

Acts 21 - John Karmelich

1. Before, we begin, I want you to know I've struggled more with Chapter 21 than any other chapter in Acts. Once you understand the issues, it leaves more questions than answers.
 - a. The debate centers around whether or not Paul was doing God's will. If I took all my favorite scholars who have written commentaries or given sermons on this chapter, they are split down pretty much right the middle on this issue. Therefore, no matter which view I teach, I am strongly disagreeing with some of my mentors. With that simple problem ahead of us ☺, let me explain further.
2. The great application to you and me in Chapter 21 is about "The will of God versus the will of man". Among the questions Christians constantly ask themselves are "Am I doing God's will?" or "Is this something Jesus would approve of?" "Am I being like Jesus in my conduct?" On the surface this chapter is about Paul going to Jerusalem and people warning him not to go. The main debate question is whether or not Paul was in God's will. The lessons we can learn from this chapter can affect our attitude toward discerning God's will.
 - a. Have you ever wondered why the New Testament is not just the 4 gospels? After all, we worship Jesus as God, why would Paul's and the apostles' opinions count for anything. (I'm being a little cynical, but I'm making a point ☺.) There is a cult called the "Jesus-only movement" which goes only by what Jesus said, and not the other apostles. They only accept the 4 gospel accounts as "Biblical" and ignore the rest of the New Testament. Back to the question, why is Paul's writings part of the Bible?
 - i. A big part of the answer is the patterns we see in Paul's life, as well as the other apostles. The New Testament records Paul's life 1) as a validation of Paul as an apostle of Jesus and 2) to show us how to live like Jesus.
 - ii. OK, John, so why are you bringing this up? Because that is what the whole debate of Chapter 21 is all about. Was Paul obedient here to God's will?
 - a. The answer, and the implications of that answer, will affect your view as a Christian. I'm going to try to lay out both sides of the argument, and then give you some conclusions. As always, please read the text yourself, and be your own judge. Hey, I'm just a mere mortal like you. God may give you some insight he hasn't given me! ☺
 - b. The issue itself is Paul's desire to preach to the Jews in Jerusalem. Paul has been traveling from his 3rd, and final missionary journey. He is anxious to make it to Jerusalem by Pentecost. This is a major Jewish holiday, and multitudes of Jewish pilgrims travel from all over the place to Jerusalem for the holiday. Paul saw this as a great witnessing opportunity.
3. Among my favorite scholars and commentators who believe Paul made a mistake are Ray Steadman and Chuck Missler. I'm sure these men were influenced by others before them who also had similar views. If you read their materials, here is a summary of their view:
 - a. Most of the remainder of the Book of Acts reads like a tragedy. Paul is no longer witnessing and winning people for the Gospel. His missionary days are over. Paul is arrested, gives several speeches to Jews, and Roman leaders during his trials. None of them appear to be successful, nor make any difference in any of their lives.
 - b. Therefore, they see Paul's desire to witness to the Jews as Paul desiring to fulfill his own will and not God's will. God called Paul to be his witness to the Gentiles and not the Jews. Although Paul has had some minor success with Jews, most of the people who converted to Christianity were Gentiles.
 - c. Most of Chapter 21 consists of various people, who had the gift of prophecy, telling Paul of the horrors that await him in Jerusalem.

- d. A verse in Chapter 21 gives an argument that Paul went against the will of the Spirit: "Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem." (Acts 21:4b, NIV). Commentators see this verse as Paul going against the will of the Holy Spirit.
 - e. In Acts 22, Verse 18, Paul recounts his conversion from over 20 years ago. Telling the story, Jesus told him that the Jews would not accept his testimony.
 - i. "and (I) saw the Lord speaking. 'Quick!' he said to me. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.'" (Acts 22:18 NIV)
 - f. There is a cute joke that fits this situation: There was a small town that was about to be devastated as the local river was overflowing. A devout Christian was praying on the roof for God to rescue him. As the water was a few inches thick on the ground, a big- truck came by and told the Christian to jump in. The Christian said, "No, God will rescue me, I will stay here on the roof and keep praying". Later, as the water rose to a few feet. A small motorboat came by, and the skipper told the Christian to jump in. The Christian replied, "No, God will rescue me, I will stay here on the roof and keep praying". Finally, as the water was rising and approaching the roof, a helicopter came by and lowered a ladder. Again, the Christian said no.
 - i. Finally the man drowns and went to heaven. The Christian man was mad at God for not rescuing him. God responded, "What do you mean, I sent a truck, a boat and a helicopter? What was your problem?"
 - ii. For those who take the view that Paul made a major error, the point of that joke is that it fits this situation. Paul was ignoring the testimony of the Holy Spirit because he was convinced he was doing God's will, even though he wasn't.
 - iii. The argument is that Paul wanted so badly to convince his fellow Jews that Jesus was the Messiah, he put his own will in front of God's will.
 - g. These same commentators acknowledge that despite Paul's failure through the rest of Acts, he still accomplished great things. Four of Paul's letters were written from prison in Rome (Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon). If Paul had not gone to Jerusalem, he may have never been arrested and therefore, never taken the time to write the letters that are so dear to us.
 - h. If you take this view, the great lesson to us is to watch our egos. To quote Ray Steadman, "Sin does not die of old age". I have found the greatest danger to Christian is to stop trusting God in an area we are good at. For example, let's say we are very disciplined in some aspect, say our daily prayer life. We might pray to God to help us in other aspects of our lives, but ignore the area where we believe we are good at. It's the attitude of "God help me in these areas, but I'm ok in that part of my life." Don't worry about that aspect. Remember Peter's sin. Peter's great strength was his boldness. Yet after Jesus was arrested, he was too scared to tell the truth to a little girl and denied Jesus three times!
4. Now that I've totally convinced you that Paul messed up, let me present the other side. ☺
- a. Among those who argue that Paul did the right thing is Chuck Smith, some of my favorite Calvary Chapel pastors (Jon Curson, David Guzik, et.al.) and Dr. J. Vernon McGee. I'm sure these men were influenced by others as well.
 - b. We need to start by going back to before the time Paul was converted. In Acts 9, Paul (a.k.a. Saul) was blinded from the vision of seeing Jesus. A Christian named Ananias was told in another vision by God to go see Saul. Here is what God told Ananias:
 - i. But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." (Acts 9:15-16 NIV)

- ii. This is a prophecy, a prediction of the future. God was saying that Paul was going to be his witness 1) before the Gentiles, 2) their kings and 3) Israel.
 - a. Until now, we have not read of Paul witnessing to any "kings". As Paul gets arrested in the later chapters he will get a chance to give a sermon to some of the highest-ranking officials in the Roman Empire.
 - b. Early church historians record that Paul had a chance to speak to Emperor Nero himself, although that event takes place after the time frame of the Book of Acts.
 - c. Therefore, it was God's will for Paul to go to Jerusalem. God's "plan" was for Paul to be arrested, and then witness to these men during his trials before them. God never said anything about how successful Paul would be. It just says in these verses that Paul would be "his witness".
 - c. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus also made an interesting prediction on this topic. Jesus was speaking to, and condemning the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem: "Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town." (Mat. 23:34 NIV)
 - i. Here is Jesus predicting he will send prophets, wise men and teachers to the people of Jerusalem. Could he have been speaking of Paul?
 - ii. God does not desire that anyone should perish in hell. Therefore, a "pro-Paul" argument is that Paul is one of many messengers sent to preach/plead with the Jews. Even though God knew they would not listen (read Jesus' warning again!) God will not allow these Jews to have an excuse on Judgment day that they never heard the Gospel message preached to them.
 - d. Let's go back to Acts 9:16: "I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."
 - i. Jesus says he will show Paul how much he must suffer for my (Jesus) namesake. Therefore, when we read in Acts Chapter 21 of all of these warnings by the Holy Spirit about Paul not going to Jerusalem, it is simply God fulfilling his promise to Paul.
 - ii. Another "pro-Paul" verse is In Acts 23, Verse 11. In that verse Jesus encourages Paul with this message:
 - a. Jesus said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome." (Acts 23:11b)"
 - b. The argument goes: If Paul is out of God's will by going to Jerusalem, why is Jesus' encouraging him? In that verse, or the adjoining verses, you don't read of Jesus condemning Paul for speaking in Jerusalem.
 - iii. Which leads up back to the problem of Verse 4 in Chapter 21: "Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem."
 - a. It's tough for the pro-Paul critics to dance around this verse. The argument is that it is simply the Holy Spirit, through these prophets, warning them of the dangers ahead.
 - b. It is also difficult to reconcile this verse with what Paul says in Chap. 20, Verse 22: "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem,"
5. Now that I've laid out the "pro/con" arguments of whether Paul was in, or not-in God's will to go to Jerusalem, let me throw in some personal thoughts. I heard a great proverb of which I don't know the source: "The river of truth runs between the banks of the two extreme's".
- a. In Christianity, there is a classical debate between "free-will" and "pre-destiny". Christianity teaches that God is perfect. A perfect God cannot learn, and therefore, knows all things. (See Isaiah 46:10). So if God knows the people who will choose to follow him, does He guide us?

- b. Is God like a "puppet master controlling our strings", or is there some aspect of free will involved? Is it simply a matter of God knowing what we are going to choose and then God "takes advantage" of those choices for His Glory (Like Paul being in jail), or is it completely our free will?
 - i. Bible scholars have wrestled with these questions for centuries. The Bible teaches both "free-will" and "pre-destiny". Churches split over this issue. There are extreme factions on both ends. This is why I like the proverb: "The river of truth runs between the banks of the two extremes."
 - ii. So let's get back to Paul. Was the Spirit leading Paul to go to Jerusalem? I would argue yes, based on Chapter 20, Verse 22 as I stated above. Did the Spirit warn Paul against going to Jerusalem? You could argue "yes" by Verse 4 of Chapter 21. My opinion of the "truth" is the "middle of the river". Others are going to disagree, but so be it.
- 6. Which leads back to us. What does all of this have to do with our lives?
 - a. The answer is just because you felt "led" by the Spirit, doesn't mean there are great prizes and rewards down the road. God could be leading you through something that causes great hardship. I have seen God take the lives of missionaries who have not converted one person. (For those of you who know the story of Peter Marshall, that is a great example. Pick up the biography on his life.) We don't always know God's purposes even when the Spirit leads us.
 - b. Second, take heed of the warnings by the Spirit. It may mean that God wants you to stop and turn around, or it may mean God wants you to go full speed ahead, but be warned that the results may be what you expect and may physically painful.
- 7. OK, I've gone 3 ½ pages and haven't even touched a verse. Before I cover this chapter, verse-by-verse, you may want to stop and read it straight through. Keeping these various points and counterpoints in mind, pray and see for yourself what God is showing you!
- 8. Chapter 21, Verse 1: After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea and sailed straight to Cos. The next day we went to Rhodes and from there to Patara. ² We found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, went on board and set sail. ³ After sighting Cyprus and passing to the south of it, we sailed on to Syria. We landed at Tyre, where our ship was to unload its cargo.
 - a. Verse 1 does mention they "torn themselves away" from "them". Remember the end of Acts 20 is Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders. That was the goodbye sendoff.
 - b. I have to admit I have trouble finding good applications for these verses. Couldn't Luke just have said, "We traveled for a bunch of days, and finally landed in Tyre? ☺ Why bother mentioning this city-by-city travel journal with no other commentary?
 - i. You have to put this in perspective. There were no cruise ships going to their final destination. They had to find merchant ships and sail to wherever the ships were going. Given that, Paul, who desired to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost, was trusting God to provide the transportation to get there.
 - c. Among the cities mentioned is Cyprus. Cyprus was the first place Paul sailed to with Barnabus on his first missionary journey. Much of Chapter 11 of Acts focused on Cyprus. I suspect it was mentioned as it brought back memories.
 - d. Paul and his companions traveled on merchant ships. When they stopped to unload their cargo, they either had to wait for that captain to leave again, or find another ship.

9. Verse 4, at Troas: Finding the disciples there, we stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.
 - a. I wonder how Paul "found" the disciples there. Did he ask around? It says something for the local Christians that they were known in the community.
 - i. That is a nice little application for us. Do others "know" you are a Christian? If someone walked up to a neighbor and asked are there any devout Christians on your block, would they point to your house?
 - ii. As to the "Spirit" issue in this verse to death, I've beaten it do death, so I'll move on. ☺
10. Verse 5: But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray. ⁶ After saying good-bye to each other, we went aboard the ship, and they returned home.
 - a. When "our time was up" meant that the same merchant ship was now loaded and ready to move on to its next destination.
 - b. These 2 verses say a lot about what kind of person Paul was. If Paul was a rotten houseguest, do you think all the Christians, their wives and children would follow them down to the beach to say goodbye? Luke's comment in this verse is a nice testimony to hospitality and Paul's personal character.
11. Verse 7: We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for a day.
 - a. A brief mention of a one-day layover Ptolemais. Again, Paul searched out the local Christians, and stayed with them.
 - b. This reminds me of a verse: "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it." (Hebrews 13:2 NIV)
12. Verse 8: Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. ⁹ He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.
 - a. Let's go back to Acts, Chapter 6. Back then, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem had to deal with complaints about bigotry between "Jerusalem-Jews" and "Hellenistic (i.e., Greek) Jews. The apostles appointed seven deacons to oversee the distribution of helping the poor. These deacons are the "Seven" referred to in this verse.
 - b. It had to be an interesting encounter between Philip and Paul. If you remember, Stephen, who was martyred in Chapter 7. Paul, (a.k.a. Saul) was one of the ringleaders who stoned Stephen to death. Stephen and Philip had to be friends, being part of the "Seven". So here was this encounter. I wonder if Phillip fully forgave Paul for that event. It is now 20-plus years later.
 - c. We last read of Phillip in Chapter 8. If you remember, he witnessed to an Ethiopian Eunuch, and led him to Jesus. At the end of Chapter 8, we read of Phillip reaching Caesarea, which is the port town of Jerusalem. It's now 20-plus years later. Phillip, settled down in Caesarea, got married, and had four daughters.
 - d. The interesting thing about the 4 daughters is that it says they had the gift of prophecy, and then, nothing. No prophecy is recorded that they said to Paul.
 - i. I suspect it was recorded to show the effects of being part of a Godly family, how it helps in raising your children to be Christians. This simple statement is a testimony to Phillip as a parent.
 - ii. One of the themes of this chapter is all the warnings Paul gets about the dangers that lie ahead in Jerusalem. It is possible that this reference to the 4 daughters who prophesied gave additional warnings to Paul, but it is not recorded in the Scripture.

13. Verse 10: After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ 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 Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.' "
- a. So here is Paul and Luke (notice the "we"), and other disciples staying with Phillip and his daughters. All of a sudden this Agabus guy shows up, takes Paul's belt, and binds it around himself as a visual demonstration as what is going to happen to Paul.
 - b. Back in Acts 11:28, this same Agabus predicted there would be a worldwide famine. This famine came true, and we know from Paul's letters that one of the purposes of the visit was to deliver a collection to the Jerusalem church during this famine.
 - i. The point is Agabus has a reputation for being a prophet.
 - ii. So when Agabus said there was a (Roman Empire) worldwide famine, it came true. Now when Agabus grabbed Paul's belt and tied his own hands as a dramatic demonstration, they took that prediction seriously!
14. Verse 12: When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³ Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." ¹⁴ When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."
- a. When Luke and the gang heard the prophecy they said in effect "Paul, your nuts, don't do it. Please Paul, don't go there."
 - b. Paul gives another of his statements that " he is ready to die" in Jerusalem.
 - i. This leads back to the debate of whether it was Paul's will or God's will.
 - c. The final statement of "The Lord's will be done" is one of acceptance by his friends.
 - i. In life, sometimes that is when God does his best work. When we give up trying to fight the situation. A similar, popular cliché is "Let go, let God."
15. Verse 15: After this, we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁶ Some of the disciples from Caesarea accompanied us and brought us to the home of Mnason, where we were to stay. He was a man from Cyprus and one of the early disciples.
- a. Caesarea is the port-town of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is located up in the mountains. One must walk from one place to the other.
 - b. As we will discover in a few verses, Paul is still a controversial figure. Many Christian Jews in Jerusalem still have problems with Paul. I believe staying in the home of one of the early disciples, this Mnason person, was a positive witness to the local believers.
16. Verse 17: When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers received us warmly. ¹⁸ The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. ¹⁹ Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.
- a. This is the James who became the leader of the church based out of Jerusalem. He is the one who wrote the Book of James, and we know he is the half-brother of Jesus. He is not James the disciple/John's brother. That James was martyred in Acts 12:2.
 - b. Notice Paul coming to town was big news. All the elders were assembled along with James. I found it interesting that the word "apostles" was not used, which may mean that none of the original 11 were present.
 - c. The last time Paul was in Jerusalem was in Acts 15, when they had the meeting to decide what rules, if any the Gentiles were to obey. Now here was Paul again, reporting the progress of the last two missionary journeys.

17. Verse 20: 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. ²¹ 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.
- a. Look at how much text in these verses is James saying: "Praise God for all you've done Paul". Now look at how much bible-text is dedicated to the rumors about Paul abandoning the law. You call tell James was really interested in this "other problem".
 - b. The rumors were floating around that Paul was telling Christian Jews to ignore God's Law's and Jewish Customs to become Christians.
 - i. Before we tackle this, one has to discuss the dangers of rumors. Few things in life are more damaging than a false accusation. It is often hard to disprove.
 - a. "A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold." (Proverbs 22:1 NIV)
 - b. It's also interesting that a good part of the Book of James talks about the importance of keeping a tight reign on your tongue!
 - ii. The text makes you wonder if James himself had the same suspicion, but wanted to say it in a nice way. Notice James says "they" are accusing you of this, (but not "I"). It almost sounds like "You know Paul, I'm not saying its true or not, but here's the gossip making the rounds right now."
 - iii. In defense of James, He goes right to the source (Paul) before spreading any further rumors. It does not say James accused Paul. James went to the source as opposed to joining the opposition. It's good support for trying to squelch a rumor versus spreading one.
 - a. The early church historians wrote very positively about James. His reputation is that he prayed on his knees so much he was nicknamed "camel knee's" from the numbness of all his prayer time!
 - c. If you study Paul's letters, I believe Paul understood the purpose of the Law in the Old Testament. He understood that the Law itself does not lead to salvation. The Law is God's standard for righteousness, and it is there to show that we need a Savior. (In other words, how do you know if you're breaking the law, unless you know what the laws are in the first place?). Following the law today is a standard for happiness, not salvation. We obey what God tells to do out of gratitude for what God did for us, not out of necessity for salvation.
 - i. Much of the Jewish rituals spelled out in the Old Testament are patterns that point to Jesus. Remember that Jesus said the Old Testament points to him (See Gospel of John, 5:39).
 - ii. Paul was willing to obey the Old Testament laws, not out of salvation, but out of love for his fellow Jews. He never wanted to offend anyone. Therefore, he submitted himself under the law as a diplomatic gesture.
 - a. Paul said: "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law." (1st Cor. 9:20 NIV)
 - d. Why would Christian Jews be so obsessed with keeping the law? Don't they understand the concept of salvation-by-grace?
 - i. Part of it is "old habits die hard". When you are accustomed to doing things a certain way, change is hard.

- ii. One also has to remember the issue of "If we abandon the law, what will become of the nation of Israel?" God made promises in the Old Testament of special blessings to the nation of Israel if they are obedient to God's law. These Jews did accept Jesus as the sacrifice for their sin. They understood that Jesus would come back again. They thought that obedience to the law was necessary for the preservation of the Nation of Israel.
 - a. This is one of the reasons why I believe Jesus will literally reign from Jerusalem during the 1,000-year millennium. God made promises to the Nation of Israel that were unconditional as well as the conditional promises. (Many Christians disagree with this view, so we'll leave it as that.)
18. Back to the text. James, worried about how the local Christian-Jews were going to react to Paul being in-town, lays out a solution to stop the rumors: Verse 22: What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, ²³ so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. ²⁴ Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law.
- a. James has an idea. Rumors are spreading among the local Christian Jews that Paul has abandoned all the laws of Moses in the name of Jesus. James, and whoever else kicked up this idea said: "Tell you what Paul, let's do something "Jewish", and do it publicly as a demonstration that you haven't abandoned the law.
 - i. To be technical, the "vow" as mentioned in Verse 23 is a Nazirite Vow. If you remember Paul took a similar vow in Chapter 18. This is where you cut all your hair, don't drink any wine spend a week-plus in the temple and dedicate yourself to God. The vow is described in Numbers Chapter 6, Verses 1-21. In this case 4 young men took the same vow. Paul offered to pay the expense of the haircut, plus loss of income for the time of the vow.
 - a. The "vow" is a simply a public way of demonstrating your love for God. It is not a salvation issue. A similar Christian issue might be fast, where we spend time in fasting and spend our mealtime in prayer or in Bible study. It is not a demonstration to be "more worthy" before God.
 - ii. My opening sermon talked about the great debate over whether or not it was a mistake for Paul to go to Jerusalem. It was this particular act that led to Paul's arrest, his trials, and jail time he will suffer for the rest of his life. Therefore the question, is asked, was this "vow" the right thing for Paul to do?
 - a. Commentators who say this is wrong, point out the lack of God in these verses. There is no mention of James seeking God's approval. The action of this paragraph implies "Hi Paul, good to see you, lots of Gentiles got saved. That's great Paul. Yeah, yeah, but we have some big problems here in town, and here is what we're going to do about it!" Again, notice the lack of prayer in this text.
 - b. The "Pro-Paul" side would argue that if Paul didn't get arrested here, some other action would have caused him to get arrested. Let's face it, Paul was in Jerusalem, during the time when many Jewish pilgrims also came to Jerusalem. Many of these men had seen Paul in other places get kicked out of other synagogues. We'll read that the man who had Paul arrested was someone who saw Paul preach in Ephesus.
 - c. Either way, one can build a Biblical case over whether Paul was right or wrong. In the end, it didn't matter. God's will got done and Paul was a witness to "Gentiles, Jews, Kings and Rulers, as Jesus predicted." Paul's time in jail gave him the time to write 4 of the Paul's letters. (Again, they are Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians and Philemon.)

19. Verse 25, James finishes: 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."
- a. About 20 years ago, back in Chapter 15, there was a great meeting called "The Council of Jerusalem". In that meeting, it was decided what non-Jewish Christians (Gentiles) should do as to not offend Jewish-Christians. These 4 things were not requirements for salvation or obedience to God, but they were things that were very offensive to Jews and out of respect, asked them not to do these things.
 - i. For more on this topic, review the notes on Acts, Chapter 15. This verse is repeated almost verbatim from that decision.
20. Verse 26: 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.
- a. Paul was the "sponsor" of these 4 men. He paid their expenses and oversaw them.
21. Now the climax. Verse 27: 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, ²⁸ shouting, "Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple area and defiled this holy place." ²⁹ (They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple area.)
- a. Notice that Paul was not recognized until nearly the end of the 7 days. (Verse 26 says, "Paul took a vow with them". Did that mean Paul shaved his head, and thus, was less recognizable? Interesting speculation! ☺
 - i. Since Paul was not recognized until near the end of his days, he was probably thinking "Hey, no problem. Nobody here is making a fuss about me being here. None of my enemies recognize me. The Christian Jews know what I'm doing. This was a good idea!"
 - a. The lesson is just because you go against God's will, and make your own plans (assuming you take the "anti-Paul" view here), God may let you get away with something for awhile, but not in the long run.
 1. God is tougher on those who have committed their lives to Him than those who haven't. That pattern is noticeable in both the Old and New Testament. God is concerned about his reputation, and thus, will not allow Christians to sin for very long.
 2. "But if you do not do so, then take note, you have sinned against the LORD; and be sure your sin will find you out. (Numbers 32:23 NKJV)
 - b. Back to the text. Some (non-Christian) Jews who were probably from Ephesus spotted Paul. We deduct the fact that they were from Ephesus because they accuse Paul of bringing "Trophimus the Ephesian" into the Temple. These guys must have recognized both people. They incited the crowd into frenzy by accusing Paul of bringing a Gentile into the inner-Temple area. It would be like us today spotting a thief and saying, "Hey, that guy over there is a murder. Somebody grab him!"
 - i. It was a death-sentence for a Gentile to enter the inner-temple area. The outer courtyard was referred to as the "Court of the Gentiles", as Gentiles were permitted in this area, but no further. Archeologists have discovered a sign from the temple warning of a death sentence to any non-Jew who stepped further.
 - ii. Why was this such a big deal? Remember that Jews believe the only way to come to God is through Judaism. For a Gentile to enter the court, without conversion first, is a denial of the whole religion of Judaism.

- c. What was the motivation of these guys to start up such a riot? I would describe it as religious pride. It wasn't "Hey, he's the guy who is telling Jews that Jesus is the Messiah. While they disagree, they could handle that. The issue was they thought Paul was telling Jews to abandon Judaism. That was like abandoning their heritage.
 - i. I've always believed that one of the biggest hindrances to becoming a Christian is religious pride or national heritage pride. To change your life and become a born-again Christian, for many, means turning their back on their family, their heritage, their nationality and their religion.
 - a. Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. (Matthew 10:37-38, NIV)
22. Verse 30: 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. ³¹ 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. ³² 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.
- a. Overlooking the temple area was a Roman army headquarters ("Antonio Fortress"). From here, the army could watch the temple area. Remember Rome's #1 issue: No rioting is allowed. Freedom of religion was tolerated, but no rioting. So when the riot started, the soldiers came down to break it up. These soldiers saved Paul's life.
23. Verse 33: 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. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers.
- a. When Paul was bound with the 2 chains, I'm sure he thought about the prophecy Agabus gave in Verse 11, when he bound his hands and feet with Paul's belt. Isn't it interesting how literal Bible prophesy can be when it is fulfilled!
 - b. The Roman soldiers could care less about the issue of the debate. All they knew was: Riot? Stop it. We'll deal with the issues later.
24. Verse 36: The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Away with him!"
- a. Biblically, that expression should sound familiar. They said the same thing to Jesus:
 - i. "With one voice they cried out, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!" (Luke 23:18 NIV)
 - b. I was going to save this for my closing statement, but this is a better place to insert this comment. There is a great parallel between the end of Jesus' life and this chapter. Remember Jesus words ""If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23b NIV)
 - i. What's the point? Notice Jesus says to take up your cross daily. That refers to denying your will (death to your will, crucify it daily) and seeking God's will. It is good support for Paul's statement earlier in Verse 13 when he said, "I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem". Paul was willing to take up his cross daily to do God's will.

25. Verse 37: As the soldiers were about to take Paul into the barracks, he (Paul) asked the commander, "May I say something to you?" "Do you speak Greek?" he (Roman commander) replied. ³⁸ "Aren't you the Egyptian who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the desert some time ago?" ³⁹ Paul answered, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city. Please let me speak to the people."
- a. The Roman soldier thought Paul was some guy who started a rebellion some time earlier. The historian Josephus records about the Egyptian leader who led this revolt. Most of his followers were killed, but the Egyptian escaped. It shows how history supports the facts of the Bible.
 - b. You have to give Paul credit here for determination. Paul was almost beaten to death by this crowd. Yet he tells the Roman commander (paraphrasing), "First of all, I'm not that Egyptian guy, I'm a good Roman citizen, from Tarsus, a city that has a positive reputation in Rome for no rebellions. Now may I speak to this crowd, please?"
 - i. The amazing part is that Paul asks to speak to these Jews who were trying to kill him! Personally, I would be running for my life, or asking the Roman guards to take me away. Paul is so driven by his love for his fellow Jews that he ignores the pain in order to give them a sermon!
26. Verse 40: Having received the commander's permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned to the crowd. When they were all silent, he said to them in Aramaic:
- a. The Roman Commander was impressed enough with Paul's request to give him a chance to speak. Maybe he figured Paul could calm them down by giving his side of the issue.
 - b. There is a debate among the scholars as to whether Paul spoke in Hebrew, or in Aramaic, which is a cousin-language of Hebrew. It can be translated either way, and it is one of those things scholars love to debate over. ☺ By speaking in Hebrew (or Aramaic), Paul could appear "more Jewish" to the crowd. In the next chapter, Paul gives his defense.
 - i. This is an odd place for a chapter break, but hey, I'm not in charge! ☺
27. On the surface, this chapter is about Paul working his way to Jerusalem after his 3rd and final missionary journey, and then getting arrested by those who opposed Christianity.
- a. Beyond this, it is a great debate about whether or not Paul was doing God's will.
 - i. As Christians, we are always concerned about whether or not we are doing God's will. We look for "signs" as to whether or not God is leading us in one direction or another.
 - ii. If you take the view that Paul was doing God's will, then the "signs" become less important than sticking to what God called Paul to do, which was being a good witness about Jesus. Paul saw his life as meaningless in compared to the eternal perspective of heaven.
 - iii. The "anti-Paul" argument believes that Paul could have done more if Paul had not gone to Jerusalem at this time. We don't know, as it is only speculation based on the facts presented in the Book of Acts and Paul's letters. We do know that Paul's speeches in the rest of Acts were pretty much failures in terms of conversion, as opposed to his successes on his missionary journeys.

b. So now that I've thoroughly confused you, ☹ how do we know when we are doing God's will? I'll play it safe and let Jesus give you the answer:

i. Then they (The Jews) asked him (Jesus), "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent." (John 6:28-29). That's it. Not look for "signs and wonders" as Jesus said in John 6:30-31, but just to believe in him. The "works" of a Christian is believing in Jesus. If you follow him, he will lead us. We may not understand what we are going through. God may give us overwhelming urges to do something that, otherwise, defies common sense. (Those "urges" will never defy God's word, period.) In times like this, where the "signs" are confusing, one simply steps forward in faith, and trusts that God is leading him down the path He desires for our lives.

28. Let's Pray: Father, our greatest desire in life is to do your will. You promised that if we seek you first, you will take care of all our needs, no matter what the situation. Many times in our lives we are confused as to what is your will. We find ourselves in difficult and painful situations, and we don't see a solution. Help us to remember that you promised never to leave us or forsake us, and you will be there through these times. Help us to have joy in the difficult as well as the blessed times of our lives. For we ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.