

Exegetical Notes, Acts 21:17-36

“The Plan Didn’t Work”

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Acts 21:17-36

Verses 17-19

When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters received us warmly.

¹⁸ The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. ¹⁹ Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

- When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, he was greeted warmly by the church there.
- The day after his arrival in Jerusalem, Paul went to see James, the brother of Jesus, who was the lead elder at that time. All of the other elders were present at this meeting, too.
- Paul gave them a detailed report concerning his ministry among non-Jews.

Verses 20-23a

When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: “You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. ²¹ They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. ²² What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, ²³ so do what we tell you.

- After hearing his report, the elders praised God that Gentiles, non-Jews, were turning to Jesus. They pointed out to Paul that thousands of devout Jews had also converted and become Christians.
- They told Paul that there was a dilemma which faced them. A report had been circulated that Paul was telling Jews who lived among the non-Jews to “turn away from Moses.” He was telling them not to circumcise their children or to keep the customs of Judaism. The elders were concerned

that this report and his presence in Jerusalem would cause trouble among those devout Jews who had accepted Jesus Christ.

- The elders felt that they needed to short circuit the possible problem. So they laid out a plan for Paul to follow in order to appease his critics.

Verses 23b-24

There are four men with us who have made a vow. ²⁴ Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law.

- There were four men in the congregation who had “made a vow.” While we are not entirely sure what this means, it seems that these men had taken a vow before the Lord but had been unable or unwilling to keep their pledge. As a result of the broken pledge, they needed to go through a process of “purification” in the Temple. They would have to pay the priests for the rite of purification and, at the end of it, have their heads shaved. The shaving would have included facial hair and the hair on the top of their heads.
- The elders suggested that Paul join these men in the rite of purification, paying for the other men and by being shaved. The elders reasoned that this rite of purification would: 1. show that Paul still participated in the “customs” he was said to be teaching others to ignore; 2. purify him in the eyes of devout Jews from his long association with non-Jews; and 3. appease anyone who objected to him and his teaching.

Verse 25

As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality.”

- The elders reaffirmed their decision regarding non-Jews who converted to Christianity. See Acts 15:23-29.

Verses 26-29

The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.

²⁷ When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, ²⁸ shouting, “Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place.” ²⁹ (They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple.)

- Paul agreed to the elders’ plan. The very next day he took the four men with him to the Temple and paid the price for all five of them to be purified.
- When the time of purification was nearly ended Paul was in the Temple. Some Jews from Asia were there, too. Seeing Paul, they raised a ruckus. They accused him of teaching things which were contrary to Jewish customs and of bringing non-Jews into the sacred areas of the Temple which were forbidden to non-Jews. The latter charge was made because they had seen Paul in the company of non-Jews in Jerusalem.

Verses 30-36

The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. ³¹ While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. ³² He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. ³³ The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done. ³⁴ Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. ³⁵ When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. ³⁶ The crowd that followed kept shouting, “Get rid of him!”

- The ruckus became so great that Paul was dragged from the Temple. The gates of the Temple were closed to keep the riot outside of the Temple courts.
- The crowd’s intention was to stone Paul to death, but news of the riot reached the commander of the Roman guard in Jerusalem. As it was his job to keep order in the city, he took soldiers to stop whatever was happening.

- He arrested Paul, but could not get a clear understanding of what it was that Paul had done. He ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks for protection. His action angered the crowd to violence. Paul had to be carried into the barracks because of the crowd's intentions.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *The Plan Didn't Work*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Interim Senior/Lead Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by *Cornerstone Fellowship* & The Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen. They are used here by permission.)