

Acts 21-22 • Why does God allow suffering?

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As is our custom, when we begin the study of Acts, I'm going to put up a map on the screen for you to look at as we read these first few verses, so you can see where Paul is and where he is traveling.

Now keep in mind he is starting off from Miletus, so he's already made quite a ways in terms of headway toward Jerusalem. Last chapter, he was in Miletus speaking with the Ephesian elders, and now he's traveling on from there.



Beginning in verse 1, it says, “*And when we had parted from them (and that is from Miletus) and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos, (and Cos can be spelt by the way with a C or a K) and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara.*”² *And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail.*”³ *When we had come in sight of Cyprus, (that’s the island there)*

leaving it on the left we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload its cargo.” (ESV)

And it was very typical back in those days for people to basically get on a ship that was, it was a cargo ship and to pay passage to travel on it. So you can imagine the accommodations probably weren't all that great because it was a cargo ship. But you got to ride along.

Verse 4, it says, *“And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.”*

Now I want you to pause there for just a moment, and I want you to think about what Luke just wrote there at the end of that verse. He says that, through the Spirit, the believers there were telling Paul not to go to Jerusalem.

It sounds like the Spirit is telling Paul not to go, doesn't it? Well, that's not what it says. That's actually not what it means. And we're going to see that here as we keep reading. In fact, we're going to be given an example of exactly how the Spirit was making this information known and how the believers were responding.

It says in verse 5, if you look with me there, *“When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed ⁶ and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.*

⁷ When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him.”

You'll remember that it refers to *“one of the seven, ...”* It's what we talked about back in Acts chapter 6, when the body of Christ chose seven men to administrate the food distribution to the widows. You'll remember there was an issue. There was a complaint that came up about it. And, and Philip was one of the men chosen to do that, but now he's known as Philip the evangelist.

So we see that people had different functions in the body of Christ, not necessarily pegged to stay in one particular area. He went on and became known as an evangelist, which is pretty cool.

It tells us here that in verse 9, if, as we keep reading. That, *“He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied.”* That's a very interesting statement. Especially in light of the fact that as we keep reading, it says in verse 10, *“While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, “Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’”*

Now stop there please for with me. What Agabus is doing is what Paul has been experiencing at pretty much every place he stops. He stops and fellowships with the believers, and somebody with a prophetic gifting begins to, through the Spirit, speak about Paul's suffering that is going to take place in Jerusalem. And of course, none of this is news to Paul because this is something the Spirit had already made him aware of.

You'll remember in the last chapter, he talked about it. Let me put this on the screen to remind you. Paul said to the Ephesian elders,

Acts 20:22-23 (ESV)

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. Right?

Now, I want you to check out the response of Paul's friends. Look, let's keep reading verse 12. *“When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.”*

Okay, guys. Now we understand what Luke wrote back earlier in verse 4, when he said, that through the Spirit, people were telling Paul not to go. It wasn't that the Spirit was telling Paul not to go. It's that people were hearing what the Spirit had to say about Paul's sufferings and then they interpreted that message as, don't go. And they didn't want to do it because they loved him, which is an important thing for you and I to understand. And that is that people who love you are never going to want you to go through a hard time because they love you.

But I want to remind you of something. It was the Holy Spirit who told Paul to go and it was the Holy Spirit who reminded him that there would be suffering there. And so what we discern from that, is that there are times when the Spirit leads us through a season of suffering.

The problem is when we go to our family to get counsel about that situation, it's very possible that they are not going to give you counsel that is in keeping with what the Holy Spirit may be telling you.

And again, the reason is, is because their counsel is always going to be biased toward you never having to suffer. Your family doesn't want you to suffer. They don't want you to go through hard times.

But guys, can I just tell you something? Sometimes the path of the Lord includes hard times. And that might mess with your theology a little bit because some people don't want to believe that, that's possible. They don't want to believe that the Holy Spirit would ever potentially lead us through a path of suffering.

And so they would say, well, don't do that. Don't go there. Don't, don't take that or whatever the thing might be. But we can see right here that sometimes, sometimes God's plan. Oh boy. Don't hate me for this. Sometimes God's plan includes suffering and that really messes with a lot of people's minds because they don't understand. It's, in fact, it's a very common question. We get it from children. We get it from adults.

In fact, I had a woman write to me just this last week or so and she said that her child. I don't remember the age of the child, probably like 10 or 11, was asking her the question, why God allows His own children to suffer. And this mother said, pastor, I didn't know how to respond.

And, to be sure, it can be a very challenging question. It can be an even more challenging answer to give somebody related to that, because, not all suffering is the same. There's different kinds of suffering. People suffer for different reasons.

First of all, there's what we see in the Bible. There is suffering for the Gospel. In other words, just because you're a believer and you're living your life as a believer in some demonstrative way, that can bring on suffering. The apostle Paul, you'll remember, said anyone who wants to live a godly life will be persecuted, right? (2 Timothy 3:12) To just live that godly life is going to invite persecution. But see, that's the kind of suffering the Bible talks about that is

honorable. In fact, it's something that the early believers thought was a privilege to participate in. That's one kind of suffering.

But then there's another type that's very, very different. It's the kind of suffering that we bring into our lives through our own foolishness or our bad choices. And I think we all understand. I mean, when I was a teenager, goodness, I mean, I was constantly inviting suffering into my life through really very stupid decisions on my part.

And I think we all understand what that means. If somebody smokes 2 packs of cigarettes a day for 45 years, you're going to torch your lungs and you're going to get to the point probably toward the end of your life where you're not going to be able to breathe very well. And you know what? That was a bad choice. Let's just face it. That was a bad choice, and we understand that suffering based on bad choices.

But then there's a third type of suffering, and it's a type that frankly comes into all of our lives. And it's the type of suffering that comes simply as a result of living in a fallen and sin soaked world. And a world that is broken beyond repair.

I know there are some Christians who disagree with me on that particular subject. But I believe with all my heart that the world is broken beyond repair. And that means that people have accidents, they contract diseases, and they suffer. No, no reason, no poor choice on their part. No, no, nothing they can point to. It's just a result or a consequence of living on a sinful planet. Living among sinful people, being sinful people. I'm not talking about specific acts of sin here. I'm just talking about the fact that we live in a fallen sinful world.

But the question could still reasonably be asked. Why does God allow His Children to suffer even though we live in a fallen world? And the answer is essentially this. The brokenness and the fallenness of this world, as I've already said, is a consequence of sin. And if He's going to deal with that, listen, everything gets dealt with.

Let me put it this way. Let's say that tonight at midnight, God was going to eliminate suffering. Okay. Well, you see, I already said that the cause of suffering is sin. So that means if God is going to eliminate suffering, He's got to eliminate sin. And if He eliminates sin, He's going to have to eliminate the sinner, so would you be around at 12:01? I mean, that's something to think about. The fact of the matter is none of us would be around.

And so you see, the reason that suffering goes on is that God is bearing with the fallenness of this world because He wants none to be lost, but that all to come to repentance. He's giving people more time.

And aren't you glad, as you sit here as a Christian, aren't you glad that He gave you enough time? Because once He begins that, that final process of eliminating all human suffering, the door is going to be closed. So that's a, I know that might be a challenging thing to communicate to a 10 year old, but that is essentially the answer.

I want you to look and see how the apostle Paul speaks of the fallenness of this world. He wrote about it in his letter to the Romans on the screen from Romans chapter 8. He said,

Romans 8:20-23 (ESV)

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

For the creation (the whole creation) was subjected to futility, (isn't that an incredible phrase?) not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, (groan) who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

Isn't it? It's a fascinating passage. But did you catch the phrase that Paul used to describe this fallen world? He said that it is “*in bondage to corruption.*” Did you catch that phrase? The world, the creation, everything is in bondage to corruption.

Do you know that's not only a very poetic way of describing the world that we live in today, but it's also a scientific statement. Because I don't know if you paid attention in science class? I didn't. Well, there was a couple of things I picked up, but I picked up one thing and it was the second law of thermodynamics. You ever heard of it? It's basically is a scientific law that says

all matter is in a constant state of deterioration. It's constantly breaking down. All matter is constantly, always breaking down. Okay.

Now that's interesting in light of Paul's statement that the creation is in "*bondage to corruption*." In other words, it's in slavery to deterioration. That means it can't stop it. We'd like to think we could, but everything, including your physical body, is breaking down. Those of you who have white hair like me, you know it every single day. And the Bible says, we groan.

I was sharing with everybody in first service that, I don't know if you knew this, you can actually tell how old a man is by how loudly he groans when he's getting out of a chair. You can literally measure the decibels, and you can say, that guy's a 50 year old, or that guy's a 60 year old, because you know the older you get the louder you groan when you get out of a chair. And all the men in the room said, that's right, amen.

You get to a certain age where you don't even try, you just put up your hand and say here help me out of this chair. Or when you get really old, you get one of those little things that goes, lifts you out of the chair with a motor. You need a motor to get out of a chair You know why? We're groaning. We groan and sometimes we mourn.

We're living in a world that is in bondage to corruption. And how do you even begin to explain that to a child? I had a painful note from a woman this last week who was just beside herself because she had just buried her 39 year old sister who had gotten sick and died. And left two children behind; ages 4 and 6. And she said, I, she said, I am undone. I don't know what to think anymore. I get it. And I wouldn't even begin to try to respond to that kind of pain. We groan, the whole world is groaning.

In fact, did you notice that Paul talked about creation is even groaning. It's groaning in the pains of childbirth. It wants to be reborn, and there's something happening, but it's not here yet. And I've always thought that every tornado, or hurricane, or earthquake was just that groaning of creation, wanting to be reborn. It's painful. It's hard, but it's part of living in a fallen world.

But know this, people. Jesus always has the last word on suffering. And here's what Jesus says from John chapter 16. He says,

John 16:33 (NIV84)

“I’ve told you these things, so that in me, you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

“I’ve told you these things, so that in me, you may have peace. (He said, let me tell you guys,) In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

And that Christians, right there, that's our hope. That's our hope. Amongst all the groaning, and moaning, and mourning, and crying, and tears, our hope is that Jesus has overcome the world, and there's a new day coming. Good grief, there's a new world coming. And God's word says that He will wipe away every tear. (Revelation 21:4) There will be no more tears, no more sorrow one day. But meanwhile we groan.

Let's read on, verse 15. *“After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁶ And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge.*

¹⁷ When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. ¹⁸ On the following day Paul went in with us to James,...” And by the way, this is James, the earthly brother of Jesus. The apostle James has long since died. He was beheaded by Herod, you'll remember. So this is James, the brother of Jesus. The son of Joseph and Mary, right? And it says, *“...and all the elders were present.”* And by elders it means the leaders of the local house churches that operated in the area of Jerusalem.

Verse 19, *“After greeting them, he (that’s Paul) related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. ²⁰ And when they heard it, they glorified God. (they were very excited, probably would have been good if they would have stopped right there, but it says,) And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, ²¹ and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, (now that’s serious) telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.”*

Would you pause there with me for a moment so I can explain this to you? Here's what's going on. James and the elders are telling Paul this. We have a lot of Jews here in Jerusalem who have come to faith in Jesus. Okay. That's what it means when it says, *“who have believed.”* What have they believed? They

believe Jesus is a Messiah. They've embraced the fact that what Jesus did on the cross was for their salvation. So these are Jews who now believe in the message of Christ. You with me?

But James and the elders also used a particular phrase to describe these Jews. Did you catch it? They said, "*They are all zealous for the law.*" What's that tell you? It means they haven't detached from their Judaism yet. Okay? In other words, they are still holding to the law as a means of approaching God. They haven't yet been released in their own hearts and minds from this understanding of what role the law plays in the life of a believer. I don't know if you can relate to that issue.

There's a lot of Christians today who are still struggling with what role the law plays in their lives as believers. And that's why you got all these different groups. You got some Christian groups that keep the Sabbath. You have other Christian groups that keep the feasts. You have some Christian groups that keep the Jewish food laws and other customs and that sort of things of the Jews. And it's all very confusing when you look at it. And people will say to me, well, pastor, why are there different beliefs, and groups, and things.

Then some of them do this, and some of them say that, and some of them say this is... And, and the reason is because they haven't understood where the law comes into play. Where it starts and where it stops in their Christian lives.

Now you'll notice that there were some charges that these people had against Paul because they had heard things. They heard that Paul was teaching the Gentiles in these outer areas, beyond Jerusalem, first of all, to forsake Moses, and that's the way it was put to them. Did you know that apostle Paul, he's teaching the Gentiles to forsake everything Moses taught us. That's what they were hearing. Now these are Christians hearing this.

They also heard that Moses was telling the Gentiles not to circumcise their children. And they also heard that Paul was telling the Gentiles that they didn't need to walk according to the Jewish customs. Now here's my question. Were those things true? Well, you know what? We can go back to the letters of Paul, and we can ask and answer these questions.

Well, let's do that. First of all, what about circumcision? What was Paul telling the Gentiles about circumcision? Before we answer the question, let me remind you of what circumcision was to a Jew. It was the covenant sign between God and Israel, right? It was given to their forefather Abraham, and the Jews considered it to be a requirement for salvation. You with me? Even the

Christian Jews had not let go of this idea of circumcision that circumcision was a requirement for salvation. All right.

So what was Paul teaching about circumcision? Check out on the screen, Galatians chapter 6, verse 15.

Galatians 6:15 (ESV)

For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.

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What's really important is that you're born again. That's what he means by new creation. That's the only thing that matters. So guess what? This is what Paul's telling the Gentiles. Circumcision, non-circumcision, I don't care.

Now, remember, Paul wasn't addressing circumcision from a medical standpoint. Circumcision is still practiced as a medical thing today and that's great. No problem with it. But that wasn't, he wasn't even addressing that.

He was addressing it as a religious requirement. Okay. As a religious requirement. He said it neither, it doesn't matter. Check also Galatians 5:6.

Galatians 5:6 (ESV)

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

Let me ask you a question. Was Paul telling the Gentiles that circumcision wasn't required? Yeah, he was. You know why? Because it wasn't required and it isn't required today.

What is required for you to be saved is to put your faith and confidence in what Jesus did on the cross. Period. You with me?

You understand. These Jews in Jerusalem didn't. They weren't there yet. They weren't there yet. They'd been raised with the law all their life and the requirements of the law, and they weren't there yet in terms of understanding,

that they were no longer under law, but that now faith had come as a means of righteousness. They still believed that the requirements of the law were there for righteousness right now.

Remember, Paul was also charged with telling the Gentiles that they didn't need to walk according to the customs of the Jews. Was that true? Check out Colossians chapter 2 verses 16 and 17. He says,

Colossians 2:16-17 (ESV)

...let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.

...let no one pass judgment on you (this is a letter to Gentiles, *let no one pass judgment on you*) *in questions of food and drink*, (well, that covers a lot of Jewish customs right there) *or with regard to a festival* (he means a Jewish feast) *or a new moon* (these are celebrations) *or a Sabbath.* (why? Because) *These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance* (of all of these regulations, and rituals, and festivals, and customs) *belongs to (is) Christ.*

The substance is Jesus. You know that, the Jews in Jerusalem weren't ready for that information. They had not yet come to that place of understanding that Jesus had fulfilled the law. See, that's what He told them He would do. You remember Jesus said that?

He said, I haven't come to obliterate the law, to abolish it. I've come to fulfill it. I've come to fill it up. (Matthew 5:17) And then when we come to Jesus by faith, something incredible happens. Paul wrote about it in Romans chapter 3. Let me show you this. He says,

Romans 3:28-31 (ESV)

...we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

...we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. (now, look at this last part here. This is so

important) *Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.*

Guys? We uphold the law. How? By faith, by faith. So if somebody ever waggles that bony finger in your face and says, are you keeping the Sabbath? You can say, yes, I am. By faith in Jesus Christ, who is the fulfillment of the Sabbath, I keep the Sabbath every single day by faith.

No, that's not what I mean. See, they haven't gotten there yet. They're like the Jews in Jerusalem who were Christian and yet had not apprehended the truly the finished work of Jesus Christ yet on the cross to set us free from the demands of the law. They had not yet apprehended that. They weren't ready for it.

And there are a lot of Christians today who aren't ready for it. They just aren't ready to hear it. And those who are ready to hear it are not being taught properly. And that's sad because they become more vulnerable to people who are teaching that you must keep the law in order to be saved.

And so these are very, very, important things. The revelation of our freedom in Christ from the confines of the law is such an important thing to understand. It doesn't mean we thumb our nose at the 10 commandments or the things that God wrote in His law. Heavens, no. Those things are now written on our heart.

We don't, we no longer need an external law to guide us. We have an internal Spirit who has taken the Word of God, the very law of God and written it on our hearts. But remember the rigors of the law, the rituals, the customs, the things that the Jews were demanded to keep, have been fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. And we now uphold them, as Paul said in Romans, by faith, by faith. That's hard for some people to understand, but we uphold the law by faith.

So how are the leaders in Jerusalem going to try to resolve this issue of their people not really understanding this dynamic that Paul has been writing about.

Look at verse 22. *“What then is to be done? (they said) They will certainly hear that you have come. ²³ Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; (that means a Jewish vow) ²⁴ take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. (and that shaving of the head signaled the end of the period of their vow) Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law.”*

So there it is. That's their suggestion. They told the apostle Paul to go ahead and participate in this Jewish right, this vow, these men had taken. And to join with them in the temple, pay for the completion of their vow so that everybody would see that Paul still keeps the law like a good Jewish little boy should.

I got to be honest with you. I think it was a bad choice. I think it was a bad decision on their part. I think there were other ways they could have handled it. And you know what? It's not going to make a lick of difference for Paul. He's still going to get in trouble, not from the Jews that had become Christians. He's going to get in trouble from other Jews, and he's still going to fall under persecution, and he's still going to be arrested. It's not going to change anything. And really they're just trying to pacify Jews that had not grown up yet in their faith.

Anyway, the elders went on to say verse 25, *“But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.”*

We talked about that all back in Acts chapter 15. If you didn't get in on that study, just go to our website and you can learn about all that that meant.

“²⁶ Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.” In other words, he capitulated to their suggestion there.

It says that, *“²⁷ When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, (okay, these are Jews from outside of Jerusalem, these are not Christian Jews, these are Jews that are from the areas of Lystra, Derby, and Iconium. Places Paul has visited previously, and they) seeing (saw) him (it says,) in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, ²⁸ crying out, “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people (meaning, against us Jews) and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.””*

And then Luke explains why they made that last charge. *“²⁹ For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian (of course, a Gentile) with him (with Paul) in the city, and they supposed (the NIV says, assume) that Paul had brought him into the temple.”* So here's a bunch of accusations based on misinformation and assumption. Isn't that always a delightful thing. All right.

And that's exactly what's going on. It says, *“³⁰ Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut.”* Nobody's getting in and nobody's getting out.

“³¹ And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort (the New King James says, the commander of the garrison) that all Jerusalem was in confusion. ³² He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.”

And the reason was because it was, what they were doing was illegal, according to Roman law so they stopped as soon as the police showed up. It's what's going on.

“³³ Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. ³⁴ Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. ³⁵ And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, ³⁶ for the mob of the people followed, crying out, “Away with him!”

³⁷ As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, “May I say something to you?” And he said, “Do you know Greek? ³⁸ Are you not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?”” Again, another incorrect assumption.

“³⁹ Paul replied, (no!) “I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people.” ⁴⁰ And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the steps, motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying:”

Can I read this last chapter?

“Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.”

² And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And he said:

³ “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day. ⁴ I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, ⁵ as the high priest and the whole council of elders can bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brothers, and I journeyed toward Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.

⁶ “As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. ⁷ And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ ⁸ And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’ ⁹ Now those who were with me saw the light but did not understand the voice of the one who was speaking to me. ¹⁰ And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.’ ¹¹ And since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.

¹² “And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, ¹³ came to me, and standing by me said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that very hour I received my sight and saw him. ¹⁴ And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth; ¹⁵ for you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’

¹⁷ “When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance ¹⁸ and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’ ¹⁹ And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. ²⁰ And when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed, I myself was standing by and approving and watching over the garments of those who killed him.’ ²¹ And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

²² Up to this word they listened to him. Then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.”

Do you see what's going on? The Jews were listening to Paul's testimony and they had no objection to anything he was saying until he said that God told him to go to the Gentiles. And then they became unhinged. They literally lost it and they began to scream that this man is not fit to live. Talk about biases.

“²³ And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, ²⁴ the tribune ordered him to be brought into the barracks, saying that he should be examined by flogging, to find out why they were shouting against him like this. ²⁵ But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, “Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?” ²⁶ When the centurion heard this, he went to the tribune and said to him, “What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman citizen.” ²⁷ So the tribune came and said to him, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?” And he said, “Yes.” ²⁸ The tribune answered, “I bought this citizenship for a large sum.” Paul said, “But I am a citizen by birth.””

Apparently, you know, we don't honestly know a great deal, but there were apparently 3 ways that you could gain citizenship in Rome. And the first was citizenship could be granted to someone as a reward for some meritorious effort on their part. If they did something to benefit the empire. You could be made a Roman citizen by imperial decree.

Secondly, Roman citizen could be gained by birth, just like being born here in the United States. You are a citizen in the United States. Lastly we learned here that it was possible to purchase a citizenship, although some people claim that it was more through bribery than anything else. Anyway, that's how people could become a citizen.

But now they discover that Paul is a Roman citizen by birth and it is illegal to punish a Roman citizen who has not been properly tried and condemned. And so therefore, they are afraid.

It says, “...*those (verse 29) who were about to examine him (examine him, they were about to whip him, anyway, they) withdrew from him immediately, and the tribune also was afraid, for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.*

³⁰ But on the next day, desiring to know the real reason why he was being accused by the Jews, he unbound him and commanded the chief priests and all the council (that's the Sanhedrin) to meet, and he brought Paul down and set him before them.”

And that's where we're going to stop, and what we're going to find out is how that goes. No reading ahead. I know it's a bit of a cliffhanger, but we're going to get into the rest of it the next time we gather. So let's stand and we'll close in prayer.

If you need prayer this morning, this is something we always do at the end of our services. We invite people to come up after the service for prayer and we do that because we don't want you to go home burdened.

The Bible says, come to me, all you who are weak, and are weary, and heavy laden. Jesus speaking here, and He says, I'll give you rest, rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:28)

And it's on us if we refuse to come because the invitation has been made. And that's why we provide people down front here just who are here to pray for you. To agree with you in prayer. You just come down and share what you need prayer for and they'll just say, yeah, we'll pray for you so take advantage of that. Okay.

Father, thank You. Thank You for the opportunity, the time that we've had today to just dig into the Word, to hear Your voice.

I pray my Father, God, that You'd give us the courage and strength to respond to everything that we've heard as our spirit bears witness to the truth.

We thank You, Father, that there is hope in Jesus Christ, even in the midst of a suffering world. I thank You for that, Lord.

I thank You also that we can pray for one another in the midst of the suffering that we endure so that we might be strengthened. So that we might be encouraged and so that we might keep the faith.

Thank You for loving us. We praise You and worship You. You are the King. You are the Lord. You are the Redeemer, and You are coming again. And we await Your arrival with anticipation.

And we pray all of these things in the name of Jesus, our Savior. And all God's people said, amen.

Thanks so much.

God bless you.