



Potomac Hills Community Church, PCA

GRACE ORIENTED • CHRIST CENTERED

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The Acts of the Apostles: The Spirit sends the Church with the Gospel **Acts 21.15-22:16 Dangerous Grace**

INTRODUCTION: “*Captive to the Word of God*”¹

When Lou Little was football coach at Georgetown University, he had on his squad a player of average ability who rarely got into the game. But Coach Little was fond of him. He especially liked the way he walked arm-in-arm with his father on campus. One day, shortly before a big game with Fordham, the boy’s mother called with the news that his father had died that morning of a heart attack.

The student went home with a heavy heart but was back three days later. “Coach,” he pleaded, “Will you start me in the game against Fordham? I think that’s what my father would have liked most.” After a moment’s hesitation, Little said, “Okay, but only for a play or two.”

True to his word, he put the boy in — but he never took him out. For sixty minutes that inspired young man ran and blocked like an All-American. After the game the coach praised him. “Son, you have never played like that before. What got into you?”

“Remember how my father and I used to go arm-in-arm?” answered the boy. “Well, he was totally blind, and today was the first time he ever saw me play!”

His desire to please someone he loved, someone not visibly present, made all the difference.

The Apostle Paul lived, fought, and died with the abiding consciousness that he was doing it all for God. His desire to please someone he loved, someone not visibly present, made all the difference.

Because he served the risen Christ, he did not allow the well-meaning pleadings of his loving friends — arguments that appealed to his desire for self-preservation — to sidetrack him from obeying God by going on to Jerusalem.

Paul was certainly not perfect. He made mistakes. Though he was an apostle, he was also a sinner. In fact, many consider Acts 21 and 22 an example of

¹ The introduction is adapted from Preaching the Word: Acts by R. Kent Hughes, page 291.

Paul's human fallibility. And whether it is or not, we do know that he was wholeheartedly devoted to God. Determined to pursue the salvation of his people, he now engaged in a controversial accommodation to Jewish culture. He was willing to take risks for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And sometimes risks are taken wisely and done in obedience to God.

And sometimes risks are taken unwisely and not done in obedience to God.

And sometimes risks are taken unwisely, but **thought** to be done in obedience to God.

Last week we saw Paul stand up to his friends and go to Jerusalem, a risk taken wisely and done in obedience to God. Paul was a man who knew and did God's will, which was to go to Jerusalem and minister to the church there even though such service would bring him into bonds and afflictions.

This week we see Paul cave under pressure from his friends, and take a risk unwisely, but a risk he probably thought was being done in obedience to God. And yet, we will still see how God sovereignly uses this time in Paul's life to further spread the Gospel.

From time to time, all of us wrestle with difficult decisions. We may wonder what God's will for us is, or we may think we know God's will but aren't sure we can do it. People are telling us what to do and sometimes their counsel is good and sometimes it's not, and debate whether or not to do what they say.

The story of Paul's struggle offers us helpful insights in how not to be sidetracked in following God's directions for us, and when we've made an unwise decision, how we get back to being faithful again.

We have a long passage today, and it begins with ...

21:15-20a: A WARM WELCOME²

Paul had been waiting for just the right moment to enter Jerusalem. Now, with the Passover crowd swelling the city to over a million, he made his entrance. **Acts 21:15-20**, *"Shortly afterward we packed our things and left for Jerusalem. [16] Some believers from Caesarea accompanied us, and they took us to the home of Mnason, a man originally from Cyprus and one of the early disciples. [17] All the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem welcomed us cordially. [18] The next day Paul went in with us to meet with James, and all the elders of the Jerusalem church were present. [19] After greetings were exchanged, Paul gave a detailed account of the things God had accomplished among the Gentiles through his ministry. [20]*

² The exposition of the text is adapted from Preaching the Word: Acts by R. Kent Hughes, pages 291-299; The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Acts 13-28 by John MacArthur, pages 242-269; Acts: An Expository Commentary by James Montgomery Boice, pages 359-370; The Spirit, The Church, and The Word: The Message of Acts by John R. W. Stott, pages 335-348; and The NIV Application Commentary: Acts by Ajith Fernando, pages 553-571.

After hearing this, they praised God.”

After meeting with the believers there, who greeted Paul and his entourage warmly, they met the following day with the leadership of the Jerusalem church. Some evidence indicates there were seventy elders (patterned after the Sanhedrin). If so, a rather imposing group questioned Paul and his companions.

Paul did two things in this interview. First, he shared the amazing things God had done among the Gentiles: the Ephesian riots that came about because of the social impact of the gospel; the power of the gospel in Athens and Corinth; the apostle’s escaping his would-be assassins; poor Eutychus’ swan dive and miraculous resuscitation during Paul’s sermon in Troas.

He also presented samples of his work:

“Exhibit A” — Trophimus of Asia;

“Exhibit B” — Secundus of the Thessalonians.

Second, though Luke doesn’t mention it here, Paul presented the love offering taken among the Gentiles for the poor brethren there. Delivering this gift was Paul’s chief motivation for going to Jerusalem, as he wrote in **Romans 15:25-31**, *“But before I come, I must go down to Jerusalem to take a gift to the Christians there. [26] For you see, the believers in Greece have eagerly taken up an offering for the Christians in Jerusalem, who are going through such hard times. [27] They were very glad to do this because they feel they owe a real debt to them. Since the Gentiles received the wonderful spiritual blessings of the Good News from the Jewish Christians, they feel the least they can do in return is help them financially. [28] As soon as I have delivered this money and completed this good deed of theirs, I will come to see you ... [31] Pray that I will be rescued from those in Judea who refuse to obey God. Pray also that the Christians there will be willing to accept the donation I am bringing them.”*

Apparently Paul feared this gift would be rejected because of rising Jewish nationalism and the increasing number of legalistic Christians. Paul hoped that the love offering would build solidarity between Jewish and Gentile believers.

What a relief it must have been for Paul when they did accept the love offering, and as a result, they praised God. Everything was going well, that Paul was likely caught off-guard when the elders informed him there was a problem.

And it wasn’t a small problem, it was ...

21:20b-25: A SERIOUS PROBLEM

Picking up in verse 20, we read, **Acts 21:20b-25**, *“But then they said, “You know, dear brother, how many thousands of Jews have also believed, and **they all take the law of Moses very seriously.** [ESV - They are all zealous for the law] [21] Our Jewish Christians here at Jerusalem have been told that you are teaching all the Jews living in the Gentile world to turn their backs on the laws of Moses. They*

say that you teach people not to circumcise their children or follow other Jewish customs. [22] Now what can be done? For they will certainly hear that you have come."

What an amazing reversal! "Paul, thousands of Jewish Christians are Zealots for the Law, but they have been told that you are teaching Jews to forsake Moses! What are we going to do when they find out you're here? This could be trouble!" Some believers in the Jerusalem church believed, mistakenly, that Paul was off-base in his teaching. The church had heard and propagated slanderous hearsay about Paul — misinformation — lies, whether intentional or unintentional.

Reminds me about the story of a quiet, pious man who was driving his pickup truck home one day when it broke down. He was going through the center of town at the time and so he just coasted to the side of the road and parked it. Then he walked home and made arrangements for it to be towed to the shop the next day.

The next morning he went into town to make sure it was taken to the shop and he stopped to have breakfast at the local diner. While he there, the town gossip came in. She saw him and immediately said, loud enough for everyone else to hear, "Hey there. Noticed your truck was parked in front of **the bar all night**. We know what that means."

The man just stared at her, paid for his breakfast, and walked out without saying a word. Later that day, he picked up his truck from the shop, drove it over to where she lived and parked it in front of her house, and walked home, leaving it there all night.

Misinformation is a dangerous thing. And this happens in the church all the time. We all get caught up in it. Someone says something that's not quite correct, it gets repeated and slightly distorted, and so by the time it gets through the church, it's become a major crisis.

And that's what happened to Paul. He had taken the message to **the Gentiles** that they didn't have to become Jewish first to come to Christ. But somehow, the message that had gotten back to Jerusalem was that Paul was telling **the Jews** that they had to stop being Jewish in order to come to Christ.

And so Paul, accompanied by Gentile believers, had become *persona non grata* in Jerusalem because the mother church was slow to accept Gentiles. She had found it difficult to receive the testimony of Peter about the conversion of Cornelius. She was suspicious of the work among the Samaritans. At the Council of Jerusalem, she did not readily give freedom to the Gentile church. On the other hand, she was quick to accommodate Jews and readily received into membership those who had made no break with Judaism. The statement at the end of Acts

21:20, “*they all take the law of Moses very seriously.*” Or as the ESV has it, “*They are all zealous for the law*” was saying in effect, “We are saved by grace, but we are **kept saved** by the Law.”

The mother church in Jerusalem had allowed itself to become a compromising church, and so their recommendation for Paul was questionable at best, but sadly predictable, [23] *"Here's our suggestion. We have four men here who have taken a vow and are preparing to shave their heads. [24] Go with them to the Temple and join them in the purification ceremony, and pay for them to have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know that the rumors are all false and that you yourself observe the Jewish laws."*

They asked Paul to pick up the expenses of four men who had taken a Nazirite vow (that is, a vow to abstain from meat and wine and not to cut their hair for thirty days). Paul would have to undergo a seven-day ritual of purification and pay for three animal offerings for each man, plus cereal and drink offerings.

Paul was not against Nazirite vows per se, for he seems to have taken one himself earlier in Acts 18. So the request does not appear unreasonable.

Furthermore, they were not asking Paul to compromise his Gentile ministry. Look at verse 25, [25] *"As for the Gentile Christians, all we ask of them is what we already told them in a letter: They should not eat food offered to idols, nor consume blood, nor eat meat from strangled animals, and they should stay away from all sexual immorality."*

However, there was more to this than seen at first glance because there was an implicit exchange of favors. “We have accepted this gift from the churches abroad, identifying ourselves with your Gentile mission. Now, Paul, if you will join with these men and identify yourself openly with our nation...”

They wanted to portray Paul as a much more scrupulous Jew than he actually was. They wanted to show the people a Christian version of the old Pharisee Paul. Ultimately, this is just another case of religious politics!

This whole idea was surely distasteful to Paul, but he submitted to it. After all, these were friends, and elders, and people Paul looked up to. But it was ...

21:26: A QUESTIONABLE DECISION³

We see what he did in Acts 21:26, “*So Paul agreed to their request, and the next day he went through the purification ritual with the men and went to the Temple. Then he publicly announced the date when their vows would end and sacrifices would be offered for each of them.*”

Was Paul sinning by doing this?

³ F. F. Bruce quote comes from his work, The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of Acts, page 408.

Some say no, including the respected and careful scholar F. F. Bruce who says, “Whether [Paul] was wise in doing so may well be doubted. ... But he cannot be fairly charged with a compromise of his own gospel principles. On the contrary, he was acting in strict accordance with his own stated policy” in **1 Corinthians 9:19-22**, *“This means I am not bound to obey people just because they pay me, yet I have become a servant of everyone so that I can bring them to Christ. [20] When I am with the Jews, I become one of them so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with those who follow the Jewish laws, I do the same, even though I am not subject to the law, so that I can bring them to Christ. [21] When I am with the Gentiles who do not have the Jewish law, I fit in with them as much as I can. In this way, I gain their confidence and bring them to Christ. But I do not discard the law of God; I obey the law of Christ. [22] When I am with those who are oppressed, I share their oppression so that I might bring them to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone so that I might bring them to Christ.”*

Paul was perhaps not in error in any way to participate in the Nazirite ritual.

However, others say Paul was most certainly sinning. They base this conclusion on what he had written long before in his letters to the Galatians and to the Romans regarding the Judaizers or legalists who were adding Law to grace. He most emphatically warned the Galatians about this. In Galatians 2, Paul told them how he opposed Peter face to face for kowtowing to Jewish legalistic prejudices (imported from Jerusalem) and for refusing to eat with Gentile brothers and sisters.

Later he explained that they no longer needed the Law, **Galatians 3:23-26**, *“Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.”* (NIV)

In view of all that, they argued, Paul was now walking in error. From their point of view, a tragedy was about to take place. The great defender of Christian freedom through grace was about to make a mockery of grace. This is the man who wrote, **Galatians 5:1**, *“So Christ has really set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law.”*

And it appeared that he was about to go into bondage once more. How terrible that the Apostle Paul should have come to this! He gave the money for the purification to the very priestly system that had called for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, in the very temple where the veil had been torn in two when Jesus died — demonstrating that God had made a new way into his presence.

Which view is correct?

If Paul was not in error, he was probably dangerously close.

And since we're probably not going to know for sure on this side of heaven, perhaps it is best to reserve judgment.

But the question remains, why did Paul go along with the Jerusalem elders' advice? The answer is to his credit: he loved the Jewish people. On another occasion he interrupted a glorious poem of praise for God to state his burden for his own people, **Romans 9:2-3**, *“My heart is filled with bitter sorrow and unending grief for my people, my Jewish brothers and sisters. I would be willing to be forever cursed—cut off from Christ!—if that would save them.”*

Paul was willing to be **damned** if it meant that his brothers and sisters would be saved. Such a thing is impossible, but that's how Paul felt. This apostle had, according to 2 Corinthians 12, been “caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.” Yet he would gladly give it all up if his people could be brought to Christ.

Paul capitulated to the Jerusalem church because he loved people.

He also did this because he yearned for solidarity between the Jewish and Gentile churches. Unity is still a major problem in the church. Paul had a massive vision of solidarity — a church of Jews **and** Gentiles, united, militant, taking the world by storm for Christ — not giving in to legalism like that of the Judaizers!

Yet Paul went along with the compromising suggestion of the Jerusalem church. Why? He loved his lost nation more than his own life, and he longed for the evangelistic power that God manifests in a church that's unified in Christ.

So ... What do we learn from Paul's experience?

- **First, in moments of our best motives we need to beware of error or bad judgment.**

When I worked at a Christian College, I was involved in a lot of concerts there. Many of them were evangelistic in intent where they hoped to reach out to a lot of people. Once, a popular Christian singer was performing, who's still well-known today. Sadly, upon his arrival at the event, this man got out of his car and let loose with profanity that wilted flowers. The promoter's enthusiasm for having a successful event had blurred his judgment in hiring this guy who was obviously very immature spiritually.

- **Second, we can be pressured toward questionable action by the sins of others.**

If the Jerusalem church had defended Paul as it should have and had been teaching its people properly, such pressure would never have come on Paul. We live in a fallen world. Our own sins and the sins of those around us sometimes make it difficult to know what is right. We need to be gracious when our brothers and sisters make what we consider wrong or bad decisions, considering not only

their actions but their motivations. Paul may have erred in this situation, but if so, it was an error of judgment, not of the heart.

- **Third, we need to have hearts that are willing to run the risk of unwise decisions because of a passion for people's souls.**

Some hearts never risk anything. They strive neither for sin nor for sainthood. They desire a temperate zone free from the storms of sin and from the tempests that accompany a life of service. Never burn for the souls of others, and you will avoid rejection. Never suggest a plan to reach the community and you will never be criticized for it. Never give counsel to someone undergoing the pain of relational problems, and you will never give errant advice.

You can't make any mistakes ... if you don't try.

I coach baseball, and baseball is a game where if you get a hit 3 out of 10 times, you're doing well. There's a pitcher who throws a hardball very fast a couple feet from your head. And if he doesn't strike you out, which is fairly common, then there's eight other guys doing their best to catch anything you hit or throw you out. It's amazing anybody **ever** gets on base.

But one of the hardest problems coaches have is convincing young players that they shouldn't quit just because they struck out once.

But to be honest, there's an easy way to never strike out.

Never get up to bat.

You know which active major league player has the most career strike outs? Sammy Sosa. He's struck out 2012 times.

Is he going to be remembered for his strikeouts by anyone other than baseball stat geeks? No way, Sammy Sosa is going to be remembered for hitting 549 home runs, putting him in 9th place on the all-time list, with enough years left to possibly become the all-time home run leader.

If you want to get hits, you have to risk strikeouts.

You'll never get burned in a relationship if you never get to know anyone.

You'll never get convicted by a sermon if you never listen to one.

You'll never hear a friend reject the Gospel if you never tell anyone about Jesus. There's a lot of risk in Christianity. Real Christians walk around with targets on their chest. And here in Acts 21, the Apostle Paul takes a risk. It may or may not have been unwise. But he learns something very important.

He learns that despite his questionable decision ... that His God is ...

21:27-40: SOVEREIGN OVER CIRCUMSTANCES

The situation, in fact, got worse, but God sovereignly delivered His apostle, **Acts 21:27-40**, *"The seven days were almost ended when some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul in the Temple and roused a mob against him. They grabbed him, [28] yelling, "Men of Israel! Help! This is the man who teaches*

against our people and tells everybody to disobey the Jewish laws. He speaks against the Temple—and he even defiles it by bringing Gentiles in!" [29] (For earlier that day they had seen him in the city with Trophimus, a Gentile from Ephesus, and they assumed Paul had taken him into the Temple.) [30] The whole population of the city was rocked by these accusations, and a great riot followed. Paul was dragged out of the Temple, and immediately the gates were closed behind him. [31] As they were trying to kill him, word reached the commander of the Roman regiment that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. [32] He immediately called out his soldiers and officers and ran down among the crowd. When the mob saw the commander and the troops coming, they stopped beating Paul. [33] The commander arrested him and ordered him bound with two chains. Then he asked the crowd who he was and what he had done. [34] Some shouted one thing and some another. He couldn't find out the truth in all the uproar and confusion, so he ordered Paul to be taken to the fortress. [35] As they reached the stairs, the mob grew so violent the soldiers had to lift Paul to their shoulders to protect him. [36] And the crowd followed behind shouting, "Kill him, kill him!"

The scene was mayhem, but God was in control and protected his servant. Over 200 soldiers and several officers, centurions, poured from the adjacent tower of Antonia. They bore Paul away from the murderous crowd and back up the steps of Antonia as the crowd bellowed, “kill him!” — just as they had done with Christ years before.

Paul then asked for and obtained permission to address the crowd, Acts 21:37-40, “[37] *As Paul was about to be taken inside, he said to the commander, "May I have a word with you?"*

"Do you know Greek?" the commander asked, surprised. [38] "Aren't you the Egyptian who led a rebellion some time ago and took four thousand members of the Assassins out into the desert?"

[39] "No," Paul replied, "I am a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, which is an important city. Please, let me talk to these people." [40] The commander agreed, so Paul stood on the stairs and motioned to the people to be quiet. Soon a deep silence enveloped the crowd, and he addressed them in their own language, Aramaic."

It's amazing that Paul was able to do this because he'd probably been terribly beaten. What was it that caused the bleeding and broken apostle to ask for permission to speak? A swelling passion for his people — the desire even to be condemned for their sake, that they might know Christ!

And that brings us to ...

22:1-16: A BRILLIANT DEFENSE

Paul has courageously requested permission to speak to the people.

Although battered, bruised, and in chains, the apostle did not think of his own safety and comfort. Instead, his passionate desire to see his countrymen saved drove him to seize the opportunity to recount his conversion to the crowd.

Paul's apology, or speech in defense of himself, is biographical. He defended both his motives (he was not anti-Jewish) and his actions (he acted only in submission to God). It was a strange place for Paul to preach—standing on the steps, surrounded by Roman soldiers, before the mob who sought his death.

He began to address the crowd with courteous, conciliatory words reminiscent of Stephen in Acts 7. He says, *"Brothers and esteemed fathers," Paul said, "listen to me as I offer my defense." [2] When they heard him speaking in their own language, the silence was even greater."*

Paul then told them of his dramatic conversion, as he went from Christianity's most violent persecutor to its greatest missionary. As in the other four New Testament accounts of his conversion (Acts 9, 26; Phil. 3; 1 Tim. 1), the emphasis is on God's power and sovereign grace, not on Paul's achievements.

Paul's testimony may be divided into his conduct before his conversion, and then the circumstances of his conversion. We'll start with ...

- **Paul's Conduct Before His Conversion**

We pick up the story in verse 3, *"[3] 'I am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, and I was brought up and educated here in Jerusalem under Gamaliel. At his feet I learned to follow our Jewish laws and customs very carefully. I became very zealous to honor God in everything I did, just as all of you are today. [4] And I persecuted the followers of the Way, hounding some to death, binding and delivering both men and women to prison. [5] The high priest and the whole council of leaders can testify that this is so. For I received letters from them to our Jewish brothers in Damascus, authorizing me to bring the Christians from there to Jerusalem, in chains, to be punished.'*

Paul began by refuting the charge that he opposed the Jewish people declaring emphatically, **"I am a Jew!"** Far from being anti-Jewish, the apostle had unimpeachable Jewish credentials. Although born in Tarsus, Paul had been brought up in Jerusalem. Furthermore, he was educated under Gamaliel — the most revered rabbi of that time and one of the greatest of all antiquity. He had been carefully and thoroughly instructed in the Old Testament law and the rabbinic traditions, and he was once a Pharisee who was blameless under the law (cf. Philippians 3:5–6). Considering that, the charge that he opposed the law was ridiculous. His personal conviction was that the law was, **Romans 7:12**, *"the law itself is holy and right and good."*

Nor was Paul's training a mere academic exercise. He was, he declared to the crowd, zealous for God, just as zealous as this crowd was. Generously crediting

to them the best of motives for their violent attack on him, Paul attributed it to zeal for God. But his zeal had far surpassed theirs, for because of it Paul had persecuted Christians to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prison. He had been the Christians' most-feared persecutor from Stephen's martyrdom until his conversion. His reputation as a persecutor of Christians was well known, as Paul acknowledged when he reminded the Galatians, Galatians 1:13, *"You know what I was like when I followed the Jewish religion—how I violently persecuted the Christians. I did my best to get rid of them."*

If anyone still doubted his zeal for God, Paul could call on the high priest and the Sanhedrin to testify for him. It was from them that he had received letters to the Jews in Damascus to bring Christians who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished. Such was Paul's zeal that the highest Jewish authorities chose **him** for the mission of arresting Christians, even as far away as Damascus.

Paul's conduct before his conversion refuted the false allegations against him. Far from being an enemy of his people, he said, **Galatians 1:14**, *"I was one of the most religious Jews of my own age, and I tried as hard as possible to follow all the old traditions of my religion."*

No one could legitimately question his regard for God and His law.

But then he goes on to speak of ...

- **The Circumstances of Paul's Conversion**⁴

Starting in verse 6, *"[6] 'As I was on the road, nearing Damascus, about noon a very bright light from heaven suddenly shone around me. [7] I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?'*

[8] 'Who are you, sir?' I asked. And he replied, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one you are persecuting.' [9] The people with me saw the light but didn't hear the voice. [10] 'I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord told me, 'Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that you are to do.'

[11] 'I was blinded by the intense light and had to be led into Damascus by my companions. [12] A man named Ananias lived there. He was a godly man in his devotion to the law, and he was well thought of by all the Jews of Damascus. [13] He came to me and stood beside me and said, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight.' And that very hour I could see him! [14] 'Then he told me, 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and hear Him speak. [15] You are to take His message everywhere, telling the whole world what you have seen and heard. [16] And now, why delay? Get up and be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on the name of the Lord.'"

⁴ For other verses on God's Sovereignty in Salvation see Luke 6:13; John 6:44; 13:18; 15:16, 19; Mark 13:20; Acts 1:2; Eph. 1:4; Col. 3:12; 2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 2:10; Titus 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1–2.

Having shown the absurdity of the charge that he was motivated by hatred toward the Jewish people, Paul then defended his actions. The God of Israel had sovereignly, powerfully intervened in his life and turned him from being Christianity's foremost persecutor to being its foremost proponent. Paul had acted in submission to Him.

The account of Paul's dramatic conversion appears three times in Acts, stressing its significance. Indeed, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus was a major turning point in both church and world history. As the crowd listened intently, Paul recounted the events of that remarkable day on the road to Damascus.

On a mission to extradite Christians back to Jerusalem for punishment, Paul was approaching Damascus about noontime. The time of day stresses how very bright the light was that suddenly flashed from heaven around Paul and his companions. The blazing glory of the glorified, exalted Christ far outshone even the brilliant noon sun. Speechless with terror, Paul fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?*"

Lying prostrate, stunned and blinded, Paul could only stammer out, "*Who are you, Sir?*" The Lord's reply, '*I am Jesus of Nazareth, the one you are persecuting*' shocked him. Instantly Paul knew how wrong he had been. The One whom he had despised and rejected as a charlatan, a blasphemer, and a false Messiah was in fact the Lord of glory. That Jesus the Nazarene had spoken to Paul from heaven was also disturbing news for the crowd to hear, since they too, had despised and rejected Him. Perhaps some of the ones who cried out concerning Paul, "kill him!" had many years earlier raised that same cry against Jesus.

Knowing that some in the crowd would question whether the Lord had really appeared to him, Paul introduced corroborating witnesses. Those who were with him on the road saw the light, to be sure. Momentarily stunned by its brilliance, they fell to the ground in terror with Paul, but unlike him were then able to stand up. Unable to understand the voice of the One who was speaking, they stood by silent with fear while Jesus addressed his message exclusively to Paul.

Nevertheless, Paul's traveling companions on that fateful day could testify to the objective reality of what had happened. They saw the blinding light and heard the sound of Jesus' voice speaking to Paul. Paul's experience, therefore, could not be dismissed as either a delusion or a lie.

Overwhelmed by this confrontation with Jesus, the proud Pharisee could only humbly ask, "What shall I do, Lord?" In reply the Lord said to him, '*Get up and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that you are to do.*'

Paul was to continue his journey to Damascus, but now as the Lord's servant, not His adversary. Upon arriving there he would be told of all that God had appointed for him to do. He was, as the Lord informed Ananias in **Acts 9:15**,

“For [he] is My chosen instrument to take My message to the Gentiles and to kings, as well as to the people of Israel.”

And so, since he could not see because of the brightness of that light, he was led by the hand by those who were with him, and came into Damascus. Paul finally reached his destination but under circumstances he could hardly have imagined when he started his journey. In Damascus, he met Ananias, whom the Lord had sent to him. Though Ananias was one of the leading Christians in Damascus, Paul described him to his hostile Jewish audience as a man who was devout by the standard of the Law, and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there. Identified as a Christian, Ananias’s testimony would have been suspect; identified as a devout member of the Jewish community, it offered further corroboration of Paul’s story.

Ananias came to Paul, and standing near said to him, *‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’* He declared that God had miraculously given him back his sight, and at that very time Paul looked up at him. Ananias told Paul what God had said to him in his vision, *‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and hear Him speak. [15] You are to take His message everywhere, telling the whole world what you have seen and heard. [16] And now, why delay? Get up and be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on the name of the Lord.’*”

Ananias’s declaration *“the God of our ancestors has chosen you”* stresses the biblical truth that God is sovereign in salvation. The Lord sovereignly chooses those who serve Him. The dramatic conversion of Saul of Tarsus is compelling testimony to the sovereign purposes of God.

By relating the circumstances of his conversion, Paul turned the tables on his opponents. He had acted only in submission to God; therefore indicting him was tantamount to indicting God. Paul’s conversion was an unmistakable sovereign act of God. By making that the focus of his defense to the crowd, the apostle put the crowd on the defensive. Since he had merely acted in obedience to divine confrontation and communication from God, how could they question, let alone condemn him?

Paul’s conduct provides an example for all believers of how to give ...

APPLICATION: Positive Testimony in Negative Circumstances⁵

1. First, Paul accepted the situation as God ordained it.

Facing persecution never caused him to be unfaithful to God’s plan. He had known for some time that he faced arrest when he arrived at Jerusalem. He calmly

⁵ The very end of this message is adapted from “The Threat of Christianity” by T. M. Moore, in his daily devotional found at www.breakpoint.com, July 27, 2002.

accepted that as God's will, telling those trying to dissuade him from going to Jerusalem, **Acts 21:13**, "*For I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but also to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus.*"

2. Second, Paul used his circumstances as an opportunity.

The crowd had not gathered to hear him preach but to beat and kill him. Paul, however, used that occasion to proclaim to them how God's saving power had transformed his life.

3. Third, Paul was conciliatory toward his persecutors.

He did not threaten the hostile crowd or seek revenge. Instead, he courteously addressed them as "fathers and brothers" and even assigned their vicious beating of him the noble motive of zeal for God. Paul was like his Lord Jesus, who, **1 Peter 2:23**, "*did not retaliate when he was insulted. When he suffered, he did not threaten to get even. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly.*"

4. Fourth, Paul exalted the Lord.

His defense to the crowd focused not on his impressive credentials and achievements but on what God had accomplished in his life. Exalting the Lord also served to exonerate Paul and put the crowd in the position of opposing God.

5. Finally, Paul maintained the proper attitude—one of selfless love.

It was his love for other believers that brought him to Jerusalem ... to deliver the offering. It was his love for his weaker brethren and desire for unity in the church that brought him to the temple. It was his love for his unsaved countrymen that led him to evangelize the hostile crowd. And it was his love for God that motivated his love for people and caused him to give glory to Him.

To the unbelieving world the message of Christianity must always appear as a threat to their settled beliefs, established traditions, long-standing ways, and comfortable values. The Gospel proclaims a new King, a new reality, and a new future. It calls all people to forsake their former ways and begin to cling to Jesus and submit to His rule. It is a summons to self-denial, self-sacrifice, and self-giving—a summons altogether strange and frightening to many postmodern men and women. We may be ever so careful not to offend—as Paul was in Jerusalem—as we proclaim this glorious message, but it may stir up opposition and heated response nonetheless.

But this much is certain: If we are neither proclaiming nor living the message of the Gospel, then the people of our day will be unchallenged by its demands and unstartled by its promises and hope.

They will continue to be bored with the diversions of mundane living, constantly wondering if they're having fun yet. Paul was faithful to declare the Gospel, even at the risk of its being a threat to his people, his neighbors, and even

his church.

All we have to offer others is Jesus.

The Apostle Paul thought that was enough.

And so, in the providence of God, Paul is arrested. And eventually, as he tells his story, he will arrive, for the first time, in Rome, and the Gospel will be heard in Caesar's courts.

He was willing to risk everything ... to give everything.

Because he felt that offering others Jesus was worth the risk.

And all who agree said, "Amen."