

*<sup>17</sup> When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters received us warmly. <sup>18</sup> The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. <sup>19</sup> Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, <sup>23</sup> so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. <sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>25</sup> 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." <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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, <sup>28</sup> 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." <sup>29</sup> (They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple.) <sup>30</sup> 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. <sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> 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. <sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. <sup>36</sup> The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Get rid of him!"*

After having been in Ephesus three years, Paul went to Jerusalem knowing that prison and hardships would await him. Luke picks up the story of the journey as he was with Paul, and again Paul is warned not to go to Jerusalem.

Biblical scholars have pored over the texts and accounts to see why Paul obeyed the Holy Spirit by going to Jerusalem for Pentecost, but disregarded the people who believed that he shouldn't go. Paul decided before the Ephesian riot to go to Jerusalem and then Rome. Paul says Acts 20:22-23) *And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. <sup>23</sup> I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. <sup>24</sup> However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace.* He says he is compelled by the Spirit to go. Yet others filled with the Holy Spirit urge him not to go. Acts 21:4 *We sought out the disciples there (In Tyre) and stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.* Again, in verses 10-11 when they stayed with Philip in Caesarea - *After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. <sup>11</sup> Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The*

*Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'*" The Holy Spirit tells Paul what will happen to him. Yet he still goes.

Back to the text: they arrive in Jerusalem and meet James – *cousin of Jesus, Mary's sister Salome was the mother of James and John; their father was Zebedee, who was left at the boat when his sons gave up fishing to follow Jesus* – and the rest of the elders to report back on what has been happening for the past eight or nine year years. Despite the warm welcome, the old issue of circumcision was raised again after having been sorted nine years earlier by stating it was unnecessary for Gentiles. The old traditions of Jewish converts had not left them... they basically followed the law of Moses with a belief that Jesus was the Messiah and was able to forgive sins. They still went to the temple to pray, gather at the necessary festivals, and follow all the food and ritual laws. The church in Jerusalem knew that the Jews were troublesome and needed any excuse to persecute Christians. So advice is offered to Paul to join four men who have taken a vow and to be purified in accordance with Mosaic law. They probably took the Nazarite vows (which involved a haircut, abstention from the fruit of the vine, sacrifices and priestly blessings), which for Christians would not be harmful (excluding the sacrifices), but neither especially useful as we are saved by grace and not by rituals. However, to prevent difficulty among Jewish believers who still regarded the need to follow the law of Moses as necessary even though Paul in his letters makes it clear that it has been made redundant, Paul submits to the suggestion of James and the elders in Jerusalem who he clearly regards as leaders of the church. There are differing views of this act: (1) Paul knows that he needs to demonstrate to the Jewish believers and non-believers that he is still a Jew to prevent trouble. (2) Paul is being expedient and submits to the authority of the church leaders, even though he believes this ritual is irrelevant, because he has already consecrated his life to serving God. (3) Paul wants to demonstrate that the reports that he is alleged to have asked the Jewish believers to abandon the law of Moses and not circumcise their sons were untrue as he is following the law of Moses in doing this ritual.

In the event, after going through the seven days of purification at the Temple, he is spotted by Jews from Asia and accused of what James and the elders had heard others say about him: *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.* As usual there is always a half truth and an outright lie when Jews accuse Paul. The half truth is that Paul teaches everyone that the law of Moses does not need to be followed by the Gentiles, but he didn't say that the Jews need abandon it. The lie is that he brought Gentiles into the temple space reserved for Jews only. Just because Paul outside the temple is seen with Trophimus the Ephesian, doesn't mean that he would be invited into the temple as no witnesses have actually seen this. Assertion of opinion is often used by evil men to override truth. A hostile crowd is gathered – news must have travelled fast as soon the whole city was in uproar (same thing happened in Ephesus). Paul is dragged out of the temple and the gates are shut. The crowd is ready to kill Paul, but fortunately for Paul, Roman troops come to restore order before any harm is done to Paul. The nameless Roman commander arrests Paul and puts him in chains. Having done this the crowd are unable to do Paul any further harm, because Paul is now in the custody of the Romans. Trying to find out what Paul had done wasn't possible due to conflicting accounts and the Roman commander – like other Romans before him - was faced with Jewish religious laws allegedly being broken for which he probably had no detailed knowledge. He decided that the questioning should be elsewhere and not in front of a mob, and takes Paul in chains to the barracks. The crowd is so rowdy that the soldiers have to carry Paul. If we picture the scene, there were probably a dozen Roman soldiers surrounded by hundreds of yelling Jews telling them to get rid of Paul. The Jews feared Roman soldiers and knew that any harm to them would invite serious retribution. Rome operated on the basis that any force

would be met by many times greater force without caring whether innocent people were killed. Pax Romana existed because overwhelming force was threatened if any Roman soldier or citizen were to be assaulted or killed. So jostling Paul and Roman soldiers was as far as the crowd dared to go. If anyone were killed, the Roman tenth legion would come out of barracks, burn down Jerusalem and kill its inhabitants. Which happened 30 years later.

And there we must leave it for this afternoon, and we will find out what happened next, next week.

### **If this story happened today, what would it look like?**

In our society it is unlikely that a Christian evangelist would be attacked by a crowd roused up by a few to draw people from their houses simply by accusing him of heresy. However, crowds have been roused by social media to attack people accused of things that the accusers found unacceptable. Franklin Graham found his venues were cancelled by social media accusations that were false, though this year he was able to come. Christians have been shouted down and accused of hatred at Speakers Corner by Muslims and secularists for merely quoting the Bible, leading to arrests by Police on baseless charges.

### **What is this story saying to us today?**

Paul was humble and submitted to the elders of the church in Jerusalem and did something that perhaps was ambiguous – it is not wrong to seek to be consecrated as a Nazarite even today, but the need for the ceremonial washing and purification rites, which usually included small animal sacrifices (a dove) is seen as unnecessary because the blood of Jesus has done all the purification needed for every Christian believer. Sometimes in preferring others or taking the advice of many Christians who are respected, can result in one's own judgment being overridden. (Proverbs 15:22 - *Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed*). The counsel of many in today's church is often wrong as it seeks to move away from what the Bible says. In a small way, Paul by falling back on his Jewish roots, went against what he had been telling the Gentiles that all this Mosaic law on rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices was unnecessary because Christ had paid the price once and for all. Going with the flow didn't end well for Paul so it was probably not the right thing to have done. But who are we to judge, because God used Paul in whatever situation he found himself, and his testimony remains the most powerful of all the apostles, and he brought thousands to faith in Jesus.

### **Could the story make a difference to my life, and if so, how?**

When we are faced with views – *whether from traditionalists who believe ceremonies and rituals that have evolved over centuries are necessary for true worship, or whether from liberals who believe that bits of the Bible can be ignored if it contradicts what society believes is lawful* – that we find difficult to accept, we should put on the armour of God and stand. Going with the flow accepting that society's laws or even the denomination's decisions on contentious matters, is something we need to pray about and seek Holy Spirit advice. We believe in the Word of God, and if the decisions made by either society or denominations are not in line with the Word of God, then we need not accept them. We must obey the law of the land, but many of the laws we might not agree with are usually over matters that will not personally affect us. We should obey our church leaders, who are accountable for their actions (Hebrews 13:17 *Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.*) However, like the law of the land, it will be rare that we will be personally affected by what they want us to do which is contrary to the Word of God. Like Paul, we will have to make a decision, and will have to pray we make the right one.