

Derek French:

In Acts 9 verse 16 the Christian believer Ananias was told by Jesus that Paul would suffer for his saviour's name. This is exactly what came upon Paul during his time in Jerusalem after he had shared with the church the wonderful things that God had been doing as the gospel had been shared around the world.

Today we're in Acts 21 and Phillippa Chrispin will read verses 18 to 40 for us and then Gerard Chrispin will take us through them.

Phillippa Chrispin:

*'On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law; but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come. Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law. But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.'*

*'Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them.*

*'Now when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." (For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.)*

*'And all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut. Now as they were seeking to kill him, news came to the commander of the garrison that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. He immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them. And when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the commander came near and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and he asked who he was and what he had done. And some among the multitude cried one thing and some another.*

*'So when he could not ascertain the truth because of the tumult, he commanded him to be taken into the barracks. When he reached the stairs, he had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob. For the multitude of the people followed after, crying out, "Away with him!"*

*'Then as Paul was about to be led into the barracks, he said to the commander, "May I speak to you?" He replied, "Can you speak Greek? Are you not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a rebellion and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness?" But Paul said, "I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city; and I implore you, permit me to speak to the people." So when he had given him permission, Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, saying, ...'*

Gerard Chrispin:

After the warm welcome given by the Jerusalem Christians to Paul and his team, the scene changes the next day to a more formal meeting with the Jerusalem church leaders. Apparently the apostles have now transferred their authority to run the Jerusalem church to a team of elders. James, Jesus' half-brother, leads both the apostles and the church elders.

When Paul reports in detail how God has saved Gentiles through him, they give glory to the Lord. In Jerusalem the same gospel, preached by others, has produced 'many myriads' of Jewish believers, estimated to be a minimum of fifty thousand, which if taken at face value would be one tenth of Palestine's estimated Jewish population and over eight times the estimated number of Pharisees.

But this amazing gospel blessing brings a problem. It often does. True believers know that trying to keep God's law can save no one. This is so whether the branch of the law is God's changeless moral law, the Ten

Commandments, or ceremonial law, hygiene law, or Israel's combined civil and criminal law. These new Jewish believers have zealously followed God's law, albeit imperfectly. God's law is not to be obeyed to try and gain salvation. After conversion to Christ their keeping the moral law, as we should, demonstrates their love for God. Jesus said that those who love him keep his commandments.

The newly converted Jews have learned that the Gentile believers, having no Jewish heritage, need not follow specific Jewish laws. They never have been, and still are not, in bondage to it. Of course they must observe Israel's national criminal and civil code if they live in Israel. That now includes keeping the laws imposed by Rome, the occupying power. Also, as for all humanity at all times, each person will be judged by God for his or her failure to keep God's moral law which reflects his unchanging holiness and character. For us as for them, the realisation of being guilty of having broken God's moral law is used by the Holy Spirit to convict us and show us our need of Christ as saviour.

But grossly exaggerated, malicious rumours are launched at Paul. The four-part accusation in verse 28 is that he teaches all men everywhere, first against the people, then against the law, then against the temple and later that he has defiled the temple by bringing Greeks into it.

Paul has made it clear that circumcision can save no one, and that there is no profit in it at all for the Gentiles. But that was said to correct Jewish heretics' teaching that without circumcision, faith in Christ can save no one. Paul himself takes Nazirite vows of devotion and observes Jewish feasts, but not to save him from his sins. Only the crucified and risen Jesus can do that. In Lystra, Paul also had Timothy, the son of a Greek father and a Jewish mother, circumcised out of sensitivity for the Jews.

To combat those erroneous rumours, including that Paul forbade Jewish believers to circumcise their sons or keep Jewish customs, the elders advise Paul to show the charges are false by identifying with four Christian men due to take a vow by participating in their temple purification rites which have nothing to do with how a sinner is saved, and pay their head shaving expenses involved in such a Jewish Nazirite vow. They are confident that Paul's practical demonstration of his pro-Jewishness will spread and negate these rumours in the minds of fair-minded observers.

Paul follows through on the suggestion. He takes the four men and is purified with them and announces in the temple when an offering will be made for each of them to mark the end of the purification period.

The elders are determined however, not to undermine the gospel of grace. They stress that Gentiles must not follow the Jewish behaviour of these four Jewish believers. In following Christ as Lord and saviour, they are reminded what to shun because of the need to avoid both sin itself and also 'certain behaviour' which Jews regard as "typically gentile" and offensive. Christians must keep themselves holy and not cause others to stumble by setting any bad example.

All seems well until near the end of the seven day purification period when rabble-rousing Asian Jews see Paul in the temple, incite the crowd and take him. They cry out their four lying accusations about him. The 'Greeks' who allegedly defiled the temple after being brought in by Paul, turn out to be the visiting representative of the Ephesian church, Trophimus, seen with Paul 'in the city', not in the temple. Whether the elders' plan and Paul's part in it was right or not, it seems to have back-fired. But God is sovereign and is working out his plan anyway!

Paul is in deep trouble yet again. Why? Simply, he follows Jesus Christ as his Lord and has a passion to win others for him. The hatred and antagonism against Paul speedily gather momentum. 'All the city' boils with hate. The mass of murderous humanity runs to get Paul. They drag him from the temple to kill him. The temple doors are shut to protect it and avoid bloodshed in it. The Roman garrison commander at the nearby over-looking fortress Antonia, north of the Temple Mount, hears about the uproar engulfing 'all Jerusalem'. Some of the 600 soldiers stationed there must hear the tumultuous noise.

At least 160 troops with centurions run urgently down the stairs to the mob which, seeing them, ceases beating Paul. The commander has Paul chained. He tries to establish his identity and wrongdoing. A rampant violent mob cares nothing about objective truth. Contradictory answers are shouted to him so he commands that Paul be taken from the chaos to the Antonia barracks. At the stairs leading to the barracks, soldiers carry him to keep him from the violent crowd. The mob follows, shouting about Paul what an equally vicious mob once shouted about his saviour: 'Away with him!' Jesus died. Paul is saved. His time has not yet come and God will yet take him to Rome.

Paul speaks in fluent Greek to the commander, correcting wrong information that he is the Jewish Egyptian rebel who recently led four thousand militant Jewish nationalists, called 'assassins' or 'dagger men', into the desert. He explains he is a Jew from a respected city, Tarsus. (He wisely keeps his Roman citizenship to himself until he needs to disclose it later). Ever keen to share God's word, he bravely asks if he can speak to

the mob. Permission is granted. Paul makes the stairs his 'pulpit' and raises his hand to the people. A hush descends over the recently ranting rabble. Paul wisely addresses them in their own Hebrew language. This is a critical moment. What will he say? How will they react?