

## ***Acts 21:40-22:29: Second Pilgrimage to Jerusalem VI: Drama I***

### ***Preface:***

Well, friends. We're moving forward in Acts. And we're moving forward into Paul's arrest. We'll talk about it for a couple of weeks, really, and it's a whole big thing, a big dramatic moment, so it could be interesting for us.

We've skipped ahead between last week and this week. Last week we took a second look at Paul's entry into Jerusalem and his reception by the Church's leaders. Today we're paying attention as Paul gives a speech after being arrested.

We skipped the arrest itself, which I'll just briefly catch us up on.

In the end I think we'll see a few different questions we can ask about our readiness to respond to what the world might ask of us. Right now, let's pray.

### ***Prayer:***

### ***Arrested!***

We left Paul taking part, and paying for, a ritualized, ceremonial vow with four others. The Church leaders wanted him to do this to prove to the very Jewish church in

Jerusalem that he wasn't anti-law. The vow ends. But it's just following Pentecost, Shavuot, remember? So there are faithful Jewish people from all over who've gathered in town, and some from back in the province of Asia see him. They know him; they've been antagonizing him throughout the province. So they do it again. They say that Paul's been anti-Torah way out there in Gentile-land, and that he even took a Gentile into the Temple, and defiled it. Luke tells us that the "whole city" goes crazy! And remember: This is Pentecost. Jerusalem is full of the most faithful, dutiful, zealous law-keepers Judaism has. They yank Paul from the Temple, they shut the gates so no one can enter during this incredibly important time, they try to kill him, and--you know what, let me just interrupt, and say, like, if you want to avoid a riot, don't invite Paul over. This is my main anti-riot advice. Anyway: The Roman occupiers get involved, because everything is crazy, and this happens:

***33 The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done. 34 Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. 35 When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. 36 The crowd that followed***

***kept shouting, “Get rid of him!”***

***37 As the soldiers were about to take Paul into the barracks, he asked the commander, “May I say something to you?”***

***“Do you speak Greek?” he replied. 38 “Aren’t you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the wilderness some time ago?”***

***39 Paul answered, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people.”***

So it’s clear that Paul’s arrest is based entirely on gossip, on misunderstanding, and on people who wish him harm manipulating the truth and blatantly lying in order to rouse people to anger and violence. This is Mob Organizing 101. And it’s working.

And Paul is hunkering down in this barracks, and before he asks to speak to the crowd outside, he declares to the commander: “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city.”

Luke uses this moment.

## ***Structure:***

There's a very clear structure to today's passage. It starts with the tail end of Paul's arrest, where Paul himself claims his Roman Citizenship. From there, Paul talks about his identity as a faithful Israelite. And it ends as Paul's citizenship is again highlighted.

Here's the structure:

***A: 21:37-40: Paul the Roman Citizen***

***B: 21:40b-23: Paul the Faithful Israelite***

***A': 22:24-29: Paul the Roman Citizen***

This isn't accidental. Luke is communicating to us through structure, here. It's a reminder of the way Paul bridges these two worlds, and is true to both of them at the same time. The bookends remind us that Paul is a Roman Citizen; Paul's speech itself reminds us that he is not only an Israelite, but a faithful one; the right interpreter of what faithfulness is this side of the death and resurrection of Israel's long-awaited Messiah, Jesus.

This is Luke's point.

Paul is both like the Gentiles, and unlike them; a Roman Citizen by birth, and yet Judean. He's like the Jews, and unlike them: As law-abiding, as righteous as an Israelite can

be, but not looking to his Torah-keeping to count for anything at all.

### ***Roman Citizenship:***

And if we haven't heard, Roman Citizenship was no small thing. To be a citizen was to be a part of the best class, to have opportunities--from owning land to becoming a magistrate to taking part in courts. Citizenship brought freedom, brought rights, brought access to all the best parts of Roman society. Without it, you were on the outskirts, not a second-class citizen, but worse. Not a citizen at all. If we've read any firsthand stories of what it's like for immigrants fleeing places of war and sneaking into countries in which they aren't citizens, and then trying to live there, then we'll realize how some of what was true of Rome then is true of the world now.

You could buy your citizenship, or you could be born into it; but to be born into it was its own impressive power, was elite, and impressive to everyone.

### ***Paul the Faithful Israelite***

So, Paul, this Roman Citizen of an important city, accused unfairly of breaking Torah and defiling the Temple, disrupting one of the most important Temple-critical holidays in Judaism, speaks. His defense is the center of the scene. And it's a story we know in one form, because Luke's already

shared it with us in Acts 9.

**1 “Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense.”**

They all hush.

**3 “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. 4 I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, 5 as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.**

A few people breathe out a sigh. They were wrong after all. Paul has been faithful all along. They remember hearing about all that. Okay. Others keep holding their breath. Paul keeps talking:

**6 “About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. 7 I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’**

**8 “‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked.**

**“ ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. 9 My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.**

And you can imagine the crowd still intensely watching, but murmuring growing. Jesus was tried and proven guilty. Jesus was a blasphemer. Some of those in the crowd helped condemn him. They have relatives who've joined the same movement, as Jesus' followers, as Paul has been promoting, who've been persuaded from worshipping God the way our people have always worshipped God. I bet it's this moment, this mention of Jesus, when Paul begins to lose most of the crowd who can hear him.

**10 “‘What shall I do, Lord?’ I asked.**

**“ ‘Get up,’ the Lord said, ‘and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.’ 11 My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.**

**12 “A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by**

***all the Jews living there. 13 He stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I was able to see him.***

***14 "Then he said: 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. 15 You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. 16 And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.'***

This is intense. And Paul continues, but as he continues he does something incredibly clever. He's telling this story, this defense of himself, but he starts to shift his focus from himself to those around him. And as that focus shifts, as those who he's talking to realize they're a part of Paul's story, they realize just what sort of characters they are in Paul's story. They're the bad guys.

Again, they're listening to Paul, expecting Paul to talk about himself. By now he's lost them, they don't expect to accept his defense; they don't accept it. But they don't expect to show up in his story as the bad guys. Imagine you're in the crowd, from far away, here for Pentecost, glad to see this racial and religious and national traitor arrested, and ready for his condemnation.

**17 “When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance 18 and saw the Lord speaking to me. ‘Quick!’ he said. ‘Leave Jerusalem immediately, because the people here will not accept your testimony about me.’**

The people here are us. We’re in Paul’s story. And he says that this false Messiah spoke to him, in the Temple? A thing only God himself could do? And so, God told him, while he was in our Temple, that we wouldn’t believe God.

Paul continues, and he brings this past story into the present tense, so that all of us who are listening are gathered with him in that moment as he talks with God.

**19 “‘Lord,’ I replied, ‘these people (and we’re “these people,” then and now) know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. 20 And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’**

We’re “these people.” We’re “these people” back then and right now. We’re the ones Paul says were killing Stephen. We

don't care that Paul admits his guilt. We don't care that Paul's knows his story is one of failure, that he himself is a terrible eye-witness to Jesus, because he's acted against Jesus already. Either those who've antagonized the Church will only remember Paul's help, or they'll see him as some great flip-flopper who has no integrity, either way, Paul's sure that he's got nothing to fear because he doesn't believe he has anything to give.

But in this moment, all we in the crowd hear is Paul calling us murderers who have killed a martyr; and all we know is that whatever happened to Stephen, he deserved it because he blasphemed God. And Paul deserves it too, for the same reasons.

And then Paul returns the focus of his defense back to himself, having just called all those who were listening murderers, having implied that all of us who are paying attention, we killed a martyr, we've stood against God, we've celebrated what Paul regrets. And Paul introduces someone else, a new group, into the story. He says:

***21 "Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.' "***

How dare he, right? We're in Pentecost. We're celebrating the moment when God gave us Torah, made us God's

People, and Paul's called us murderers of God's martyr, we heard that he defiled the Temple. This guy. Kill him.

Luke writes:

***Paul the Roman Citizen:***

***22 The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!"***

***23 As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, 24 the commander ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. He directed that he be flogged and interrogated in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. 25 As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?"***

***26 When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and reported it. "What are you going to do?" he asked. "This man is a Roman citizen."***

***27 The commander went to Paul and asked, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?"***

***“Yes, I am,” he answered.***

***28 Then the commander said, “I had to pay a lot of money for my citizenship.”***

***“But I was born a citizen,” Paul replied.***

***29 Those who were about to interrogate him withdrew immediately. The commander himself was alarmed when he realized that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains.***

He should be alarmed. He himself could be flogged for what he’s about to oversee, and those who were actually about to interrogate Paul likely weren’t even citizens.

***Misconceptions:***

Think of how dynamic this is: Everyone around Paul is mistaking him for who they expect him to be. He’s a Roman Citizen, but the commander thinks, at first, that he’s some Egyptian, then just some Judean who’s managed to make everyone angry at him. He certainly doesn’t expect Paul to have rights and power that are more impressive than his own.

Right before his arrest, the Jerusalem Church saw him as

someone who was threatening their culture; Paul sought to help clear this up. We don't even know if it really worked; all we know is it led to non-Christian Jews ramping up their attacks on his faithlessness even higher, spreading rumors that he defiled the Temple when he hadn't. And then Paul claims he has rights and power greater than theirs, that they're murderers while he's been charged by God to go to the Gentiles.

Luke wants us to see the simple truth that Paul is both a faithful Israelite and a Roman Citizen. He's both of these things. It's who he is. But being both simply doesn't fit into the categories that either side live with. For the Roman soldiers, his Jewishness is utterly irrelevant; all that matters is his birthright citizenship, a thing they esteem more than we can imagine. For the Romans, this is all that matters when it comes to Paul: His citizenship, which he was born into. And for the Israelites that surround the barracks, that surround Paul, the ones who he's just condemned for murder, even as he's owned his part in that, Paul is simply a Temple-defiler and God-blasphemer. Paul is leading people astray. They don't want to see the ways he's still Jewish, the ways he's still faithful; the experiences that could give them pause, and have resulted in so many trusting Jesus. They simply don't think he's a faithful Israelite, and they don't care that he's a Roman Citizen; in fact, right now, that's likely a strike against him.

The drama will continue...we'll talk about it next week. But there are a few salient features from this story, ways to bridge the gap between Paul's moment of faithfulness and our own, that I hope we can see.

***Seeing: Paul is Two Kinds of People At The Same Time:***

I hope we can see how critical it was for Paul to be both a Roman Citizen and a Faithful Israelite. He has a foot in two worlds, is two things at once, and that enables him to do what no other Apostle could do, what no other early leader in the Church could do, which is both reach out to the Gentiles, and still speak prophetic correctives to the Judeans. The Church in Jerusalem was more or less lost when Rome wiped out Jerusalem in 70 AD, not too many years away from this moment, and we can't know what shape Christianity may have taken had that not happened. But we can say that whatever shape it had taken, Paul's influence would have been just as great, because God was with him. And so, we ought to pay, I think, special attention to those around us now who are in between, who are both one thing and another, who can translate one culture or class or ethnicity or race to another culture or class or ethnicity or race. We humans divide along all sorts of lines, and if we know people who are both "us" and "them" at the same time, can speak to an issue with authority from either

side of a divide, we must listen to those people, I think. And if we are those people, we ought to recognize our great power to speak for our groups, both of them, when one side or the other might not listen.

### ***Conclusion: Paul Communicates the Mistakes About To Be Made***

I hope we can see that Paul knows both himself and his audiences, here. He knows the heart of this crowd outside the barracks, he knows the concerns of the Roman soldiers, but more than these, he knows himself. Who he is, what God has called him to do.

And he uses this knowledge in a very specific way in today's passage.

Paul is very deliberate about helping these two groups he's a part of to see the mistakes they are making. He helps these two groups that he's a part of see the mistakes they are about to make. On the one hand, this can read like a threat; on the other, and more positively, this is just, like, giving someone a head's up: "Don't swim at that beach; there are sharks."

"Judeans, don't mistake me for faithless. You are the ones who misunderstand God, not me." ("Let's kill him!")

"Romans, don't flog me. It'll be your hide, literally, if you

do.” (“Oof. He’s a citizen! Back up!”) Because Paul knows himself, he knows his audiences--he’s a member of both--and he knows how to point out the mistakes they are making. And it’s actually the response that people have to what Paul says that determines whether what he says is a warning or a threat.

The Romans listen, and so the warning becomes a warning. They avoid their mistake. The Judeans don’t listen, and they make their threat real, as they call for Paul’s death. They embrace their mistake.

And so, I think we ought to consider how we respond to those who point out that we’re making, or about to make, mistakes? Do we treat their insight as a warning? Do we treat it as a threat? Both of these groups had prejudices to overcome, but only one heard Paul and responded well. What does it take for us to hear the warning another person might give us?

### **Conclusion: Paul Can Tell His Story**

And, lastly, Paul knows himself, sure. But he also knows how to tell his story in a way that really, really communicates. When Paul defends himself here, he does so with integrity and authenticity. It’s definitely pointed, it’s definitely occasion-specific, you know? He’s telling this autobiographical defense in a way that makes sense for this

moment. And I just wonder if we could do the same. Peter will write in his first letter, “Always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.” There’s something about our ability to tell what we know about God, and how God has been active in our lives, that really does matter.

We are unlikely to need to defend ourselves. But I like to think that none of us are past making new relationships with others. And no relationship, no friendship, comes without sharing our stories. So...we ought to be able to tell them, that’s all. Could you? Could you well enough that you can make it occasion-specific, as Paul’s able to do.

### ***Conclusion: Conclusion***

These three remain! Can we tell our stories when it matters in a way that matters? Can we receive the warnings people give us about the mistakes we’re making? Can we listen to those who have a foot in two worlds, who are able to speak with authority because they are both like us and unlike us at the same time?

We’ll move forward next week as Paul continues having to defend himself.