried to seize him in the Temple and kill him. Still, Jesus' words were proven true, "I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles" (26:17). So here Paul stands, saying the same things that Moses and the prophets said would happen, that 1) Israel's Messiah would suffer, i.e., die, 2) would rise from the dead, 3) and that Jesus would bring this revelation to the world, to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles (26:22-23).

It seems Paul's talk of Jesus' resurrection and supernatural apparitions sending him on a regional speaking tour strikes Festus as insane, and he says so. But Paul respectfully disagrees. His account may sound crazy to a Gentile like Festus, but to someone steeped in Judea's Jewish history and culture, not so much. King Agrippa knows all this because his whole family knows of Jesus, His crucifixion, the "rumor" of His resurrection, and the increasing number of Jesus' followers. Paul even presses the king on what he says, "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you believe" (26:27). But the king brushes him off as Paul expresses his desire that everyone become Jesus' followers.

The hearing comes to a close with Agrippa's and Festus' admission among themselves that there are no charges that would stick against Paul, and he would have been good to go had he not made a formal appeal to Rome. So, off to Rome Paul goes.

Chapter 27 is about Paul's famous shipwreck on his way to Rome. This shipwreck was one of three Paul references in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 11:25). Once again, it would be good to pull up a map online or check the back of your Bible for Paul's final journey to Rome.

The ship sets sail north from Caesarea to Sidon. From there, Paul and the crew sail west along Asia Minor's southern coast, take a slight jog around Crete and stops on the south side. As they're about to leave Fair Havens on Crete, Paul warns the crew that the weather is getting sketchy since it is already Autumn and just past the Day of Atonement (Yom

Kippur, October). He senses (likely from the Holy Spirit) that the voyage will end in disaster. But all the ship needs to do is make a little journey from the south side of the island to a more favorable harbor (Phoenix) in which to winter (27:12). It's only a little way. What could possibly go wrong?

Just about everything. Thinking that a gentle wind from the south would help them travel northwest, they embark on their voyage. Not long after the ship sets sail, the wind shifts and the ship is struck by a wind out of the northeast called a *tuphonikos*, a typhoon, and the captain can't keep to the shores of Crete to his east. The typhoon drives them west, out to sea. First, the crew warps ropes under the ship to reinforce the hull. Then the captain drops the drift anchor, a large stone with a hole drilled in the top, to help slow the boat as the wind drives it along. To keep their boat buoyant, the crew throws the cargo and gear overboard and hopes for the best (27:18-19). Because the storm is so intense and dark, everybody loses track of the days as the wind and waves rock them.

Some days after the storm hit, the crew is famished and exhausted from living in darkness and fear, fighting against the gale. Paul does not condemn the captain and crew but encourages them. Once again, Paul gets a divine communicate in the form of an angel who tells him it's His Lord's plan for Paul to arrive safely in Rome. That's the good news. The *great* news is that Jesus will protect the crew. All they need to do is find a place to run aground, which is difficult in dark and stormy weather.

The sailors detect that they are approaching land two weeks after the storm began. Their assumption is the very real risk of striking underwater rocks close to shore, grinding up the hull as the waves tear the ship apart. Paul calls the whole crew for a meal to gain strength and face what's coming. Paul again encourages them that God is in control, has granted them their lives, and that they must stay with the ship until it's necessary to abandon it (27:33-34). I love this part – even amid a great storm and what looks like their impending doom, Paul has peace through God's word. He focuses everyone, all 276 crew members, on the God who saves (27:35-38).

And saves them, God does! Light finally begins to break at dawn on the fourteenth day, and they spot a harbor they can safely sail into and run aground the ship. So, they cut the drag anchors and hoist the sail to maximize the wind for speed. But they hit a sandbar and lodge fast.

Growing up on a lake with sandbars, I know this all too well. When I boated out from our family home's dock, my brother and I would have to hang to the right and loop around a sandbar with submerged rocks that lay straight out from the shoreline. If we

misjudged our course, the engine prop would strike the sand and stop, but the engine would continue to turn the shaft, breaking a protective pin called the shear pin. The shear pin ensured the engine and drive components wouldn't be wrecked by the sudden stop. However, we'd still be dead in the water unless we were smart enough to have previously loaded the oars for the strenuous workout back home.

As Paul's ship is hopelessly caught and the waves begin tearing apart the stern, it's every man for himself. Paul's centurion escort prevented all the prisoners from being killed to avoid their escape. Every person makes it to shore using anything they can find for flotation.

Imagine the testimony about the truth of God's word and His protective power when all crew members and passengers count themselves and find, true to Paul's encouragement, that not one man was lost!

In chapter 28, the castaways find out they've shipwrecked on the island of Malta, which lies just south of Sicily. Look at that! Despite the storm, the Lord made sure that Paul was still on course, and Rome was just a short sail away from Sicily. The locals offer hospitality to the shipwrecked men. Again, God testifies about Himself when He allows a viper to bite Paul, which the Apostle just shakes off into the fire. When I read this, I always have a funny picture in my mind as I see the Maltese citizens leaning forward to see if Paul will swell up and die (28:6). When he doesn't, that grabs the islanders' attention. The witnesses change their minds from thinking Paul could have been a murderer to being a god. No, he wasn't a god. Paul served a mighty God, and God's power keeps flowin'!

God blesses the Maltese people starting with Publius, a prominent leader. The Lord heals Publius' father and then the sick and infirm throughout the island who were brought to Paul (28:8-9). Three months later, the seas are safe for passage after the winter season ends. Paul sets sail with his entourage and his centurion guard. When they come to Puteoli on the shores of Italy, a little over 50 miles from Rome, they encounter fellow believers. After seven days, Paul travels on and finally reaches Rome as Jesus promised and Paul so long desired (28:14)! In Rome, Paul is afforded a house to stay in as his low-security jail with his guard. This imprisonment is from A.D. 60-62.

Since Paul can't go to the synagogue, he summons the leaders of the Roman Jewish community to explain his situation and why such an esteemed rabbi from Jerusalem would be facing trial in Rome. Paul reassures them that he's not a heretical Jew even though he's a follower of Jesus (28:20). It's Jewish theology to believe in the resurrection of the dead. News about Paul hasn't reached the Roman Jews, and all they know about

is the growing Jewish sect called the Way. They invite Paul to speak with them about it since “people everywhere are speaking against this sect” (28:22). News about Jesus and His followers has spread from the backwater province of Judea throughout the Roman empire.

So, Paul has a grand meeting with the Roman Jewish leaders “from dawn to dusk,” explaining everything about the kingdom of God and how Jesus and His Way are the new way to be a part of God’s kingdom. He uses Moses and the Prophets to explain and prove his position; some accepted and believed while others didn’t. Of those who refused to believe, Paul quotes Isaiah 6:9-10 where God attests to Israel’s spiritual stubbornness that continues to Paul’s day. “Since Paul said this in response to those who ‘did not believe’ [vs. 24] what he was saying about Jesus, his citation of Isaiah clearly implied that the coming of Jesus Christ and His rejection by the Jews were foretold in the OT” (HCSB).

Because of the Roman Jewish community’s partial rejection of his message, Paul commits the remainder of his life and ministry to reach the Gentiles with the Good News of Jesus Christ (28:28).

The book of Acts ends with Paul preaching and teaching without hindrance for two years to anyone who would come to listen to him. So, what happened to Paul after this? Church history records that Paul was beheaded during Nero’s persecution of Jesus’ followers around A.D. 54 or 65. However, some accounts say Paul was released for a time, rearrested, and then executed. We know that Luke was with Paul during this time, and curiously, Luke doesn’t end the book of Acts with the final events of Paul’s life. This fact leads many to conclude that Acts was written before Paul was executed or Luke decided to end his account on a positive note of the Gospel’s spread from the heart of the Roman empire throughout its domain. I like how my Study Bible words it, “Paul’s preaching day and night in the seat of the pagan Roman Empire ensured that Christianity would become an international phenomenon, not just a regional religious anomaly.” I disagree a bit. Jesus, through Paul, ensured knowledge of Israel’s God would reach the Gentile world to let as many as possible know Who their Creator is and that He loves them enough to sacrifice everything to bring them home to Him.

INSIGHT

“So take courage, men, because I believe God that it will be just the way it was told to me. But we have to run aground on some island” (Acts 27:25-26). Life is full of terrible storms, and God tells us they’re coming, “But humans are born for trouble as surely as sparks fly upward.” (Job 5:7). God saves us, yes, but we still have to go through turbulence and trouble.

Amid terrible storms of life, it may seem the Lord is far away. King David felt that way, "Lord, why do you stand so far away? Why do you hide in times of trouble? (Psalm 10:1). But David also knew that though God felt so far away during the storm, He was indeed with His servant and would rescue him, "The Lord is a refuge for the persecuted, a refuge in times of trouble (Psalm 9:9), and "This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him and saved him from all his troubles" (Psalm 34:6).

Does this mean we'll come through every storm unscathed? No. Our storm scars will accompany us until we reach our final destination, and we go to meet the Lord. The idea of reaching our final destination ties in with Paul's journey to Rome.

Did you notice that Paul's storm, traumatic as it was, didn't hinder Paul's arrival in Rome? *God was in control the whole time, and the winds that threatened Paul and everyone on board actually brought Paul toward his destination.* Not every storm in life drives us backward or away from our destination. Sometimes the storm *is* the path to our destination.

We can fear the storm or turn our face into the wind and ride it out. Trust God.

November 20 : Scriptures Romans 1-3

SUMMARY

Speaking of Jews from Rome, we come to Paul's letter to the Roman believers (A.D. 57) with its Jewish and Gentile background. From here on, when I refer to Christians, please understand that the context of the Early Church is a Jewish Christian movement with Gentiles joining the growing messianic community. That means Gentiles were learning to adapt to the Jewish culture and messianic Judaism into which they were immersed – literally and figuratively.

Many Bible scholars consider Paul's letter to the Roman Christians to be his epic treatise on salvation, which is most certainly true. Chapters 1-8 are awash with powerful truths regarding humanity's fall and depravity, God's grace and way of salvation, and how to live a life with Him by His indwelling Holy Spirit to help us. Quite amazing!

However, in chapters 9-11, Paul shifts his focus to the nation of Israel and the Jewish people. Weirdly, this has stumped many Christians. So much so they label these three chapters as "Paul's Parentheses" because he picks up with practical guidelines and fatherly advice in chapters 12-16. So, what gives? What is Paul getting at?

It's simple when you consider the Roman Church, and I hesitate to use the word "church" because of the Gentile veneer that's grown up around the term. Remember that the "Roman" messianic believers came from the Jews from Rome who were visiting Jerusalem on Shavuot, the Day of Pentecost, 50 days after Jesus' resurrection and 10 days after His ascension, when the New Covenant kingdom was launched with the Holy Spirit's arrival (Acts 2). These newly-reborn believers returned home to their Roman synagogues and shared about Israel's Messiah, Jesus. As more Jews and God-fearing Gentiles received the Gospel, the Jewish messianic community grew, with Gentiles joining in.

I found an excellent synopsis of the context for Paul's letter. Here are some excerpts and the link. I've also downloaded the whole article if the link goes dead. (Contact HighBeamMinistry.com to get it).

"The earliest house churches in Rome would have been primarily Jewish and would have culturally felt Jewish, but in A.D. 49 the Roman Emperor Claudius kicked the Jews out of Rome. [confirmed by Acts 8:1-2] Jewish Christians, of course, would have been expelled along with the rest of the Jews. [see note #2] During the five years between Claudius's edict (A.D. 49) and his death (A.D. 54) when the edict lapsed and Jews started to return,

the composition and self-understanding of the house churches in Rome would have shifted considerably. Paul's letter to the Romans would have arrived in Rome somewhere around A.D. 57, during the period when Jews were still trickling back into Rome." (biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2012/something-about-the-book-of-romans-that-will-help-you-really-get-it).

So, what did the returning messianic Jews find when they arrived home? "The most obvious effect is that the persons who comprised the churches would have been substantially altered. The Gentiles who remained would have begun meeting together without Jewish leadership and input, and those they reached with the good news of Christ during the intervening five years would have been Gentiles. When Jewish Christians began returning five years later, they would have encountered house churches composed of more Gentiles than Jews. The edict to expel Jews also would have pushed the returning non-Christian Jewish community and the already-present house churches to self-define in relation to one another. Before the edict, the ruling Romans would have viewed Christians as a subset of Judaism—the churches, after all, were socialized like Jewish groups. But after the edict and the changing socialization of the groups into Gentile-ish communities, the process of viewing Jews and Christians as separate groups would have sped up (both as viewed from the inside [emic perspective] and as viewed from the outside [etic perspective]). Note that by A.D. 64—only seven or so years after Paul's letter arrived, this process would have been complete. Paul's letter arrived while this process of changing self-identification was taking place. Jewish Christians coming back to Rome had to struggle with the question of whether they were primarily Jewish or whether they were primarily Christian (which would have felt increasingly like a Gentile thing to them)" (Ibid.).

Previously, the Gentiles were faced with joining a community whose culture and customs were foreign to them. Now, it was the returning Jews whose messianic Jewish community had changed, and the Gentilized culture and customs were new to them. This back-and-forth struggle with identity and faith is the context in which Paul is writing.

You can tell how strongly this separation occurred between the 1st c. increasingly Gentilized messianic Jewish movement and the Jewish non-believing community by how the notion of the Church's Jewish background is so foreign to today's Christians and, sadly, repulsive if those Christians are antisemitic. But that's the truth.

I like what the author of the above article says about the book of Romans and Paul. "If this reconstruction is correct—and it does seem to be where the external historical evidence leads us—then we should expect to encounter evidence within the book of

Romans that questions of self-identification of Jewish and Gentile Christians were in Paul's mind as he wrote the letter... *One of Paul's teaching strategies in his letter to the Romans is to use questions (85 at my count) to move along his argument and to help his readers think hard about what he's writing...* As you keep the historical setting in mind, you'll become a much better reader of Paul's letter to the Romans " (Ibid., italics author).

The book is divided into two sections per David Stern (JNTC). "1) What the Gospel is: what God has done already and what He will yet do (1:18-11:36). 2) What believers should do because of what God has done. Ethical behavior and right heart attitudes (12:1-15:33)." Within those two sections, Paul talks about how A) Everyone (Jew and Gentile) is guilty in God's sight, B) The guilty are forgiven and made right with God if they trust in Jesus' atoning sacrificial death. 3) Being united with Jesus helps believers lead increasingly righteous lives, pleasing God, with eternal life to follow death. 4) Believers can trust God to keep His promises to them. Why? Because even though Israel has failed, God will help them ultimately succeed because of His promises. Individual Jews and the Jewish nation will come to the Lord Jesus. Thus 'all Israel will be saved.'"

So, let's begin!

Paul introduces himself and Jesus. He is Jesus' servant, called to be His emissary to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles. Jesus is David's son (according to the flesh) and God's Son (according to the Spirit) (1:1-5). Paul has longed to meet with the Roman believers he's heard so much about and for whom he's so often prayed (1:8-10). His heart desires to meet with them to encourage them in their faith and to use his spiritual gifts to do so. Remember, God has been doing great works through Paul! (Acts 28:8-9).

We reach Paul's theme in Romans 1:16-17 – Jesus the Messiah can save any person, Jew or Gentile, if they trust that Jesus' atoning death is His Father's way to eternal life and the power to be saved comes from hearing and receiving the Gospel. That's it. The Gospel in a nutshell. Next, Paul begins his explanation of how and why this works.

The rest of chapter 1 is the downward-slide-because-all-humanity-has-turned-away-from-God face slap. What is God's wrath? It's God's punishment for rebelling against Him. Traitors, rebels, and insurrectionists are executed because they try to overthrow the king and country. Fine. If they don't want to be part of the king's domain, the king will oblige them and make sure they never do it again. Until the king's wrath falls (the execution), all the rebels are on death row. They are dead people walking.

Why are they on death row? What did they do to deserve the death penalty? "By their unrighteousness (they) suppress the truth," meaning they see the truth about God, that He exists and who He is, and they deliberately deny and reject Him (1:18-19). Too bad for them because all the evidence anyone needs can be clearly seen and understood through God's creation. A painting's existence proves the artist exists, and the painting itself reveals the artist's characteristics. God's creation reveals everything anyone needs to prove God exists and what He's like (1:20).

But humanity refused to admit there was an artist that created the painting. In a fit of self-delusion, they deny the obvious conclusion. They looked at the painting, assumed other artists did the work and began to sing their imaginary artists' praises. What an insult to the real Artist, attributing His person, genius, and work to others *who didn't even exist!* (1:21-23). In idolatry terms, people deliberately turned from their Creator, whom they couldn't see, and made gods out of what they could see, thinking they were so clever by doing so (idiots that they were and still are). Isn't it interesting that many people, thinking they are so smart, deny God's obvious-by-nature existence and worship the environment, the planet, and "climate change" today? Same thing.

Why do people do this? Because if they admit there's a God, they know they're accountable to Him and must live His way. By creating their own god, they can be "spiritual" without any accountability whatsoever. They can follow any of their desires and claim their god allows it. "What's that, Baal? I can have sex with anyone I want in any number or manner? Okay. If you say so!"

So, Paul, what did God do for those who turned their back on Him? He let them go their way (1:24), and go their way, they did (1:25)! They turned away from the truth and embraced the lie.

When people let go of the anchor that truth is, they go adrift in the ocean of lies. God's first truth besides His existence was making men and women and creating the institution of marriage. Baseline truth. As soon as humanity turned from God, sexual desires became unleashed. Homosexuality is a direct slap in God's face and a sign of a perverted mind. But lest you think this is an "anti-LGBTQANDANYTHINGELSEPEOPLECANCOMEUPWITH" screed, it's not. Homosexuality is just one of the symptoms, albeit obvious and flagrant. Consider Paul's list of sins in 1:29-31. Yup. Our pet sins are in the same basket as homosexuality and just as fit for judgment. Those sins (sin in general) puts us on God's death row for treason – turning our back on the king and rebelling against the law of His land. The horrible thing

is that humanity knows it does wrong and continues sinning, even encouraging others to join them in their sin (1:32)!

Paul moves on in chapter 2 about the result of our sin – judgment. No one has an excuse, and God’s truth prevails. Denying it doesn’t make it go away. We’re all under judgment, even if we plead ignorance. Therefore, we shouldn’t be pointing fingers condemning others because we have three more pointing back at us along with God’s finger (2:1-3). The reason we haven’t experienced God’s wrath right after sinning is God’s mercy giving us a chance to repent (2:4).

Again, I want to emphasize that when the scriptures say we’re “under God’s wrath” (2:5), it means we’re under God’s judgment, meaning we already stand judged for our sins and are guilty. This judgment is God’s death row for unsaved people. We haven’t experienced God’s wrath – the total and permanent expulsion from His presence in torment for all eternity which will come on a specific day (2:5). That’s the actual execution for our crimes of treason and rebellion. And this isn’t for certain people only. It’s for all people, whether Jewish or Gentile. See? This is Paul speaking to the Roman Christians as a body of believers, Jews and Gentiles as one community (2:9-10).

Because Paul sets up a progressive argument on why and how people are saved regardless of their Jewish or Gentile background, it seems clear that the earlier debates about following the Torah/Law and customs were again erupting to the surface. These disagreements are why Paul so thoroughly nails down the salvation issue as it applies to all people.

And here we come to the arguments in 2:11-29! Long story short, Paul addresses the argument that would naturally come from a Jew. “But I follow God’s Torah! Surely that shows I’m one of His people and thus in His kingdom!” “Fine,” says Paul, “but do you break God’s Law?” (2:17-24). But then, a Jew might reply, “But I’m circumcised, the sign that I’m descended from Abraham, and that makes me one of God’s people. God made an eternal covenant with Abraham. Therefore, I’m in!” Paul responds that circumcision doesn’t matter if that person doesn’t follow God’s Law (2:25). “Just ‘cause ya got yer ticket punched doesn’t mean you get to ride the salvation train,” is what Paul is saying. *Doing things entirely God’s way is what matters; for Jews, circumcision is only a part of that.* Circumcision was a confirmation sign that God gave to Abraham to “mark” Abraham’s proven trust and obedience to God and to remind Abe to stay that way.

What Paul is getting at is salvation is needed because *all* people have sinned against God (speaking to all of you Roman Jewish and Gentile believers), and a simple act

(circumcision) doesn't make things right with God, only obeying Him 100%. If a Gentile (uncircumcision) keeps God's Law completely, "will not his uncircumcision be counted as circumcision?" (2:26). In other words, God approves of the person who keeps His Law, even if they're a Gentile, not the person who bears the marks of trust and obedience but doesn't do so, evidenced by breaking His Torah (2:27). "A person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart—by the Spirit, not the letter" (2:29). What Paul refers to is God's New Covenant process (Jeremiah 31:31) by which the Holy Spirit *causes* our hearts to become responsive to God (remove a dead heart of stone and replace with a living heart of flesh, Ezekiel 36:26), willing and able to follow His ways (Jeremiah 31:33). This process is known as the Lord "circumcising our hearts," removing the "barrier" that prevents us from responding to God. God's person is the one who follows the Lord's ways according to the Spirit, not by commands alone.

After taking down the Jewish believers a peg, Paul now stands up for his brethren. In chapter 3, Paul turns the argument around. If following the Torah and circumcision don't secure salvation, then what advantage do the Roman Jewish Christians have (because at this point, the Gentile Roman Christians might be looking at the Jewish believers and saying, "So there!")?

The Jews have every benefit at the start, for they were the first to receive God's word, O Gentiles. They were chosen first to receive God's revelation. However, not all of them responded to God's words as they should have. But that doesn't do away with God or His Word. "The veracity (truth) of God's word does not depend on who believes it; truth stands by itself" (Stern, JNTC).

Paul does something really cool. Like an accomplished rabbi, he quotes 1 verse to draw his readers' attention to an entire portion of scripture (3:4, from Psalm 51:4). What do we find in Psalm 51? David's plea that the New Covenant answers, "God, *create a clean heart for me and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*" (Psalm 51:10, italics author).

But someone might argue based on 3:3-4, "Hey, if my sinfulness highlights God's righteousness, then why am I getting punished?" Paul's answer? The Hebrew sense, per David Stern, is, "A curse on that argument!" (JNTC). So, are the Jews better off for having God's word than the Gentiles? Not entirely. They have been truly blessed, but Paul has already said all people have sinned against God and stand judged. To prove his point, Paul quotes several uncomfortable scriptures. The worst part? God's word is what indicts us for our sins. By having the Torah/Law that sets the standard for what is right, the Jewish people are terrifyingly accountable for knowing the truth more directly than the

Gentiles “because the knowledge of sin comes through the law” (3:20). Gulp. That’s some bad news.

But there’s Good News! There’s a way to make people right with God apart from the Torah but testified to by the Torah and the Prophets (meaning all of God’s word). How? “Faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (3:22). God worked it out so that Jews, who are under the Torah and its demands, can receive God’s gracious offer through trusting Jesus and the Gentiles, who are not under the Torah and its demand for justice for sin, can do the same. *Jesus is the payment of sin for those under and outside God’s Law to which all people are accountable.* All people sin (3:23). God demands death for sin. Jesus took the death we deserve (3:25). We’re free to go because punishing one crime, our sins, twice is unjust. God’s plan of a death substitution satisfies His justice and provides a way to clear our heavenly court record.

Paul goes back to the Jew’s boast in 2:17-21. Can they boast because they have the law? Nope. Because the law doesn’t save them from sin, it only points out that they *are* sinners. It can’t save the Gentiles because they don’t know it and can’t live up to it, just like the Jews can’t. You can only be right with God if you keep the entire Torah/Law without ever breaking one command – ever. Since God is God of all people, Jew or Gentile, there needs to be one way back to Him that works for both parties (3:30). That way is the way of faith, i.e., trusting that Jesus’ sacrifice is for you because the Father said so.

Finally, does having faith mean the Torah/Law is nothing? To the contrary! The whole point of the New Covenant is to make us *willing and able* to follow God’s commands *to walk out the righteousness He graciously gives us.*

INSIGHT

“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you because the news of your faith is being reported in all the world” (1:8). Imagine that! Within 35 years, the Good News of God’s kingdom has spread throughout the known Roman world. Not entirely, but so much so that it impacted many cultures and people through the Roman Empire’s influence. Do you think it was by accident that our Heavenly Father planted the Gospel seed in the seedbed of the most extensive empire of human history up to that point?

Jesus spoke prophetically when He used the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven (Luke 18:13-21). You can’t stop God’s kingdom from growing once it starts (like a sprouted mustard seed), and it will ultimately spread to the ends of the earth (like yeast through dough).

The evil Roman emperors tried to snuff out Christianity through repeated waves of persecution only to have it spread even more; Nero (37-68, one of the worst!), Vespasian (69-79), Trajan (98-117), Hadrian (117-138), Marcus Aurelius (161-180), Maximinus the Thracian (235-238), Decius (249-251), Valerian (253-260), Diocletian (284-305, the "Great Persecution"), and Constantius and Galerius (early 4th century, rulers of the Western and Eastern Roman Empires).

Today, evil governments try to do the same thing to no avail. Christianity grows best under persecution. Take heart! Jesus said the Gospel would spread throughout the whole world, and then the End would come. He will return, and His Father's Kingdom will rule all the kingdoms of the earth with love and grace.

November 21 : Scriptures Romans 4-6

SUMMARY

So what do the Roman Jewish and Gentile believers have so far from Paul? According to the outline in my Study Bible (and yes, everyone should get a solid study Bible), Paul has established that Gentiles and Jews are equally guilty before the Lord. Why? For denying the truth of and about God, turning their backs on Him, and pursuing their own ways. "There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away; all alike have become worthless. There is no one who does what is good, not even one" (3:10-12).

For the Jews, following the Torah/Law can't save them because even though it is the standard of right and wrong, no one can ever follow it 100% throughout their entire life. Well, except God Himself (Jesus) because He *is* the standard and can't change or contradict Himself. The Jews can't rely on circumcision because 1) that's the sign of their physical lineage from Abraham, and 2) circumcision was commanded by God to Abraham as a sign of his proven faithfulness to God. If someone is circumcised and acts unfaithful to God, their circumcision means nothing. If someone isn't circumcised (a Gentile man) yet follows God's ways, then they're like the O.G. (Original Gentile) follower of God, Abraham, by whose trust in God the Lord declared righteous.

So really, neither side in the Roman Christian community has anything to boast about, "For all have sinned and fall short of the[ax] glory of God" (3:23). But there's hope, "The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, since there is no distinction; they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (3:24). The circumcised (the Jew) and the uncircumcised (the Gentile) return to God through the same door. Period.

In chapter 4, Paul highlights the foundation for how God justifies His people. Spoiler alert! It's always been the same in both the Older Covenant and the New Covenant. But first, what is justification? The following is a quote from my Torah class, *Vayikra* (Leviticus 1):

"To be justified is to be *made* righteous. It is a divine act where God declares the sinner to be innocent of his sins. It is not that the sinner is now sinless, but that he is "declared" sinless. This justification is based on the shed blood of Jesus, "...having now been justified by His blood..." (Romans 5:9). When God sees the Christian, He sees him through the sacrifice of Jesus and "sees" him without sin. This declaration of innocence is not without cost for it required the satisfaction of God's Law, "...without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness," (Hebrews

9:22). By the sacrifice of Jesus, in the "one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men," (Romans 5:18, NASB). *In justification, the justice of God fell upon Himself--Jesus.* We receive mercy--we are not judged according to our sins. And grace is shed upon us--we receive eternal life. This justification is a gift of grace (Romans 3:24), by faith (Romans 3:28) because Jesus bore our guilt (Isaiah 53:12)." (carm.org/dictionary.htm, italics author).

In other words, God took His own punishment set for us so we could be declared innocent of the charge. When it comes to sin and punishment, there is no double jeopardy. The crime of sin can't be punished twice. And if a court allows a man who hasn't committed a murder to be executed for a convicted murderer, then the crime has been paid for, and the convicted murderer is declared absolved of all charges and *regarded* as innocent of the crime. But don't forget, *he did commit the crime, and he's declared innocent because the punishment has already been dished out.* Justified doesn't mean, as many believe, "just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned." It means "I-did-sin-but-am-now-declared-innocent." There's no longer any basis for guilt or accusation. Gone.

That's the way it is with God's gracious justification. Because of His mercy, we're declared as right with Him as His Son is. Let this blow your mind. If you're saved, you're as right with God as He Himself is. Through Jesus' salvation, we can't get any "righter" with our Heavenly Father. Jesus took all saved persons' punishments for sin and still comes out right with His Father because He was perfect, and through His death, Jesus put to death sin and death.

BOOM!

Okay, back to chapter 4. The issue of *how* people are justified and declared right with God is still on the table. Paul starts where it all began – with Abraham. Did Abraham earn his "rightness" with God by doing anything? Nope. Abraham simply believed God when He made the awesome promise to him in Genesis 15:5-6, "He (God) took him (Abraham) outside and said, "Look at the sky and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then He said to him, "Your offspring will be that numerous." Abram *believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness.*" Bada-bing. Abraham was declared righteous by trusting God's word to him. As Paul says, "But to the one who does not work, but believes on him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited for righteousness" (4:5). What a blessing that is, as King David knows. To be forgiven by God for sin? Indescribably wonderful (4:7-8)!

But is Abraham's justification by trusting God only for his physical descendants, the Jewish people (4:9)? Nope. Because everyone can believe in and trust God, regardless of lineage. Paul reinforces his argument by pointing out that circumcision came *before* the Torah/Law was given. Therefore, Abraham wasn't even a "Jew" by national standards. Though Abraham was the father of the Jewish people, at first, he was a Gentile made righteous by God's grace who was later made into a family who would bring forth the One who would make it possible for all people to come to God whether they would be Abraham's physical or spiritual descendants (4:11-12).

God's declaration that people are right with Him didn't come through the Torah/Law. The Torah/Law shows the standard to be right with God. Every person fails miserably (4:15). Therefore, the Torah/Law shows us we *need* to trust God's way of being made right with Him apart from the Torah/Law and that makes it possible for both Jew and Gentile to be saved (4:16). Abraham trusted God in the face of *impossible* circumstances – his very elderly body (100 years old!), and Sarah's menopausal (dead) reproductive system (4:19). Why? "he was fully convinced that what God had promised, he was also able to do" (4:21). That's the point when God declared Abraham right with Him – "Yup. That's my boy!" (4:22). As it was for Abraham, so it can be with everyone – Jew or Gentile. "Got that, Romans Christians?" implies Paul.

But justification doesn't stand alone. Justification brings along its friend, reconciliation. What's reconciliation? "*Reconciliation is changing for the better a relationship between two or more persons.* Theologically it refers to *the change of relationship between God and man.* We are naturally children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3), and are at enmity (we fight) with God (Ephesians 2:11-15); but, "...we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son..." (Romans 5:10). Because of the death of Jesus, *the Christian's relationship with God is changed for the better. We are now able to have fellowship with Him (1 John 1:3) whereas before we could not.* So, we are reconciled to Him (Romans 5:10-11)" (Ibid., italics author).

In chapter 5, God declares us as right with Him and lets us know there's also peace between us and we have access to Him (5:1-2). And even though we experience significant difficulties in life, as His reborn people, we can grow and remain sure of the hope He's given us through His love for us (5:3-5). How do we know our Heavenly Father loves us? Because Jesus died for us even though He had every reason not to do so (5:6). Why die for your enemy? Let death put them out of your misery. But not so with our Father who loves us. I know what it's like to be hated by my child. Imagine having billions of children who *all* hate you and turn away from you. Yet, our Heavenly Father wants every single one of us home and safe in His loving arms. The scope of this is too great for me to comprehend! *Selah.*

Paul continues. If we're justified by Jesus' punishment ("His blood"), how much more does it prevent us from experiencing the Father's death sentence? The sentence has already been carried out, and it only remains for those who want it by refusing to let Jesus take "the hit" for them. Because we're set free by Jesus' punishment for our sake, we can enjoy the relationship He has with His Father (5:11).

So this part doesn't get too long, let me summarize it better: When Adam and Eve sinned, death entered all creation through the human doorway. God's Law declares what sin is. But even if we don't know His law, we're still guilty of breaking it, for "ignorance of the law is no excuse." But Jesus is the gift that reverses the work of sin and death. Adam's life brought death that affected everyone. Jesus' death brings life to all who want it. Therefore, Jesus' life is more robust, powerful, and effective than the death that sin brought. Adam's sin condemned all people. Jesus' righteousness can release every single person who will come to Him. Our Father revealed His Law to show us how much we need Jesus' sacrificial death on our behalf, so even though it pointed out how hopelessly sinful we are, God's grace through His Son is even more remarkable to the utter overcoming of sin (5:12-21).

Now that we're set free from bondage to sin and our living death, how then should we live? Good question, dear reader. That's what Paul moves on to share about over the following three chapters (6:1-8:39).

Now that we've been declared right with our Heavenly Father, are reconciled to Him, and have God's ongoing forgiveness and peace, it doesn't matter how we live, right? *Wrong!* Now the fun starts, and where the phrase applies, "Jesus died for me. I'll live for Him." Our Heavenly Father frees us from death for a purpose, *so we can live the life Jesus lived*. Paul's point is that once we've died to death, we're no longer compelled nor obligated to live as we did before – sinfully and opposing God. We're supposed to be done with that.

Have you ever heard the phrase, "You're dead to me?" Well, that's what sin is supposed to be for us. Just as a dead person can't respond to stimuli, a born-again Christian is free from having to respond to sin. We're to look sin in the face and say, "You're dead to me." Yes, we all struggle with the remaining habits and stinking thinking that lead us to sin. For that, we have God's word and His Spirit to steer us away from sin as we say over our shoulders, "You're dead to me." But just because we have the potential to respond to sin doesn't mean we have to (6:6-7). Instead, we should focus on our life with Jesus and live just like He does, obediently to His Father, for Jesus cannot respond to sin's temptation. We've been remade to react the same way, but for us, it's a process learned by obedient

repetition. We've been released from sin's power and control, and we're dead to them, even though they rap on our door, asking to enter like some overly enthusiastic vampire. Sin no longer rules over us. God does by His grace (6:12-14), not the Law, i.e., demanding we gain rightness with God by following rules.

Now here's the tricky thing. God's grace forgives our sin, i.e., He refuses to punish us because our sin has already met its punishment, right? Right. So, if God doesn't demand we follow "commands" to be saved, does that allow us to sin after salvation? Nope. "Don't you know that if you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of that one you obey?" (6:16). Since you've been freed from slavery to sin, why act like you haven't? That's not only ridiculous but deadly. "So what fruit was produced then from the things you are now ashamed of? The outcome of those things is death." (6:21). The truth is we have been freed from sin and are now servants of the Most High. Therefore, let's live like it and experience life as He offers it, not the self-inflicted effects of death through sinning (6:22-23).

Paul shows the level ground upon which the Jewish and Gentile Christians stand, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

"Verse 23 is Sha'ul's (Paul's) classic expression of the idea that the only place you can work your way to is hell; no one can work his way to heaven. To reach heaven, one must acknowledge the futility of striving in one's own strength and accept God's free gift of eternal life as being offered in union with Messiah Yeshua (Jesus) our Lord by his grace when one responds with faith or trust" (Stern).

INSIGHT

The example of Abraham's faith in God is what brings us salvation. We're dead in sin. Not one of us can "come alive" spiritually and reconnect with God by our own power. It's impossible! But not for God. Only He can bring us back to life with Him, but that only happens when we become "fully convinced" that His promise of eternal life through Jesus taking our punishment to clear our sin slate is true. "Fully convinced" – that's the point where salvation happens.

Are you fully convinced? Maybe you need to take a moment today to talk to God about it and settle the matter as I did on a cold November Saturday in 1976.