

Let the Will of the Lord Be Done

Acts 21:1-16

¹ And when we had parted from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos, and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. ² And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. ³ When we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload its cargo. ⁴ And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. ⁵ When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed ⁶ and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.

⁷ When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. ⁸ On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. ⁹ He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. ¹⁰ While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" ¹² When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³ Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." ¹⁴ And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

¹⁵ After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁶ And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge. – Acts 21:1-16 ESV

In his gospel account, Luke records the following statement regarding Jesus: "Now when the days drew near for him to be taken up, Jesus set out resolutely to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51 NLT). Jesus had begun to reveal to His disciples the fate that awaited Him in Jerusalem. He told them, "Take these words to heart, for the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men" (Luke 9:44 NLT). As time went on and the day of His betrayal and death drew closer, He became more specific regarding the details surrounding what awaited Him in Jerusalem.

³¹ Then Jesus took the twelve aside and said to them, "Look, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. ³² For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; he will be mocked, mistreated, and spat on. ³³ They will flog him severely and kill him. Yet on the third day he will rise again." ³⁴ But the twelve understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what Jesus meant. – Luke 18:31-33 NLT

Jesus had been resolute and steadfast in His commitment to carry out the assignment given to Him by God the Father. He knew why He had come to earth and His work would not be complete until He had finished what He had been sent to do. And, at one point, He spoke the following statement in the hearing of His disciples and to those who had claimed to be His followers, but who had been distracted by worldly concerns: “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62 NLT).

Here in Luke’s retelling of the history of the church, he seems to be comparing the determination and dedication of Jesus to that of Paul. We see in this passage, some striking similarities between the two men, as Paul, making his way to Jerusalem, displays a strong sense of calling and commitment to complete the journey, even in spite of the warnings of those who loved him. Paul had no idea what awaited him in Jerusalem, but he knew from experience that the potential for death was a reality everywhere he went.

22 And now, behold, I, not knowing what will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. 24 But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. – Acts 20:22-24 ESV

Paul wanted to finish well. He wanted to be faithful to the assignment given to him by Jesus. And his attitude was that, as long as the Lord allowed him to live, he would share the gospel faithfully and boldly. His goal in life was to please the Lord, whether in life or in death.

6 So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, 7 for we walk by faith, not by sight. 8 Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. 9 So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. – 2 Corinthians 5:6-9 ESV

And Luke, using geographic locations as a sort of measurement device, tells of Paul’s unwavering commitment to return to Jerusalem as the Spirit had directed him. Luke describes their journey from Miletus to Cos, then to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. Their next stop was Phoenicia and from there they sailed to Tyre, passing by the island of Rhodes on the way. There are no stops mentioned. At no point does he describe Paul taking time to minister along the way. This was not normal behavior for Paul. You can sense in Luke’s description of this leg of their journey that there was a certain determination on the part of Paul. Like Jesus, he had set out resolutely to go to Jerusalem.

It was only when he had arrived in Tyre that Paul took time to meet with the disciples there. He stayed for seven days, but this was only because he was forced to wait for this ship’s cargo to be unloaded. During the delay, Paul was once again bombarded with dire warnings from those who cared deeply for him. Luke records that the brothers and sisters, under the influence of the Spirit of God, “were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem” (Acts 21:4 ESV). This begs a

question: If these believers, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, warned Paul not to go to Jerusalem, why did he do so anyway? Was he being disobedient to the Spirit? Does this just display a stubbornness on Paul's part? It is important to remember that Paul had also received word from the Spirit of God. In fact, he had made that plain when he had said, "I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit" (Acts 20:22 ESV). It would seem that some of the disciples in Tyre had been given a divine insight into Paul's fate, provided to them by the Holy Spirit. Upon hearing the news, their natural conclusion had been that the Spirit was telling them these things so they could warn Paul and keep him from going. But it much more likely that the Spirit was simply confirming what He had already told Paul. Out of their love for Paul, they were trying to prevent any harm from coming to him, but what awaited Paul in Jerusalem was the sovereign will of God. What we see happening here is the very same thing that happened when Jesus had informed the disciples about the fate awaiting Him in Jerusalem.

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and experts in the law, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²² So Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him: "God forbid, Lord! This must not happen to you!" – Matthew 16:21-22 NLT

Peter had meant well. He loved Jesus and was simply trying to protect him from what he believed to be an undeserved and unnecessary death. He didn't understand what was going on but was seeing things from his limited human perspective. And what Jesus said to him provides us with a telling and sobering warning.

²³ But he turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me, because you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but on man's." – Matthew 16:23 NLT

The disciples in Tyre were guilty of the same thing. They were setting their minds on their own interests, rather than those of God. They couldn't bear the thought of losing Paul. It made no sense to them that God would allow anything to happen to someone so vital to the well-being of the church. But that kind of attitude was dangerous. Jesus described Peter as acting like Satan, attempting to stand in the way of God's divine will for the redemption of mankind. And the disciples in Tyre, while trying to keep Paul from having to suffer, were unwittingly doing the same thing. They had no idea what God had planned for Paul and what was going to happen as a result. They could not see into the future. All they knew was that something dire was waiting for Paul in Jerusalem and they wanted to prevent it from happening.

But Paul remained determined. He departed from Tyre and made his way to Ptolemais and then on to Caesarea, where he and his traveling companions stayed in the home of Philip the Evangelist. While there, Paul was once again confronted and warned about the fate that awaited him in Jerusalem. This time, it came from the lips of a prophet named Agabus, who had come all the way from Judea. Using a visual illustration, he revealed to Paul that he would be arrested by the Jews, bound up and delivered to the Gentiles. It is obvious that Agabus had also received a word from the Lord. And the text does not indicate that Agabus tried to dissuade

Paul from going to Jerusalem. He simply presented the facts as given to him by God. It was the disciples in Philip's house who heard this news and attempted to persuade Paul to change his plans. And Luke, out of love for his brother, Paul, included himself among those who tried to change Paul's mind. "When **we** heard this, **we** and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem" (Acts 21:12 ESV).

What they failed to realize was that their passionate pleas for Paul to refrain from going to Jerusalem were actually making things more difficult for Paul. He responded: "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13 ESV). What Paul needed were words of encouragement to stay the course, not emotion-filled pleas to disobey the will of God for his life. His friends meant well, but they were operating out of a sense of selfishness. They were not seeing the bigger picture. For Paul, the plans of God far outweighed any personal aspirations he might have. He was much more interested in seeing the sovereign will of God accomplished than doing whatever he could to keep his life as trouble-free as possible.

Luke, along with all the others who had tried to dissuade Paul from his seemingly ill-fated plans to go to Jerusalem, resigned himself to the inevitable. He simply stated, "Let the will of the Lord be done" (Acts 21:14 ESV). There is a certain sense of failure in Luke's words. He doesn't sound convincing. He even admitted that "since he would not be persuaded, we ceased" (Acts 21:14 ESV). They had tried but had failed. So, they were forced to accept what happened as the will of God. But is that the way we should face the future? Does God want us to simply give up hope and face what may happen with a sense of resignation? What a contrast we see between the words of Luke and those of Paul. "I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13 ESV). The will of God didn't intimidate Paul. It didn't depress him. He didn't feel compelled to resign himself to it. He willingly and eagerly embraced it as preferable to any other alternative, because he was fully convinced that God knew best. Paul lived his life in keeping with the words of Peter: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:6-7 ESV).

A Delicate Balancing Act

Acts 21:17-26

¹⁷ When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. ¹⁸ On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. ¹⁹ After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. ²⁰ And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, ²¹ and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. ²² What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. ²³ Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; ²⁴ take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. ²⁵ But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.” ²⁶ Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them. – Acts 21:17-26

ESV

In this next section of Luke’s account, he is going to provide a precise record of Paul’s return to Jerusalem and the interactions that took place between Paul and the leadership of the church there. Upon arrival back in Jerusalem, Paul appeared before James and the rest of the leadership of the church, including the other apostles. He reported the details of his latest mission trip among the Gentiles, explaining all that God was doing to bring those outside of Judaism to faith in Christ. His third missionary journey had been similar to the previous two, further confirming that the gospel message was bearing much fruit, in spite of increasing opposition from Jews who were dispersed abroad and from the Gentiles who found Christianity to be a threat to their own pagan religions.

One of the striking features of Paul’s report was the way he gave all the credit to God. Luke reports that Paul “related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry” (Acts 21:19 ESV). Yes, Paul had played a vital and indispensable role, but he knew that nothing worthy would have taken place without the sovereign hand of God. No one would have come to faith in Christ if God had not called them and the Holy Spirit had not regenerated their hearts. Paul knew his place. He was no more than a messenger, a herald of the truth, communicating the good news concerning Jesus Christ to those who had never heard it. Any converts produced were the result of God’s handiwork, not Paul’s. In fact, he admitted as much in his first letter to the believers in Corinth.

³ I came to you in weakness—timid and trembling. ⁴ And my message and my preaching were very plain. Rather than using clever and persuasive speeches, I relied only on the

power of the Holy Spirit. ⁵ I did this so you would trust not in human wisdom but in the power of God. – 1 Corinthians 2:3-5 NLT

And in that same letter, Paul made it clear that his role had been simple and somewhat one-dimensional.

¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. – 1 Corinthians 1:17
ESV

Because Paul had been quick to give all the credit to God, the apostles were able to direct their praise to God and not to Paul. At no point did Paul attempt to rob God of glory by allowing himself to receive unwarranted praise. He was more than content in the knowledge that his efforts on behalf of God, done in the power of God, had accomplished the will of God.

But James and the other apostles, while grateful for all that God had done, were forced to bring up a potential conflict that loomed as a result of Paul's report. While Paul had been away, the Spirit of God had been at work in Jerusalem as well, resulting in the conversions of thousands of faithful, law-abiding Jews. These individuals, while having put their faith in Jesus Christ as their Messiah and Savior, still held tenaciously to their Hebrew heritage and the ways of their ancestors. They maintained their allegiance to the Mosaic law and the religious rites and rituals of Judaism. Obedience to the law of Moses was still a non-negotiable, non-optional requirement for them. Earlier in his book, Luke had recorded the findings of the Jerusalem council, when they had been forced to deal with the demands of certain Jewish believers that all Gentile converts be required to live according to the law of Moses just as they did. James and the apostles had determined that this was unnecessary because it was not a requirement that God had placed on the Gentile believers. That dispute had been settled. But now, James was bringing up a different issue altogether. It seems that the latest rumor circulating among the Jewish believers in Jerusalem was that Paul had been trying to convince Jews living among the Gentiles where he ministered, to abandon their allegiance to the Mosaic law. They were falsely reporting that Paul was teaching Jews not to circumcise their children or follow other Jewish customs and laws.

Part of what was going here was a misunderstanding of Paul's outlook on the law. He outlines his perspective regarding the Mosaic law in his first letter to the church in Corinth.

²⁰ When I was with the Jews, I lived like a Jew to bring the Jews to Christ. When I was with those who follow the Jewish law, I too lived under that law. Even though I am not subject to the law, I did this so I could bring to Christ those who are under the law.

²¹ When I am with the Gentiles who do not follow the Jewish law, I too live apart from that law so I can bring them to Christ. But I do not ignore the law of God; I obey the law of Christ. – 1 Corinthians 9:20-21 NLT

When living among his fellow Jews, Paul chose to keep the law, just as they did. But when he found himself living among Gentiles, he chose not to follow the Jewish law, because he did not want it to be a stumbling block for them. It was important to him that they not see him living in obedience to the law and wrongly assume that this represented an added requirement for coming to faith in Christ. In no way did Paul ever diminish or demean the law of Moses. But he made it clear that he saw himself and all other Jews, as no longer subject to the law. The law had served its God-appointed purpose. In his letter to the Galatian believers, Paul had clearly stated that the law had been given by God “to show people their sins. But the law was designed to last only until the coming of the child who was promised” (Galatians 3:19 NLT). The child had come. Jesus had been born, had lived a sinless life, having kept the law perfectly, and had died on behalf of sinners as the sinless sacrifice. “God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins” (Romans 8:3 NLT).

In his letter to the believers in Rome, Paul explained that the Jewish nation had failed to understand that the law could not make anyone righteous. Attempting to live up to God's holy standard in their own strength, striving to seek a righteousness of their own making, had left them weary and defeated. But when had appeared and offered Himself as the only means of being made right with God, the Jews had rejected Him.

³ For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. ⁴ For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. – Romans 10:3-4 ESV

And while Paul was proud of his Jewish heritage and understood the value of the law, he also understood that the law had never been intended to make anyone right with God. It could only reveal man's sinfulness, not produce righteousness. And nowhere does Paul make that point clearer than in his letter to the Galatian believers.

¹⁵ “You and I are Jews by birth, not ‘sinners’ like the Gentiles. ¹⁶ Yet we know that a person is made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law. And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be made right with God because of our faith in Christ, not because we have obeyed the law. For no one will ever be made right with God by obeying the law.”

¹⁷ But suppose we seek to be made right with God through faith in Christ and then we are found guilty because we have abandoned the law. Would that mean Christ has led us into sin? Absolutely not! ¹⁸ Rather, I am a sinner if I rebuild the old system of law I already tore down. ¹⁹ For when I tried to keep the law, it condemned me. So I died to the law—I stopped trying to meet all its requirements—so that I might live for God. – Galatians 2:15-19 NLT

And yet, Paul had been misunderstood by the Jews. They saw him as anti-law. But Paul himself said, “the law itself is holy, and its commands are holy and right and good” (Romans 7:12 NLT).

The problem was not with the law, but with man's failure to understand that adherence to the law could never save anyone, because man's sin nature made it impossible.

But the problem was real. James knew that when those Jews who were "zealous for the law" got wind that Paul was in town, they were going to be upset. And the rumors would fly. So, James suggested a plan to alleviate any potential and unnecessary tension. He recommended that Paul join four other men who had recently made vows to God and were preparing to conclude the completion of their vows by having themselves ceremonially cleansed at the temple. Paul was encouraged to join them and to underwrite any costs associated with the sacrifices they would need to make. In doing so, Paul would show that he had not abandoned the rites and rituals of Judaism. His actions would go a long way in convincing others that he was still a faithful Jew and not anti-law.

James made it clear that nothing had changed regarding their previous decision to place no undue or unnecessary burden on the Gentiles. The Jerusalem council had already determined that Gentile converts were not required to be circumcised or to keep the Mosaic law. It was enough that they "abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality", out of deference for their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ.

The early church was equal parts melting pot and powder keg. The unique and unlikely blending of so many ethnic, social and religious perspectives had created a potentially toxic cocktail. Part of the responsibility of the leadership was to manage this sensitive and volatile environment with wisdom and diplomacy. The church was growing rapidly, and each day brought with it new issues and potential conflicts that required careful and prayerful administration. The diverse constituency of the church demanded that the elders, apostles and other leaders manage all the competing expectations and conflicting perspectives with godly grace and brotherly love. It is no wonder that one of Jesus' primary requests in His high priestly prayer on the night He was betrayed, was for unity among those who could be His followers. Paul could have easily rejected the suggestion of James, demanding that it was well within his rights to do so. But he cared more about the gospel than he did about his rights. He was always willing to sacrifice his rights for the cause of Christ. He was ready, willing and able to die to self in order that others might discover what it means to live for Christ. He summed up his outlook quite succinctly in his first letter to the Corinthian church.

³¹ So if you eat or drink or whatever you do, do everything to honor God. ³² Do nothing that would make trouble for a Greek or for a Jew or for the church of God. ³³ I want to please everyone in all that I do. I am not thinking of myself. I want to do what is best for them so they may be saved from the punishment of sin. – 1 Corinthians 10:31-33 NT

Disorder in the Court

Acts 21:27-36

²⁷ When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, ²⁸ crying out, “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.” ²⁹ For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. ³⁰ Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. ³¹ And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. ³² He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. ³³ Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. ³⁴ Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. ³⁵ And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, ³⁶ for the mob of the people followed, crying out, “Away with him!” – Acts 21:27-36 ESV

Rumors had spread among the predominantly Jewish believers in Jerusalem that Paul, while on his missionary journeys, had been attempting to get Jews to walk away from Judaism. They had heard that he was teaching against the Mosaic law, demanding that parents no longer circumcise their children or keep the customs associated with Judaism. Of course, none of it was true, but rumors have a way of becoming fact, not fiction, when told often and eagerly enough. So, Paul had agreed with the suggestion of James, to join four other men who were completing their vows to God. Paul would underwrite the costs of their ceremonial cleansing and join them in their rites of purification, signaling to the Jewish Christians that he was still very much a faithful adherent to Judaism. And it was while Paul and the four other men were in the middle of completing their seven days of purification that a riot ensued. It seems that the Jews had never forgiven Paul for deserting the faith and becoming a follower of the Way. At one time, he had been an up-and-coming Pharisee and fervent opponent of the sect of the rabbi from Nazareth. He had done everything in his power to eradicate the movement and its followers. Then suddenly, without warning, he had switched sides, becoming one of movements most powerful proponents and propagators of the teachings of Jesus. As Paul was completing his purification rites in the Temple courtyard, some Jews from Asia saw him and became upset that he was on their sacred grounds. These men were Jews who had traveled all the way to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. They were devout and completely dedicated to the Hebrew faith. Having come from Asia, they were very familiar with the work of Paul and his efforts among the Gentiles. It may be that these men were from Ephesus, because “they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city” (Acts 21:29 ESV). They obviously recognized Trophimus and knew him to be a non-Jew. Upon seeing Paul in the temple courtyard, they immediately assumed that he had brought his Gentile friends with him. Now, if Paul had brought them into the Court of the Gentiles, that would have been acceptable, but as

part of his purification rite, Paul would have been in the Israelite's Courtyard. These men viewed Paul as an enemy of Judaism. He had spent two years in Ephesus, preaching the gospel and spreading the good news regarding Jesus, "so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10 ESV).

Now, here were these Jews from Asia, seeing Paul in the courtyard of their sacred temple, and they lost it. They immediately sounded the alarm, calling attention to Paul's presence and accusing him of desecrating the temple by bringing Gentiles into the restricted areas. Perhaps they thought that the four men who were undergoing purification with Paul were Gentiles. Whatever the case, they shouted, "Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who preaches against our people everywhere and tells everybody to disobey the Jewish laws. He speaks against the Temple—and even defiles this holy place by bringing in Gentiles." (Acts 21:28 NLT). Luke makes it clear that they had wrongly assumed that Paul had brought Trophimus into the sacred area of the temple. According to the Mosaic Law, that would have been a capital offense. According to the 1st-Century Jewish historian, Josephus, there were notices placed in the court of the Gentiles, written in both Greek and Latin, warning that any Gentiles who ventured into the inner courts would be responsible for their own deaths. Paul, while a Jew by birth, was little more than a Gentile to these men because they were convinced that he had abandoned his Jewish faith for Christianity. In their minds, Paul was a lover of Gentiles, and he deserved to die. The Jews from Asia whipped the crowd into a frenzy, and "Paul was grabbed and dragged out of the Temple, and immediately the gates were closed behind him" (Acts 21:30 NLT). It seems likely that Paul was removed by force from the Israelite Courtyard and dragged into the Court of the Gentiles. The gates between the two were closed and locked, in an effort to prevent any other potential desecration of the holy grounds.

Things escalated quickly, because Luke indicates that they were trying to kill Paul. News spread of the riot taking place on the temple grounds, and the commander of the Roman forces stationed at the Fortress of Antonio, gathered his troops and entered into the crowd in an attempt to restore order. It didn't take the Roman Tribune long to get there, because the Fortress of Antonio was directly outside the northern portico of the temple. It was only when the crowd saw the Roman troops, that they stopped beating Paul. But the chaos continued, with the irate Jews shouting accusations and spewing hate-filled demands calling for Paul's death. The commander, placing Paul in chains and having his troops carry him above their heads in an effort to protect him from the mob, ordered that he be taken to the fortress. And as they made their way through the throng crowded into the Court of the Gentiles, Paul could hear the shouts of "Kill him, kill him!"

This scene conjures up images of another, very similar occasion, when Jesus had been dragged before Pilate, the Roman governor, having been arrested by the Jewish council and accused of blasphemy. Pilate had examined Jesus and found Him guilty of nothing worthy of death. And Pilate, confused as to what he should do with Jesus, turned to the Jewish crowd and asked them for their opinion in the matter.

¹² Pilate asked them, "Then what should I do with this man you call the king of the Jews?"

¹³ They shouted back, "Crucify him!"

¹⁴ "Why?" Pilate demanded. "What crime has he committed?"

But the mob roared even louder, "Crucify him!"

¹⁵ So to pacify the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He ordered Jesus flogged with a lead-tipped whip, then turned him over to the Roman soldiers to be crucified. – Mark 15:12-15 NLT

Their answer had been perfectly and painfully clear. And, in the case of Paul, the Jews were equally adamant in their demand that he be put to death. Paul was a perceived threat to their way of life. He was disrupting the status quo and, apparently, guilty of causing many of their fellow Jews to abandon their Jewish faith. He was a troublemaker and a heretic who needed to be exterminated. But, in reality, all Paul was guilty of, was teaching men and women how they might be made right with God. He had been teaching justification by faith, not by the law. He had not been discounting Judaism or diminishing the importance of the Mosaic law but had simply been clarifying the true intentions of the law. If Paul had taught anything, it was that the law "was given alongside the promise to show people their sins. But the law was designed to last only until the coming of the child who was promised" (Galatians 3:19 NLT). It had been the apostle John who wrote in his gospel, "For the law was given through Moses, but God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17 NLT). Later on, in the same gospel, John records the words of Jesus, spoken to the Jews: "Moses gave you the law, but none of you obeys it! In fact, you are trying to kill me" (John 7:19 NLT).

Jesus had come to fulfill the requirements of the law. He made that fact known when He addressed the crowds during His sermon on the mount.

¹⁷ "Don't misunderstand why I have come. I did not come to abolish the law of Moses or the writings of the prophets. No, I came to accomplish their purpose. ¹⁸ I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not even the smallest detail of God's law will disappear until its purpose is achieved. – Matthew 5:17-18 NLT

Jesus had been the consummate law-keeper, not lawbreaker. He was obedient to His heavenly Father in every way, having kept every single commandment perfectly. And Paul had been spreading the truth regarding Jesus and His association with the law of Moses.

²¹ But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law, as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago. ²² We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. – Romans 3:21-22 NLT

³ *The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins.* ⁴ *He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature but instead follow the Spirit.* – Romans 8:3-4 NLT

Paul was not against the law of Moses. He was against the idea of anyone being able to keep the law and make themselves righteous in the eyes of God. He had been a law-abiding Pharisee but knew that all his efforts to keep the law had failed. In spite his best intentions, he had been a lawbreaker, not a law-keeper. And Paul provides us with a vivid description of his view of life lived in an attempt to keep the holy and righteous law of God in the flesh.

¹⁴ *So the trouble is not with the law, for it is spiritual and good. The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin.* ¹⁵ *I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate.* ¹⁶ *But if I know that what I am doing is wrong, this shows that I agree that the law is good.* ¹⁷ *So I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.*

¹⁸ *And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't.* ¹⁹ *I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.* ²⁰ *But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.*

²¹ *I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong.* ²² *I love God's law with all my heart.* ²³ *But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me.* ²⁴ *Oh, what a miserable person I am!* – Romans 7:14-24 NLT

Paul was in chains. He had been beaten and falsely accused. But he knew that he was guilty of nothing more than preaching and teaching the truth about Jesus. He firmly believed what he wrote to the church in Rome, answering his own question, “Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?” with the powerful and life-altering words, “Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 7:24-25 NLT)

Misdirected Zeal

Acts 21:37-22:5

³⁷ As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, “May I say something to you?” And he said, “Do you know Greek?” ³⁸ Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?” ³⁹ Paul replied, “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people.” ⁴⁰ And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying:

¹ “Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.”

² And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said:

³ “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. ⁴ I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, ⁵ as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.” – Acts 21:37-22:5 ESV

At the close of chapter seven and the beginning of chapter eight, Luke introduced us to Saul for the very first time. Luke indicated that Saul “was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison” (Acts 8:3 NLT). He was a man on a mission. He was obsessed. And he honestly thought he was doing God a huge favor by ridding the world of any and all Christians he could get his hands on. In fact, in today’s chapter, he explains the mindset behind his passionate persecution of the church.

³ I became very **zealous to honor God in everything I did**, just like all of you today. ⁴ And I persecuted the followers of the Way, hounding some to death, arresting both men and women and throwing them in prison. – Acts 22:3-4 NLT

He was highly motivated and demonstrated extreme eagerness to please and honor God through his actions. We know that when he stood by and watched the stoning of Stephen, he not only held the coats of those who threw the stones, he “agreed completely with the killing of Stephen” (Acts 8:1 NLT). He was convinced that the killing of Christians was a good thing. He saw them as dangerous heretics and criminals who opposed the Mosaic law and the Jewish religion. But something had happened to Saul. He had a personal encounter with the resurrected Jesus and his life had been dramatically transformed and the trajectory of his life had been radically altered. He was no longer the same man.

And as he stood in the Court of the Gentiles, having been rescued by the Roman cohort, from a beating at the hands of the Jews, he recounted to the crowd just what had happened to change his life. He asked the captain of the Roman soldiers if he could be given a chance to address the crowd, the very ones who had been attempting to end his life. Paul saw this as a unique and unavoidable opportunity to share his story. And when the captain, having learned that Paul was not the radical Egyptian revolutionary he supposed him to be, allowed him to speak. And Paul addressed the crowd of Jews in their own language.

Not only did Paul address the crowd in their own language of Aramaic, he let them know that he was one of them, a Jew born in Tarsus of Cilicia. He was a Hellenistic Jew, born in the Roman-controlled region of Cilicia. Tarsus was a major city, located in what is today southern Turkey. Paul wanted the Jews in his audience to know that he was a Jew, not some upstart Greek-speaking troublemaker. And he proceeded to give them his curriculum vitae, explaining that he had a significant Hebrew heritage and a formal education that was more than a little bit impressive. Paul wasn't bragging, but he was attempting to get his audience's attention by highlighting his religious and educational resumes.

"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, and I was brought up and educated here in Jerusalem under Gamaliel." – Acts 22:3 NLT

He wasn't a newcomer to Jerusalem or some kind of country bumpkin from the sticks. He had been raised in the capital city and trained under one of the most revered of all the Jewish rabbis and teachers of the day. He was well-educated and more than familiar with the religion of his forefathers. Paul had been a Pharisee. and he would later describe himself as having been one of the best of all the Pharisees.

⁵ I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. ⁶ I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault. – Philippians 3:5-6 NLT

Paul had been a law-keeping, card-carrying Pharisee who had an impeccable record of human-based righteousness. He had Hebrew blood coursing through his veins and a no-holds-barred obsession for the Hebrew faith. If you looked up the word, "zealous" in the dictionary, you would have found Paul's picture out beside it. In fact, Paul referred to himself as "being zealous for God." The Greek word he used is *zēlōtēs*, and it refers to someone who burns with zeal for something, but also someone who defends and upholds something, vehemently contending for it with all his power. Paul had seen his pre-conversion mission as somehow God-ordained. But he had really appointed himself, having determined that he was doing the will of God, without having ever received his assignment from God. Paul was a self-appointed vigilante for God. He was kicking tail and taking names. His mission in life was to eliminate any and all Christians from the face of the earth – one at a time, if necessary. And Paul openly confessed, "I persecuted the

followers of the Way, hounding some to death, arresting both men and women and throwing them in prison” (Acts 22:4 NLT). He had taken his job very seriously. And he had not been content to restrict his efforts to the city of Jerusalem. He had gone to the high priest and solicited formal documents that would allow him to take his little show on the road, seeking out Christians wherever he could find them.

Back in chapter eight, Luke recorded that “A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria. (Some devout men came and buried Stephen with great mourning.) **But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church.** He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison” (Acts 8:1-4 NLT). And he had received official papers giving him permission and power to search and destroy all Christians found in the city of Damascus.

I received letters from them to our Jewish brothers in Damascus, authorizing me to bring the followers of the Way from there to Jerusalem, in chains, to be punished. – Acts 22:5 NLT

And he challenged his listeners to fact-check his claim by talking to the high priest himself. He would corroborate the authenticity of his story.

But this is where his story will take a dramatic turn. He had set them up. They were on pins and needles, having heard him share some insights to his life story that none of them would have never guessed in a million years. Here was a former Pharisee and student of the famous Gamaliel, and he had been accused of teaching against the law of Moses and of desecrating the temple by bringing uncircumcised Gentiles into the area reserved only for Jews. How could he have done such a thing? What had forced this Pharisee to abandon his Jewish faith and turn his back on his own people? At this point, the crowd is far less interested in beating Paul, as they are in hearing what he has to say. They were mesmerized and intrigued. And Paul was going to take advantage of their rapt attention to share the most dramatic and unexpected part of his story. He had been one of them. He had grown up in the same culture and under the same conditions as they had. He had been circumcised, taught in the synagogue, attended the various feasts and festivals, trained as a Pharisee, and emersed in the rights, rituals and religious rules of Judaism. So, what had happened? And that’s where Paul will pick up his story:

“As I was on the road, approaching Damascus...” – Acts 22:6 NLT

Remember. He had been on a mission. He thought he was acting on behalf of God. He had truly believed he was doing God a favor. He was zealous and energetic in his efforts. He had been determined and disciplined in carrying out his actions. And, like the people standing in the crowd, listening to his words, Paul had been convinced that he was right. He had fully believed that his agenda had been God’s agenda. But he was in for a big surprise and so were they.

Appointed by God

Acts 22:6-21

⁶ “As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. ⁷ And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ ⁸ And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’ ⁹ Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. ¹⁰ And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.’ ¹¹ And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.

¹² “And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, ¹³ came to me, and standing by me said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. ¹⁴ And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; ¹⁵ for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’

¹⁷ “When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance ¹⁸ and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’ ¹⁹ And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. ²⁰ And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.’ ²¹ And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’” – Acts 22:6-21 ESV

Paul had been on his way to Damascus, on a self-appointed mission to seek and destroy Christians.

³ I became very zealous to honor God in everything I did, just like all of you today. ⁴ And I persecuted the followers of the Way, hounding some to death, arresting both men and women and throwing them in prison. ⁵ The high priest and the whole council of elders can testify that this is so. For I received letters from them to our Jewish brothers in Damascus, authorizing me to bring the followers of the Way from there to Jerusalem, in chains, to be punished. – Acts 22:3-5 NLT

He clearly believed he had been doing God a favor by eliminating this radical religious sect called The Way from the face of the planet. He saw his efforts as God-honoring, but the problem was that they were not God-appointed. God had not asked him to do what he was doing. He had not been commissioned by God to persecute, arrest and murder Christians. That had all been Paul's idea. Yes, God had been sovereignly orchestrating the events surrounding

Paul's life and, according to Paul's own testimony, God had chosen him for salvation and for his role as an apostle, long before Paul was even born.

¹³ You know what I was like when I followed the Jewish religion—how I violently persecuted God's church. I did my best to destroy it. ¹⁴ I was far ahead of my fellow Jews in my zeal for the traditions of my ancestors.

¹⁵ But even before I was born, God chose me and called me by his marvelous grace. Then it pleased him ¹⁶ to reveal his Son to me so that I would proclaim the Good News about Jesus to the Gentiles. – Galatians 1:13-15 NLT

But God had not made Paul, then known as Saul, persecute the church. He had not forced Saul to do the things he did. God does not entice anyone to commit acts of evil. James, the half-brother of Jesus reminds of this very important fact: "And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, 'God is tempting me.' God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else" (James 1:13 NLT). And John echoes those same sentiments: "Remember that those who do good prove that they are God's children, and those who do evil prove that they do not know God" (3 John 1:11 NLT). What Paul had been doing had been his idea, not God's. But unbeknownst to Paul, God had been using his ungodly actions to accomplish the divine plan of redemption. Paul's efforts to destroy the church had actually resulted in the scattering and dispersion of the believers and to the spread of the gospel message.

³ But Saul was going everywhere to destroy the church. He went from house to house, dragging out both men and women to throw them into prison.

⁴ But the believers who were scattered preached the Good News about Jesus wherever they went. – Acts 8:3-4 NLT

And Paul had been heading to Damascus to carry out his self-appointed mission as a bounty-hunter for God, when his will ran head-on into God's. He testified, "As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me" (Acts 22:6 ESV). Paul had his eyes set on Damascus, but he had an unexpected and unplanned encounter with the risen Lord. This had not been on his agenda for the day. He had not scheduled this meeting in his appointment book that morning. When he had set out that day on his seek-and-destroy mission, he had not planned on meeting the crucified and resurrected Jesus. In fact, he didn't believe such a person existed. Oh, he believed there *had been* a Jesus, but He had been put to death. And yet, Paul was in for the shock of his life. Jesus was alive and well and knew him by name. He saw a blinding light and heard a voice calling out to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Whoever this was knew him. but Paul wasn't able to put two and two together. He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" and Jesus responded, "I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting." Can you imagine what went through Paul's mind as he heard those words? He was hearing the voice of a dead man. The martyred leader of The Way was speaking to him from the grave. The recognized leader of the sect Paul had been trying to destroy was somehow communicating with him and accusing Paul of persecuting Him.

Now, what happens next is fascinating. Just think of all the questions that must have been swirling through Paul's mind at that moment. Imagine how his thoughts would have been reeling as he stood there, unable to see, but clearly hearing the voice of a man he had never met before and who was supposed to be dead. And yet, the only thing Paul could say was, "What shall I do, Lord?" Paul was a religious man. He was a devout Jew and a well-educated Pharisee, so he knew this was a divine encounter of some kind. It is doubtful that he fully understood what was going on or that he realized that the voice he heard truly was that of the resurrected Jesus. But he knew he had been physically accosted by a power greater than his own, that had left him blind and totally incapacitated. So, he asked for directions. He wanted to know what he was supposed to do next. And Jesus accommodated Paul's desire for next steps by providing him with specific instructions: "Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do."

The word "appointed" is important. The Greek word Luke used is *tassō*, and it means "to ordain, order or appoint; to assign to a certain position or lot." Paul was about to find out what he was really supposed to be doing. He had been on a mission, but it had not been the one God had in store for him. And while Paul had been zealous to honor God in all that he did, he was not doing any of it according to God's will. He had been well-intended, but well off the mark when it came to his true life's calling.

Paul was led by the hand into Damascus, and later received a visitor, sent to him by God. Ananias was a believing Jew who had received a vision from God, commanding him to go to Paul, restore his sight and deliver to him a message. But Ananias had been somewhat reluctant to follow God's orders. He had felt compelled to remind God just who this man Saul was and why it was probably not a good idea for him to go and meet with him.

¹³ "I've heard many people talk about the terrible things this man has done to the believers in Jerusalem! ¹⁴ And he is authorized by the leading priests to arrest everyone who calls upon your name." – Acts 9:13-14 NLT

Paul's reputation had preceded him. And Ananias was justifiably reluctant to have a one-on-one encounter with a known and renowned persecutor of the church. But God calmed Ananias' spirit by providing him with insight into what was going on. God had a plan for Paul's life. "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:15-16 ESV). God had hand-picked Paul for a special assignment and had preordained the purpose for and outcome of his life.

And when Ananias had arrived on the scene and restored Paul's sight, he delivered a personal message from the Lord. "The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard" (Acts 22:14-15 ESV). There's that word again: Appointed. But this time, Ananias uses the Greek word, *procheirizō*, which carries the meaning, "to appoint for one's use" or "to choose." In this case, Ananias was letting Paul know that God

had made a decision to reveal His divine will to him, by allowing him to have a personal encounter with Jesus, the Righteous one, and to receive a message directly from the lips of the resurrected, living Messiah. And now, Paul was going to have a new life assignment: Telling anyone and everyone what he had seen and heard.

And Paul indicates that the very next thing that happened to him was his own baptism. He received water baptism as a result of his faith in Christ. Nowhere in the text does Paul indicate exactly when he came to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, but it was long before he was baptized, because the water baptism does not wash away sins. It is a post-conversion act of obedience, signifying that one has believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and received the gift of salvation, including forgiveness and cleansing from sin. Ananias had rather abruptly asked Paul, "What are you waiting for? Get up and be baptized. Have your sins washed away by calling on the name of the Lord" (Acts 22:16 NLT). The text makes it sound like Ananias was associating water baptism with the washing away of sins, but in the original text, the phrase, "calling on" is actually an aorist participle meaning "having called on." Paul's baptism was following his conversion. It was symbolic of the spiritual cleansing that had already taken place in Paul's life.

Paul ultimately returned to Jerusalem, where he received a vision from Jesus, warning him to flee the city because they were not going to accept his testimony. Jesus had other plans for Paul. Because of his prior mission as a persecutor of the church, Paul thought his chances at having a successful ministry were shot out of the water. He was damaged goods. But Jesus let him know that his ministry was going to be to the Gentiles, telling him, "Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles!" And that is exactly what Paul had been doing, up until the point that he had been nearly beaten to death in the temple courtyard. He had been faithfully carrying out the ministry appointed to him by Jesus, and just as Jesus has told Ananias, Paul had discovered what it meant to suffer for the name of Jesus.

Between Two Worlds

Acts 22:22-30

²² Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live."²³ And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air,²⁴ the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this.²⁵ But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?"²⁶ When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, "What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen."²⁷ So the tribune came and said to him, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" And he said, "Yes."²⁸ The tribune answered, "I bought this citizenship for a large sum." Paul said, "But I am a citizen by birth."²⁹ So those who were about to examine him withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.

³⁰ But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them. – Acts 22:22-30 ESV

Paul, having been saved by Roman soldiers from being beaten to death by the Jewish mob, had been given an opportunity to address his accusers. And as Paul had shared his conversion story with them, they had given him their undivided attention, until he relayed the words spoken to Him by Jesus: "Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles" (Acts 22:21 ESV). It was at that very moment that the crowd lost their composure yet again. As soon as they heard speak those words, they responded, "Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live" (Acts 22:22 ESV). But was it that caused this extreme reaction? Why had they listened so quietly and intently up until this particular moment? There were probably a number of factors involved. First of all, Paul was claiming to have heard directly from Jesus Himself, the very one the Jews had plotted to have put to death by the Romans. Paul referred to him as "Lord", a designation most often reserved for God Himself. On top of that, Paul infers that Jesus told him to take the message of salvation to the Gentiles. This would have angered the believing Jews in the audience, who were already upset with Paul because he had been converting Gentiles without requiring them to submit to the rite of circumcision and obey the Mosaic law. It is important to remember that part of what had gotten Paul in trouble in the first place was the accusation that he had brought Gentiles into the Court of Israel. This would have been a crime punishable by death. When Paul had showed up at the Temple to complete his ceremonial cleansing, some Jews from Asia had seen him and riled up the crowds against him.

"This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." – Acts 21:28 ESV

So, when Paul mentioned that Jesus had spoken to him and had commanded him to take the gospel concerning the Messiah to the Gentiles, the Jews became enraged. Those were unbelieving Jews were upset that Paul spoke of Jesus as the Messiah and Lord. Those in the crowd who were believing Jews were angry because they believed that Gentiles must first become law-abiding Jews before they could receive salvation in Christ. Both groups were angry with Paul. So much so, that Luke describes them as “shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air” (Acts 22:23 ESV). What a scene. Complete confusion and chaos, mixed with uncontrollable rage. And the Roman tribune ordered Paul to be taken to the barracks inside the Fortress of Antonio, which was immediately outside the temple grounds. His plan was to flog Paul until he got to the truth of what was really going on.

It's interesting to note that Paul allowed the soldiers to go so far as to have him stretched out, ready to be flogged, before he spoke up and revealed his status as a Roman citizen. It is as if Paul was going to let them get right up to the point of no return before he stopped them from committing a crime. This would certainly get their attention. And Luke proves that this little, last-minute revelation by Paul had its desired impact.

The soldiers who were about to interrogate Paul quickly withdrew when they heard he was a Roman citizen, and the commander was frightened because he had ordered him bound and whipped. – Acts 29 NLT

They had been stopped in the nick of time. As a Roman citizen, Paul was legally protected from scourging. It was against the law for any Roman to undergo this kind of punishment without access to due process. Paul had been accused, but nothing had been proven. He had been arrested, but there had been no trial. And the very fact that the Roman tribune had commanded Paul to be bound by chains, was a violation of Paul's rights as a Roman citizen.

The Roman commander was surprised that Paul had Roman citizenship, because he had seen in him in the temple and had heard his testimony. “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers” (Acts 22:3 ESV). And because Paul was a Jew, the Roman tribune had just assumed that he was not a Roman citizen. He even hinted that Paul must have purchased his citizenship somewhere along the way. But Paul assured him that he had been born a Roman citizen, with all the rights and privileges that designation brings.

While the Roman tribune had learned of Paul's Roman citizenship, he was still in the dark as to why Paul was being accused by the Jews and what had prompted them to try and kill him in the first place. So, the next day, he arranged a meeting with the religious leadership.

³⁰ But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them. – Acts 22:30 ESV

This was going to set up a unique situation, in which Paul, a Jew and Christ-follower, would find himself standing before the Jewish chief priests and religious leaders, as well as a representative of the Roman government. He would have his feet firmly planted in two different worlds, both of which would prove integral to his entire life and ministry. Paul was a devout Jew and proud of his Hebrew heritage. He was a Pharisee and a former student of one of the leading rabbis of the day. He was knowledgeable of the Hebrew Scriptures and highly intelligent. And yet, Paul was comfortable in the pagan world as well, easily able to mix and mingle with people from all walks of life and from every imaginable ethnic background. Paul was comfortable within the context of Jerusalem, but he would one day find himself living in Rome, under house arrest, and sharing the gospel with all those he had a chance to meet, including his Roman guards.

In this scene, we get a glimpse of God's sovereign hand as He orchestrated all the details of Paul's life, from his birth into a Jewish home to his inheritance of a Roman citizenship. What if that had not been the case? What if Paul had not been a Roman citizen? He would have been flogged severely, a punishment that left its victim disfigured for life and, at time, dead. God had preordained Paul's entire life story, from beginning to end. His training in the school of Gamaliel had equipped him with a tremendous understanding of Judaism and the Hebrew Scriptures. His status as a Pharisee gave him an unparalleled understanding of the Mosaic law. His childhood spent in Tarsus, the capital city of the Roman province of Cilicia, would have provided Paul first-hand experience with the Roman way of life. He was a man adept at living in two different worlds. And yet, Paul would live his life with the attitude that his real citizenship was elsewhere. He reminded the believers in Philippi, "we are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Savior" (Philippians 3:20 NLT). Paul was comfortable living in two worlds, while keeping his mind set on the Kingdom to come. He had been specially prepared by God for his life and ministry, having been born and raised a Jew, inherited his Roman citizenship, and having received a theological education that was second to none. He was God's man for this moment in time.

According to Plan

Acts 23:1-11

¹ And looking intently at the council, Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day." ² And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. ³ Then Paul said to him, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?" ⁴ Those who stood by said, "Would you revile God's high priest?" ⁵ And Paul said, "I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest, for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'"

⁶ Now when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial." ⁷ And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. ⁸ For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. ⁹ Then a great clamor arose, and some of the scribes of the Pharisees' party stood up and contended sharply, "We find nothing wrong in this man. What if a spirit or an angel spoke to him?" ¹⁰ And when the dissension became violent, the tribune, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him away from among them by force and bring him into the barracks.

¹¹ The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome." – Acts 23:1-11 ESV

Paul had caused a riot in the temple. Actually, it would more accurate to say that it was his *presence* had led to a riot in the temple. The riot was the result of a contingent of Jews from Asia who, upon seeing Paul in the temple, had wrongly assumed that he had been accompanied by one of his Gentile companions, a violation of the Mosaic law. Their accusation has caused the Jews in the temple grounds to react vehemently and violently to Paul, nearly beating him to death before the Roman guards stepped in. Paul was given a chance to address the crowd, but when it went south, he was taken to the Roman barracks in chains, where the Romans made plans to flog the truth out of him. When Paul announced to them that he was a Roman citizen, he was immediately released and apologized profusely. But the Roman tribune still had a problem: He needed to know the nature of the crime for which Paul was guilty. When he had rescued Paul from the mob in the temple courtyard, he had been unable to discern what it was that Paul had done to make the Jews so angry. Luke recorded: "He inquired who he [Paul] was and what he had done. Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar" (Acts 21:33-34 ESV).

So, the Roman tribune had determined to bring in the big guns: the Jewish high council or Sanhedrin. He assumed that these religious rulers could help him get to the truth of what was going on. The following day, Paul was brought before the high priest and the council and given

an opportunity to speak. But this would prove to be a less-than-receptive audience. No sooner had Paul begun his address, he was slapped in the face by order of the high priest. All Paul had said was, “Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day” (Acts 23:1 ESV). This simple opening statement had incensed the high priest so much that he had commanded Paul to be publicly humiliated. Luke does not provide us with any details as to why Paul’s words were so upsetting to the high priest. It could have been a number of things. Perhaps he was offended that Paul addressed them as his brothers. Paul had at one time been a Pharisee and, according to his own testimony, had been given letters of authority by the high priest to pursue and arrest Christians in Damascus (Acts 9:2). So, at one time, he had enjoyed a close relationship with the high priest. But it is likely that the high priest was well aware of the radical change that had come over Paul and how he had switched sides and become a follower of the Way. He would no longer have considered Paul a brother.

There is also the likelihood that Paul’s claim of having a clear conscience before God also raised the ire of the high priest. Paul was claiming moral and ethical innocence as it pertained to his actions. As far as he was concerned, there was nothing he had done that was outside of the will of God or in violation of the Hebrew Scriptures. He had done nothing to deserve being beaten or arrested. The high priest most likely sensed that Paul was trying to seize the moral high ground and was not going to allow him to proceed.

Finally, there is a strong chance that the high priest was well aware that Paul was getting ready to launch into the story of his conversion and of his ministry among the Gentiles. He would have remembered what had happened when Stephen was on trial before them and how he had lectured them on their own history and accused them of killing Jesus. The slap might have been an attempt to put Paul in his place and to prevent him from using this forum as an opportunity to spout his heresy. Whatever the case, the indignity of the high priest’s reaction angered Paul and he responded accordingly.

“God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Are you sitting to judge me according to the law, and yet contrary to the law you order me to be struck?” – Acts 23:3 ESV

Paul’s words seem uncharacteristically angry. It almost appears that he lost his cool and allowed the tension of the last 24 hours to get to him. His words are harsh and vindictive, accusing the high priest of being a whitewashed wall. This statement is very similar to that of Jesus when He had referred to the scribes and Pharisees as whitewashed tombs.

“What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs--beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity.” – Matthew 23:27 NLT

Paul was accusing the high priest of hypocrisy. He was supposed to be the keeper of the law, but in ordering Paul to be struck, he was in direct violation of the law. Now, this is where it gets a bit interesting. Immediately after his verbal tongue lashing, Paul was informed that he had been addressing the high priest. This appears to have come as a shock to Paul, because he

immediately claims ignorance, stating, “I did not know, brothers, that he was the high priest” (Acts 23:5 ESV). And Paul makes it clear that, had he known, he would not have said what he said, because to do so would have been in violation of God’s law as well. He even quotes from Exodus 22:8: “You must not dishonor God or curse any of your rulers.” So, it would appear that Paul had been unaware that his words, spoken in anger, had been addressed to the high priest. But that begs the question: But would it have mattered? According to Exodus 22:8, Paul would have been guilty no matter which one of the men had ordered him to be slapped. As members of the high council, they were all considered leaders over the people of Israel. So, there is a likelihood that Paul was being a bit sarcastic. In saying that he didn’t know it was the high priest, he may have really been inferring that the high priest had not been acting like a high priest when he had ordered Paul to be slapped. So, how was Paul to know he was addressing a leader of the people of Israel. He hadn’t acted like one, so Paul had addressed him appropriately.

We’ll never know exactly what went on at that moment. But we do know that the tensions were high, and Paul sensed an opportunity to take advantage of what he knew to be the divisive nature of the council’s makeup. The members of the high council were made up of Pharisees and Sadducees. Paul, as a former Pharisee, knew well the differences between the two groups. The Sadducees denied the very idea of the resurrection. This was a major point of division between themselves and the Pharisees and, as a former Pharisee, Paul would have been well aware of this fact. So, he exploits it by saying, “Brothers, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees. It is with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial” (Acts 23:6 ESV). Once again, he addressed them as brothers, but this time he directs his attention to the Pharisees in the room. He was dividing his audience and setting up a confrontation. And, for the benefit of the Roman tribune, Paul cuts to the chase and established the true reason for his so-called trial: The resurrection of the dead. Specifically, the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But he purposefully doesn’t mention Jesus. He simply raises the controversial issue of bodily resurrection and the room explodes. Luke records that, “when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided” (Acts 23:7 ESV). Paul just sat back and watched the fireworks. And the Roman tribune got a first-hand glimpse of Jewish religious politics in action. Paul’s little ploy worked to perfection. Luke states that “a great clamor arose” and at one point, some of the scribes who were Pharisees, shouted that they saw no reason for Paul to be on trial – he was innocent. Then things began to get violent – so much so, that the Roman tribune had to rescue Paul once again and return him to the barracks, so he wouldn’t be torn to pieces by the religious leaders.

Paul was not out of the woods. He was still under arrest and had no idea what was going to happen to him. But the following night he was given words of assurance from Jesus Himself.

The following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.” – Acts 23:11 ESV

Paul was on his way to Rome. He had longed to go to Rome for some time. He had even written to the believers in Rome, telling them, “I am eager to come to you in Rome, too, to preach the Good News” (Romans 1:15 NLT). And now, after a lengthy delay, he was going to get his opportunity. But while Paul had long harbored a desire to go to Rome, he had not let that sway him from doing his job. He told the believers in Rome:

²⁰ My ambition has always been to preach the Good News where the name of Christ has never been heard, rather than where a church has already been started by someone else.

²¹ I have been following the plan spoken of in the Scriptures, where it says,

*“Those who have never been told about him will see,
and those who have never heard of him will understand.”*

²² In fact, my visit to you has been delayed so long because I have been preaching in these places. – Romans 15:20-22 NLT

But there would be no more delay. God was sending Paul to Rome. It would not be quite the way Paul had probably envisioned it, but it was the will of God. The timing was perfect, because it was God’s timing. The means by which Paul would make his way to Rome might appear less-than-ideal, but it was the sovereign plan of God. Paul’s very presence in Jerusalem had been the will of God. His presence in the temple had been part of God’s divine plan. His beating and arrest were as well. And all that had taken place in his trial before the Sanhedrin was just another example of God’s providential plan for his life. Paul was going to enjoy the opportunity of a lifetime: To testify about Jesus in the capital of the Roman empire.

Dead Man Walking

Acts 23:12-24

¹² When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. ¹³ There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. ¹⁴ They went to the chief priests and elders and said, "We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul. ¹⁵ Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you, as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. And we are ready to kill him before he comes near."

¹⁶ Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. ¹⁷ Paul called one of the centurions and said, "Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him." ¹⁸ So he took him and brought him to the tribune and said, "Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you." ¹⁹ The tribune took him by the hand, and going aside asked him privately, "What is it that you have to tell me?" ²⁰ And he said, "The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more closely about him. ²¹ But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in ambush for him, who have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they have killed him. And now they are ready, waiting for your consent." ²² So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, "Tell no one that you have informed me of these things."

²³ Then he called two of the centurions and said, "Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night. ²⁴ Also provide mounts for Paul to ride and bring him safely to Felix the governor." – Acts 23:12-24 ESV

Paul was in protective custody. The Roman tribune in charge of his care was at a loss as to what to do with Paul. He was still searching for a reason to keep Paul in custody because there appeared to be no valid charge against him or cause to keep him. But the Jews were still in an uproar and the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, had ended up in a violent debate over Paul and his guilt or innocence. Paul was most likely being kept somewhere within the Fortress of Antonio, just outside the walls of the temple compound.

Back in chapter 21, Luke recorded the arrival of Paul in the city of Caesarea, where he stayed in the home of Philip the Evangelist. While there, Paul received a visit from a man from Judea named Agabus, who had the gift of prophecy. This man had received a message from the Holy Spirit and delivered it to Paul.

¹¹ He came over, took Paul's belt, and bound his own feet and hands with it. Then he said, "The Holy Spirit declares, 'So shall the owner of this belt be bound by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and turned over to the Gentiles.'" ¹² When we heard this, we and the local believers all begged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. – Acts 21:11-12 NLT

This man's prophecy had come true. Paul had been bound by the Jewish leaders and now he was being kept under lock and key by the Roman authorities. Yet, all of this was part of God's divine plan for Paul's life, and he knew it. In fact, when those in Philip's house had tried to convince Paul not to go to Jerusalem, he had replied: "Why all this weeping? You are breaking my heart! I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but even to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13 NLT). And Paul, while sincere in his statement, had no idea just how prophetic his words had been.

While Paul was in the custody of the Romans, the Jewish leadership had been approached by a group of forty Jewish zealots who had developed a plan to take Paul's life. They were so serious that they had made a pact with one another, sealed by an oath and a mutual commitment to fast from food or drink until Paul was dead. But their plot would require the assistance of the high priest and the Sanhedrin. With Paul safely sequestered within the walls of the Fortress of Antonio, where he was surrounded by Roman guards, the only hope these men had was to somehow force the Romans to bring him out in the open. So, they appealed to the Sanhedrin, saying, "ask the commander to bring Paul back to the council again. Pretend you want to examine his case more fully. We will kill him on the way" (Acts 23:15 NLT).

Now, the text does not say whether the Jewish religious leaders agreed to this request. But Luke seems to take it quite seriously, because he records the fact that Paul's nephew somehow got wind of what these men were planning and delivered the news to Paul. And Paul immediately sent his nephew to inform the Roman tribune. Which raises an interesting side note. Notice how Paul reacted to the information his nephew delivered to him. He didn't smile and say, "Thanks for the warning, but I'm going to trust God." He didn't send his nephew away with a pat on the head and an assurance that God had this all under control. No, Paul seems to have viewed this news as having come from God and he took it seriously. Paul was not afraid to die, but he was in no rush to have his life taken by men who were driven by nothing more than hatred and motivated by Satan himself. Paul knew that there was a spiritual battle going on. He lived with a constant awareness that dark forces were gathered against the Kingdom of God and stood opposed to all that he was doing. Which is why he had written to the believers in Ephesus:

For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. – Ephesians 6:12 NLT

Paul felt a strong compulsion to go to Rome. Earlier, as Paul was making his way to Jerusalem, Luke records: "Paul felt compelled by the Spirit to go over to Macedonia and Achaia before going to Jerusalem. 'And after that,' he said, 'I must go on to Rome!'" (Acts 19:21 NLT). He somehow knew that a visit to Rome was in his future. He had even written to the believers in Rome, expressing his strong desire to be with them.

¹³ I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to visit you, but I was prevented until now. I want to work among you and see spiritual fruit, just as I

have seen among other Gentiles. ¹⁴ For I have a great sense of obligation to people in both the civilized world and the rest of the world, to the educated and uneducated alike. ¹⁵ So I am eager to come to you in Rome, too, to preach the Good News. – Romans 1:13-15 NLT

So, it would appear that Paul knew the plot against his life was not part of God's will for his life. He was not to die in Jerusalem at the hands of religious zealots. God had other plans for Paul and he knew it. As a result, Paul sent his nephew to inform the Roman tribune about the plot on his life. As we have seen all throughout the Book of Acts, this whole scene has God's sovereign hands all over it. Nothing escapes the divine will of God. He knew all about the plot and the names of every one of the forty men who had conspired to carry it out. And God had arranged for Paul's nephew to discover their plans so he could inform Paul. This whole sequence of events was actually God working behind the scenes to bring about His will that Paul arrive in Rome. In the eyes of the Jewish leadership, Paul was a dead man. It was only a matter of time before his life would be snuffed out, just like Jesus' had been. But Paul was going to walk out of that Roman barracks, under armed Roman guards, and with his entire trip to Rome paid for by the Roman government. And, as we will see in tomorrow's blog, Paul was going to be given opportunities to appear before powerful men and share the good news of the gospel, just as Jesus had told Ananias.

"Go, for Saul is my chosen instrument to take my message to the Gentiles and to kings..."
– Acts 9:15 NLT

It is always amazing to see how God accomplishes His will. The sad thing is that we don't always recognize or appreciate it when it is happening. We tend to look at the circumstances of life and see nothing but the apparent negatives that stare us in the face. Take this story as an example. Paul had been mobbed by a crowd, falsely accused and nearly beaten to death. He had been arrested by the Romans and barely escaped a violent flogging. Then, when he had appeared before the Sanhedrin, instead of getting an opportunity to defend himself, he had gotten his face slapped, and ended back in Roman custody. Now, he was facing a conspiracy to take his life. Oh, and Luke describes Paul having to depart Jerusalem in the middle of the night, surrounded by 200 Roman soldiers, 200 spearmen and 70 mounted troops. Could it get any worse?

But if we look at this same scene from a God-focused perspective, we see this seemingly insignificant Jewish evangelist, getting an all-expenses paid trip to Rome, complete with an armed escort made up of nearly 500 Roman soldiers. Paul was on his way to Caesarea where he would get a one-on-one, divinely ordained appointment with the Roman governor, Felix. In his wildest dreams, Paul could have never imagined something like this happening to him. And he would view it all as positive, not negative. He knew that God was in control and he was willing to rest in the knowledge that God was all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-loving. He was living out the very words he wrote to the believers in Philippi.

⁶ Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. ⁷ Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. – Philippians 4:6-7 NLT