

EXPOSITION OF ACTS

Message #48

Acts 21:17-39

There are certain attributes that make God who He is and one of the attributes of God is that He is pure truth. It is impossible for God to lie (Titus 1:2). Every word God says will be true. Now there are three Divine Persons who have the attributes of God—God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. All three meet Deity criteria and form the Divine Trinity.

Since God the Spirit is part of Deity, you and I can know beyond any shadow of a doubt that the Holy Spirit does not ever lie. The Holy Spirit always must tell the truth. It is absolutely impossible for God to lie (Heb. 6:18).

We may remember that Paul was told by the Holy Spirit on multiple occasions that he would face serious trouble and affliction in Jerusalem (Acts 20:22-23). When he got to Jerusalem it did not take long until that became reality.

AS SOON AS PAUL GOT TO JERUSALEM, THE TROUBLE THAT GOD REVEALED WOULD HAPPEN TO PAUL IMMEDIATELY DID HAPPEN TO PAUL.

Wise are believers who take God at His Word. What God predicts will happen, you may be certain will happen.

In **verses 17-20**, when Paul got to Jerusalem things initially appeared to be good. He arrived during the Feast of Pentecost and it is estimated that there could have been as many as two million Jews in the city at that time. We may assume that Paul immediately handed over the offering that he had collected for the poor Jews, because Luke mentions the fact later (Acts 24:17). When Paul arrived there were four immediate reactions:

(Reaction #1) - He was gladly received by the brethren. **21:17**

Paul had some good friends in Jerusalem who truly loved him and were glad to see him. The noun “brethren” is articular “the brethren” which means certain, specific believers were glad to see him, but obviously not everyone was.

(Reaction #2) - He met with James and all the elders the next day and reported all God had done in the Gentile world. **21:18-19**

Paul was obviously very respectful of the leadership of the church. James was the head of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13-21) and the church obviously had elders, the number of which is not known, but there were several. Paul went in and gave them a complete report. He told them of what God had done in Asia and Greece. Notice in **verse 19**, Paul stresses this is what “God had done.” Paul always gave God the glory and credit for everything.

(Reaction #3) - They all glorified God with a great praise response. **21:20a**

The Apostle Paul had returned to the city of Jerusalem and his missionary journeys were all over. He went and made a report to the elders of all that had happened and they all rejoiced. So far Paul's visit to Jerusalem had been very positive. But that was all about to change right now.

(Reaction #4) - They all had great apprehension about Paul's relationship with the Jews.
21:20b-26

Paul was in town during a major Jewish feast and Paul was a big name theologian and his presence and theology could cause some real issues. They are here to observe an O.T. Law feast and Paul was here and he preached the Law was of no value. Notice the end of **verse 20**, Paul had had tremendous success with the Gentile world, but James and the elders wondered about what would happen as soon as the Jews learned about Paul's presence and his ministry and theology.

As Paul was off preaching to the Gentile world, apparently thousands of Jews had come to faith in Christ in Jerusalem. Biblical scholars say as many as 25,000 to 50,000 Jews had believed on Christ during this time, but many were still confused about the Law.

Paul was preaching all over the world that you are justified by faith alone in Christ alone apart from the Law of Moses (Acts 13:38-39), and he was now back in Jerusalem where there were thousands of believers who were "all zealous for the Law." This presented a real dilemma for the leaders.

According to **verse 21**, those Jews had all heard that Paul was back in town and they knew he taught a free grace, non-Mosaic Law Gospel. He did preach and teach that "we are not under law, but under grace" (Roman 6:14). In that very same context he brings up the subject of "coveting" which is one of the famous Ten Commandments (Rom. 7:7). So Paul clearly taught we are not under any of the Law code, including the famous Ten Commandments.

They had been told that he was telling the Jews to forsake the Mosaic Law, not circumcise their children and not walk according to the legal Jewish customs. This did put Paul in a difficult position.

By the way Paul never told the people they could not circumcise their children nor did he teach them that they could not observe Jewish customs. **What he taught was this had nothing to do with justification.** He taught that one was justified and sanctified by faith in Jesus Christ. As far as circumcision was concerned, it meant nothing concerning justification (Gal. 5:15) and he taught if one relied on circumcision to be right with God he had to keep the entire O.T. Law (Gal. 5:2-4). When it came to day observances he specifically taught that every believer needed to be persuaded in his own mind (**Romans 14:5**). So these people are probably not blatantly lying, but they are very ignorant about what it was that Paul actually did teach.

So the leaders of the church came up with a plan to try and preserve peace. To prove that Paul was not against all Jewish customs, they decided that a good thing for Paul to do would be to put himself under some form of Jewish Nazarite vow with four other guys who were already under the vow, and pay money to the temple so they could all shave their heads when the vow was over. It was not uncommon for Jewish men to vow something for a short time in some applied form of the Nazarite vow found in Numbers 6. They would do this to show their devotion to God. When the vow time was over, the men would shave their heads and the hair would be burned at the Temple, but then he had to offer an offering which was very expensive. The offering consisted of two lambs, one ram, loaves and cakes with meal and drink offerings.

These leaders thought it would be a good gesture if Paul got in on the tail end of the vow and showed the people in Jerusalem that he really wasn't against them or the Law. They wanted Paul to go with these four guys to the Temple for the final days of their vow and complete the days of purification until a sacrifice was offered for each of them. In my opinion, the real issue at stake here is this—**“Is peace more important than truth or is truth more important than peace?”** **James and the elders apparently think peace is more important than doctrinal truth.** From a human perspective, this is going to backfire.

Now Paul could have been mad about this proposal and he could have been fed up with these leaders and said “no.” Many believe that is exactly what he should have done. He had literally risked his life to take the grace Gospel to the Gentile world and personally collected and delivered a huge offering for these people while they stayed in their homes in Jerusalem, and he could have said “Nothing doing.” He could have said “you mean you want me to actually spend money for a Temple purification vow that doesn't mean anything?” Paul could have said “I am not following the custom for one second and you people need to grow up in your doctrine.” But Paul decided he would go ahead and do it. He decided that he would submit himself to this bizarre request.

Now when a Jewish man would return from Gentile lands, he would often go through some purification process that as it were “shook the Gentile dust off their feet.” However, any way you analyze this, Paul is doing something that seems to support their quirky religious ideas.

Now many biblical students believe Paul made a huge mistake here in doing this. In fact, some have gone so far as to say this was the saddest ministry moment for Paul and one of the saddest sections in the Bible. In fact, some go so far as to say that when Paul went to the Temple with these guys and paid to offer the animal sacrifice, he was denying the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

G. Campbell Morgan said he believed this is the greatest mistake of Paul's ministry here. Donald Grey Barnhouse took the same position and said what Paul does here would be as bad as going to a Roman Catholic cathedral and receive Mass from some priest's hands.

We may observe from Paul's life that there were times he did use his liberty to do things to win people. For example, he had Timothy circumcised so he could be effective with the Jews (Acts 16:3). In I Corinthians 9:19-20 Paul explains why he was willing to do things like this. It was not because he was putting himself back under the O.T. Law; it was that he was trying to win some of the Jews who were under the Law.

And it seems to me that there is one factor that is often overlooked in this story and that is the **sovereignty of God. God's sovereign plan for Paul's life is to go to Rome and this crazy theological mess will be part of the process of getting Paul to Rome.**

From a human standpoint the purpose of forfeiting truth for peace will backfire and Paul will not win these Jews. But God was still sovereign and will use this disaster to get Paul to Rome. **So the question arises, do you compromise your theology for the sake of possibly reaching someone? That is a question each must answer.**

Let me give you an illustration from Mormon land. We lived in Mormon land for eight years and one of the beliefs of Mormons is that you do not drink any coffee or pop. That is until the Mormons purchased one of the pop companies and then they received a special revelation that they could drink pop. Anyway, a Mormon judge, whom I greatly respect, asked me to haul my horses over to a mountain range so we could ride up and take a look at a high mountain lake. We took off on Friday afternoon and I slept in my horse trailer. The next morning I made myself a cup of coffee. I had told this judge that his religious legalism meant nothing and I decided to back my belief up with my action. Each person must decide on his own.

Dr. Ironside said years ago at a picnic there was a man who had come to faith in Christ who had been in the Islamic religion from India. He ran a tea business. He went to the picnic and a girl from church went up with a tray of sandwiches and asked if he wanted one. He asked her what the sandwiches were and she said they were pork and ham. He asked if there were any beef, lamb or fish sandwiches and she said no. He said, "Well, I won't eat one." The girl said, "Don't you know that you are a Christian and you have liberty to eat anything?" He said, "Yes, I know that, but I will have to go report to my father who is nearly eighty years old about our business and the first thing he will ask me is whether infidels have taught you to eat filthy hog meat. He said I will tell him that it has not touched my lips and I will be welcome in his home and can witness to him for Jesus Christ." That may be what Paul did here.

Now according to **verse 25**, the Jerusalem elders wanted Paul to know this did not change their theology. We may remember that at the Jerusalem council meeting some of these same leaders had come to this conclusion (Acts 15:28-29) and this did not change their minds. So apparently they were solidified in their doctrine, but their application of it seemed a little lacking.

Well regardless of our position, the strategy did not work:

OPPOSITION #1 – He faced opposition from Asian Jews in the Temple. **21:27-30**

More than likely these were Jews from Ephesus. They stirred up a crowd against Paul and they stirred up the crowd to riot level. This is the sixth time in Paul's ministry when a crowd is revved up by Paul—Acts 14:19; 16:19-22; 17:5-8, 13; 19:25-34; 21:27-30. Here they stir up the crowd in Jerusalem by making a series of false allegations:

False Allegation #1 - Paul preaches against the Jewish people. **21:28a**

Paul so loved the Jewish people that he always tried to minister to them first before any Gentile. Furthermore, he told Gentiles that they should never forget that they have been grafted into a program that is for Israel (Rom. 11).

False Allegation #2 - Paul preaches against the Mosaic Law. **21:28b**

Paul taught the Mosaic Law proved we were all guilty so that we would believe on Jesus Christ.

False Allegation #3 - Paul preaches against Jerusalem and the Temple. **21:28c**

That is certainly not true. In fact, he taught Gentiles that Jesus Christ would come right to this very place to deliver Israel (Romans 11:25).

False Allegation #4 - Paul brings Gentiles into the Temple to defile it. **21:28d-29**

They made this up because they had seen Paul with Trophimus from Ephesus and assumed Paul had taken him into the Temple, which he had not.

According to **verse 30**, they rushed Paul and dragged him out of the Temple and slammed the door shut. According to **verse 31**, they intended to kill Paul. They don't even ask Paul to explain things to them.

They could violate one of their famous commandments "thou shall not kill" by justifying it if they didn't kill in the Temple.

OPPOSITION #2 – He was arrested by Roman soldiers. **21:32-38**

Now the Roman barracks was located in one corner of the temple area. So it was very close to the Temple action.

The Roman police force immediately recognized they had a riot on their hands so they rushed in and saw they were beating up Paul. According to **verse 33**, they grabbed Paul and bound him with two chains and they started asking him who he was and what exactly had he done.

According to **verse 34**, the mob was shouting things at Paul and the commander could not make heads or tails of what Paul had done so he brought Paul to a barracks for questioning.

According to **verse 35**, the crowd was so large that Paul could not walk so the soldiers had to carry him and the people were shouting away with him (**verse 36**). This plan the elders came up with to have Paul participate in some purification vow didn't work.

According to **verse 37**, Paul asked the commander if he could say something to him. Paul apparently spoke this in perfect Koine Greek.

Now this was important because until this moment the commander assumed that Paul was an Egyptian terrorist who had led four thousand "men of the Assassins" out into the wilderness in some insurrectionist movement. Apparently Egyptians could not speak Greek

Josephus tells a story of an Egyptian false prophet who gathered a group of rebels together three years before this (A.D. 54) on the Mount of Olives for an insurrection movement. He promised them that the walls of Jerusalem would collapse at his command. But Felix sent his Roman troops up the hill and killed several hundred of them and captured 200 more. Some escaped, including the Egyptian leaders. Apparently, they must have thought that Paul was the leader of this group, but when he spoke Greek they knew it could not be him.

In **verse 39**, Paul identified himself as being a Jew from Tarsus and a Roman citizen and he asked that they let him speak to the crowds.

What Paul taught was the pure grace of God. He traveled all over the world preaching that you are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. You are not saved by anything you do or any law code you keep. We are saved by grace through faith.

There is no other way for you to be saved from your sins. If you will believe on the Lord Jesus Christ you will be saved.