

A DEEPER DIVE

Acts 21: 17-36
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Micah 6:8 – He has shown you, oh mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. (NIV)

Acts Chapter 21 – Part 2

Happy homecoming – Paul and the travelers get to Jerusalem. Read verses 17-19 and try to put your imagination in the scene to see and feel what the reunion was like. Note that the word that the NIV translates “warmly” can also be rendered as “with gladness,” or, “with joy.” Luke is trying to put some emotion into the story. Look back at the end of chapter 20 and note that the book of Acts is way more than just a cold, clinical, detailing of the events of the early church. Why is that important?

Paul’s report – Paul and the others meet up with James and the elders. What does Paul recount to them? Luke says that Paul reported to them “in detail.” So, this wasn’t just a brief outline. What things do you think Paul would highlight about his missionary trips? When you meet with friends in a Bible study or just a fellowship time, what sorts of things do you talk about? How ready do you feel about recounting in detail what God has been doing in your life?

Look at the reaction of the people to Paul’s report. Would you find this kind of reaction encouraging? When you hear someone talk about what God is doing in their lives, how ready are you to praise God because of the story and encourage the person to tell more?

Rumors going around – Read through verses 20-26. In these verses, Luke lets us know that there have been some rumors going around about what Paul has been teaching. James and the elders tell Paul of the great impact the gospel has had. They tell Paul that, “many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law” (NIV). In verse 22 they ask Paul, “What should we do?” Why are they asking this question?

Summarize what the rumor mill is saying about what Paul is teaching (verse 21). Why do you think this is such a problem for the elders?

The question “what should we do?” in verse 22 seems rhetorical in a way considering verse 23. These elders have a plan of action. Read verses 23-25 and summarize what they ask Paul to do.

Why do you think the issues these elders were dealing with was such a big deal? What does Paul do?

Please note. These people, the thousands of believing Jews who are jealous for the law, are spreading harmful and false rumors about Paul. Do you find this surprising? Have you experienced fellow believers spreading rumors or false information about you or about others? What should we do in these cases? Both testaments are crystal clear on God’s view of gossip, rumors, slander, etc. Spend some time researching the various verses in the Old and the New Testaments. Afterwards, commit yourself before God that you will not participate or engage in any of these activities going forward.

Quiz time! – How well do you remember what has come earlier in the book of Acts? What does verse 25 refer to, and where can that be found?

The trouble comes – As usual, a crowd gathers to confront Paul with accusations, rumors, and the threat of violence. How often has this happened in Acts? Read verses 27-36. List some similarities and some differences between this event and previous riots and uprisings.

Was Paul right or wrong? – Paul's willingness to go along with the plan that James and the elders had come up with (verses 20-26) has created some commentators to wonder about the wisdom of the plan and Paul's decision to go along with it. Warren Wiersbe says, "It was a bad bargain, but Paul fell into it. He had already written letters to the Romans and Galatians, which proved that no man could be saved or sanctified by keeping the law and showed that the Christian is free from the Law of Moses. Now he was denying all of this inspired truth with a 'religious bargain' that was aimed at compromising with the Jews. Paul shared with the four men as they completed their cows and offered the sacrifices, the whole transaction taking seven days...Did the scheme work? No! It resulted in Paul being arrested...Whether Paul was right or wrong is not for us to say with confidence. This we know: God used the whole episode to put Paul into the hands of the Romans and not the Jews." What do you think of Wiersbe's assessment of Paul's decision? Do you agree with Wiersbe? In another place in his commentary, he says, "It is easy to assume that everything the apostles did was right." Do you make that assumption? Is it an accurate assumption?

Epilogue – Aside from the interesting account of Paul being, once again, caught up in mob violence, I think a key part of this passage for us is the impact of rumors and gossip have on individuals and the health of the church as a whole. NT Wright says that the rumors being spread accused Paul of not only "telling Gentile converts that they don't need to be circumcised but he had been telling Jews to abandon their ancestral traditions and customs as well. That latter is something Paul has neither said or done...As far as they [the Christians spreading the rumors] were concerned, it's all or nothing. Either you say that circumcision matters, in which case every Christian has to be circumcised; or you say it doesn't matter, in which case no Christian—including Jewish Christians—should be circumcised." There are a lot of occasions today where there is an "all-or-nothing," "my side is the only side," attitude. Do you agree with this line of thinking about cultural, or political, matters? In what ways can this thought life be useful and in what ways can it be dangerous? How can you tell the difference? Seek the Lord's wisdom whenever you feel like a "my way or the highway" is the proper Biblical course to take.