

Week 36

The Jerusalem Riot – A Collision Course for the Church

The Plan of Appeasement Backfires

In the second half of chapter 21, Paul arrived in Jerusalem and was warmly welcomed by the brothers and sisters. He met with James (the brother of Jesus, and local Bishop) and the elders and reported what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. They praised God and told Paul that many Jews had believed in Jesus, but they were zealous for the law and had heard rumors that Paul taught against Moses and the customs. This shows how the young Christian church was in a very precarious place. Many Jews were converting to believe in Christ as Messiah, but they could not leave behind the old ways of the Mosaic Law. The two worlds, Judaism and Christianity were on a collision course for sure.

The Elders advised Paul to join four men who had made a vow of purification. The text tells us the vow included cutting their hair. This give us a clue that it was most likely a “Nazarite” vow, which involved abstaining from wine, letting the hair grow until the vow was fulfilled, then cutting their hair, and offering sacrifices at the temple. The use of such vows extend far back into the history of the Jews, as can be seen in the life of Samson and other Old Testament figures. These vows were often taken as a special time of devotion to God and spiritual strengthening.

This was a way of showing respect for the law and dispelling the false accusations against Paul, but in reality, it was a kind of appeasement. I am sure the Elders were afraid that a riot was possible with Paul in the city. Many Jews, who were believers, simply were not ready for such grace to be granted to Gentiles as to come to faith in Messiah without first converting the Mosaic law. And this even though the earlier Church Council held in Jerusalem (Acts 15) had agreed that Gentiles did not have to convert to Judaism before they could be Christian. Paul agreed and went to the temple with the men. However, some Jews from Asia (where Paul had spent three years and was a very well-known figure) recognized him and stirred up the crowd, accusing him of teaching against the Law and bringing Gentiles into the temple, which would defile it. Paul, indeed, had not taken any gentiles into the Temple. He had much to much respect for the Law to do that. However, the people didn't care to find the truth, they saw an opportunity to accuse Paul of great sin in violating the sanctity of the Temple.

The crowd seized him and dragged him out of the temple, and the gates were shut. The mob tried to kill him, but the Roman commander intervened and arrested him. He bound him with two chains and asked who he was and what he had done. The crowd shouted different things, and the commander could not get the truth. He ordered Paul to be taken to the barracks, but as he reached the steps, the mob became so violent that he had to be carried by the soldiers. The crowd kept shouting, "Get rid of him!" Paul's greatest trouble had just begun... the story continues in chapter 23 and 24.

D. PAUL IN JERUSALEM (21:15-23:22)

1. Welcomed by Brethren (21:15-26)
2. Arrested by the Jews (21:27-40)
3. Paul's Defense (22:1-21)
4. The Response of the People (22:22-29)
5. Paul Before the Sanhedrin (23:1-10)
6. The Plot Against Paul (23:11-22)

Revive Us Again: How the Church Changed the World and Can Again

Study Notes – Week 36
