**Ready to Die**

Acts 21:1-36 on October 31, 2021

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Acts 21:1-36 can be split into 3 scenes:

**Scene #1** (Acts 21:1-16): Paul BOLDLY does God’s will and goes to Jerusalem.

**Scene #2** (Acts 21:17-26): Paul makes a WISE concession for the sake of the gospel.

**Scene #3** (Acts 21:27-36): Paul is attacked and arrested in Jerusalem, as foretold.

*>>> Please read Acts 21:1-36 before going further in this transcript.*

Map

Description automatically generatedLet’s begin with **Scene #1** (Acts 21:1-16): Paul BOLDLY does God’s will and goes to Jerusalem. Since this is now the official end of Paul’s 3rd Missionary Journey, let’s take one final peek at our MAP:

Paul and his companions are on the final leg of his 3rd Missionary Journey. In Acts 21:1, they had just pulled themselves away from the Ephesian elders, who’d traveled to meet with Paul in Miletus (Center of the map under Ephesus). They then head to the island of Cos (WHITE arrow in the left center of the map, pointing SE across the top of the Mediterranean Sea). Then they go SE to the island of Rhodes, then east to the island of Patara. (PAT uh ruh)[[1]](#footnote-1) At Patara, they “board a larger seagoing vessel for the 400-mile journey” to Jerusalem.[[2]](#footnote-2) They pass along the south side of the Island of Cyprus and then land in Tyre. They then go south to Ptolemais (TALL uh MAY)[[3]](#footnote-3) and then Caesarea, and finally, at long last, they end up in Jerusalem.

Now this travel itinerary points toward a key theological point: the doing of God’s will.[[4]](#footnote-4) You see, Paul is warned multiple times that hardships lie ahead, specifically IN JERUSALEM, but he boldly presses on, despite dire warnings from his fellow Christians. Paul is well aware of the dangers; he said as much to the Ephesian elders back in Acts 20:22-23, “And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.” Paul is warned again when he passes through Tyre.[[5]](#footnote-5) Acts 21: 4 says, “We sought out the disciples there and stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.” At first, it sure SEEMS like these disciples were hearing a different message from the Holy Spirit than Paul was hearing. However, upon further reflection, it’s more likely that they were simply worried about the suffering that lay ahead for Paul, so they tried to stop him.[[6]](#footnote-6) [[7]](#footnote-7) Paul is then warned for a 3rd time, now by the Prophet Agabus.[[8]](#footnote-8) Acts 21:11 says, “Coming over to us, he (Agabus) took Paul’s belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, “The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.’”[[9]](#footnote-9) Despite this prophetic object lesson, and despite the pleading and weeping of his fellow believers,[[10]](#footnote-10) Paul’s mind is made up.[[11]](#footnote-11) [[12]](#footnote-12) Acts 21:14 says, “When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, “The Lord’s will be done.” Frankly, this is how God’s people should ALWAYS pray, “The Lord’s will be done.”[[13]](#footnote-13) We shouldn’t just pray for the easy way, or even necessarily for the most difficult way, but rather for the Lord’s way in every situation. An author named Darrell Bock summarizes it this way: “This passage shows a community in deliberation in the midst of a situation where the stakes are high. …it shows that sometimes well-intentioned people can be wrong about what God desires. …once it becomes clear that Paul is being driven by the Spirit to face what lies ahead, the believers who love him, and [love] God’s will, embrace the path and support him.”[[14]](#footnote-14) [[15]](#footnote-15)

This leads us right into **Scene #2** (Acts 21:17-26): Paul makes a WISE concession for the sake of the gospel. Acts 21:17 says, “When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters received us warmly.” Make no mistake about it, there was a deep love and ministry partnership between Paul and his companions, and their fellow Christ-followers in Jerusalem. In fact, at the end of Paul’s 3rd Missionary Journey, he traveled around collecting donations from various churches for the offering he was now delivering to these believers in Jerusalem.[[16]](#footnote-16) For whatever reason though, Luke, the author of Acts, doesn’t even mention the offering that is being delivered at this time. The likely explanation for this, seems to be that Luke is focusing on something MUCH more pressing at the time… Instead, Luke focuses on Paul’s meeting the next day, with James and the church elders.[[17]](#footnote-17) After Paul gives his report on his ministry to the Gentiles, they respond in two ways: First of all, they praise God! But then, they quickly move on to make an appeal to Paul. And the substance of this appeal is the more pressing priority for Luke. In Acts 21:20 Luke records, “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.”

Verse 20 is a direct response to verse 19. After James and the Jerusalem elder board hear about God’s work among the Gentiles through Paul’s ministry, they then report to Paul about God’s continued work among the Jews, through their own ministry.[[18]](#footnote-18) Hearing this report from them would have greatly warmed and encouraged Paul’s heart, since he carried a deep, life-long burden for the salvation of his own Jewish people.[[19]](#footnote-19) But here’s the thing, they are not giving Paul this ministry report in order to WARM his heart, but rather to WARN his heart about something even more dear to him: the gospel. More specifically, to warn him that the welfare of the gospel in Jerusalem could be in danger, due to HIS presence in Jerusalem. They explain this danger in Acts 21:21-22, “They (these Jewish Christ-followers) 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. What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come.” In other words they told him, “Paul we’re so sorry to be the ones who have to tell you this, but your presence here in Jerusalem, may have the unintended consequence of derailing the gospel’s momentum among THOUSANDS of Jews!”

They knew this would be the very last thing that Paul would ever want to happen. So they offer a suggestion. Acts 21:23-24 go on, “So do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law.” In other words, help us to correct these false rumors before they get out of control. Make a public demonstration of your obedience to the Jewish law. And all of a sudden, Paul had a choice to make. Back in verse 13 he declared that he was “Ready to Die” for the Lord. But now was he ready to die to his own personal rights and to his freedoms in Christ? You see, Paul knew that he didn’t need a purification rite to make him right with God. He, of all people, was well aware that all he needed was Jesus to make him right with God. And yet, here he was in a unique situation where thousands of Jews had genuinely put their faith in Jesus, but they were also still zealous for the law. And they were wondering what Paul had done with his “Jewishness” since becoming a Christ-follower.

They’d been told that Paul urged Jews to turn away from Moses, and not to circumcise their children, and to abandon all of their Jewish customs. Was this true? Had Paul completely sold out and abandoned his entire Jewish heritage? Now, there’s a significant difference between making wise concessions for cultural reasons and selling out on our Christian convictions. Paul is consistently, crystal-clear, all throughout the New Testament, that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone; we cannot be saved by works of the law.[[20]](#footnote-20) Even so, Paul did not explicitly teach against Jewish customs and family traditions, but he did want it to be clear, that these things can’t earn us salvation or points with God.[[21]](#footnote-21) In 1 Corinthians 7:19-20 Paul says,

“Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts. Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.” And so, for these Jewish Christ-followers, who were Jews when God called them, Paul doesn’t think that they need to stop being Jews in order to follow Christ. In the New Testament, we don’t see the spiritual leaders pressuring Jewish believers to live like the Gentiles, any more than we see them pressuring Gentile believers to live like Jews.[[22]](#footnote-22) Instead, we find Bible passages like Romans 14-15, which leave many culturally disputable matters up to individual conscience. There is also a strong emphasis throughout the New Testament on surrendering our personal rights for the sake of love and harmony within the church.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Paul goes on to demonstrate that there is a place for making WISE concessions for the sake of the gospel. Acts 21:26 says, “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.” In other words, “By paying for their expenses, Paul would show that he remains loyal to his Jewish heritage.”[[24]](#footnote-24) James and the Jerusalem elders weren’t asking Paul to sell out on a gospel of grace; they were asking Paul “to be sensitive to Jewish concerns about Jewish practice among Jewish believers. (What we might call appropriate contextualization of the gospel.) Clearly Paul must have agreed with them, because he goes to the temple to make the vow the very next day.[[25]](#footnote-25) [[26]](#footnote-26) Paul explains it this way in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, “Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. 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. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.” One author summarizes it well: “…what we see [in Acts 21] is Paul being asked to act with cultural sensitivity to the Jewish context he now finds himself in, without compromising the gospel. He is quite willing to do so for the sake of the unity it may create. [This author then makes a modern-day application…] Oftentimes we may be asked, in ministry or a given community, to engage in neutral practices that are culturally driven, not because we have to, but because it may prevent unnecessary static from getting in the way of sharing the gospel or doing damage to the unity of the church.”

I’m glad to add my hearty “amen” to this. It makes me think back to a time in my own life, during the early days of my first pastorate. This was back when I was serving at a Conservative Baptist Church. Back then I had longer hair; in fact, I had a little ponytail that I’d grown out well below my collar. In Christ, I knew I had the freedom to wear my hair however I wanted to. But, what I eventually had to figure out, was that exercising my freedom to have long hair, was hurting our unity as a church, and thus hurting our gospel efforts together. I can still remember the day I finally just grabbed a pair of scissors from my desk and cut off my ponytail. Once I approached it with a gospel lens, it was all too easy to cut my hair short. (Especially in that particular setting.) F.F. Bruce says it this way: “‘A truly emancipated spirit like Paul’s is not in bondage to its own emancipation.’ [In other words] Liberty is a great thing, but sometimes the expression of liberty can be counterproductive. Paul sensed that James’s request made sense, so he willingly restricted his [own] freedom.”[[27]](#footnote-27) [[28]](#footnote-28) Brother or Sister in Christ, each one of us needs to ask ourselves if we’re willing to sacrifice our own personal freedoms, in order to help the gospel thrive? If surrendering any of our rights, can help us avoid a gospel distraction, then we should do it. If there’s any freedom that you absolutely refuse to surrender for the sake of the gospel, then you can be sure of this: that freedom is your idol. You’ve made it more important than God; and essentially you are worshipping it, rather than Christ.

Let’s wrap up by taking a brief look at **Scene #3** (Acts 21:27-36): Paul is attacked and arrested in Jerusalem, as foretold. The irony of Paul’s decision shows up in Acts 21:27-28, “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, shouting, ‘Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place.’” Ironically, just about the time that Paul had completed his 7-day JEWISH purification rite, that’s when these Jews seize him. Even though he’s made this good faith effort, to honor his Jewish heritage, he’s attacked for *supposedly* teaching against it.[[29]](#footnote-29) [[30]](#footnote-30) Supposedly, he’d also brought a Greek (aka Gentile) into the temple, which was explicitly forbidden.[[31]](#footnote-31) In fact, warnings were clearly posted: “Four-and-a-half-foot tall stone markers inscribed in Greek and Latin …announced to foreigners that they were prohibited from entering the sanctuary.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Two of these markers have actually been found. “They read, ‘…Anyone who is caught trespassing will bear personal responsibility for his ensuing DEATH.”[[33]](#footnote-33) There were several reasons why Paul would have never defiled the temple this way: First of all, out of genuine respect for his Jewish heritage. Secondly, out of concern for the physical safety of his Gentile friends. Thirdly, Paul was wise enough to avoid causing trouble for the local Jerusalem church, or for the advance of the gospel.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Well, they get the whole city riled up and drag Paul out of the temple area.[[35]](#footnote-35) Acts 21:31-32 tells us, “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. 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.” One Study Bible estimates that there were likely at least 200 soldiers called to the scene.[[36]](#footnote-36) These soldiers were stationed right around the corner from the temple, so it didn’t take long for them to get there. Now, to be clear, they didn’t come to rescue Paul, they came to suppress this riot before it got any worse. That said, God sovereignly provided a way to stop Paul’s beating, and to save his life.[[37]](#footnote-37) [[38]](#footnote-38) Paul is then arrested and bound with 2 chains and taken into the barracks, just as Agabus had predicted.[[39]](#footnote-39) [[40]](#footnote-40) And this is where we have to stop for today: “to be continued” next Sunday! To sum things up though for today, Paul’s spiritual maturity made him BOTH Bold and Wise. He was BOLD, ready to die for the sake of the gospel! But he was also WISE, ready to make concessions for the sake of the gospel.

1. “PAT uh ruh” Severance, W. M., & Eddinger, T. (1997). In That’s easy for you to say: your quick guide to pronouncing Bible names (p. 128). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2265 footnote on Acts 21:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “TAHL uh MAY” Severance, W. M., & Eddinger, T. (1997). In That’s easy for you to say: your quick guide to pronouncing Bible names (p. 133). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 635. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sounds just like “tire.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2265 footnote on Acts 21:4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is similar to Peter’s effort to try to stop Jesus from going to Jerusalem back in Matthew 16:21-22, “…Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things…. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. “Never, Lord!” he said. “This shall never happen to you!” As we know, this is exactly what happened to Jesus, because this was God’s will. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. We talked briefly about the Prophet Agabus last week, and how back in Acts 11:27-29 he predicted a severe famine was coming. This equipped the believers to receive and send an offering to Jerusalem to help those in need. It’s ironic that he now shows up at the scene again, as Paul prepares to deliver a more recent offering to help the Jerusalem church. Only this time, Agabus predicts not a famine, but rather that Paul would be handed over to the Gentiles (Acts 21:11). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Just to be clear, Agabus didn’t tell Paul NOT to go to Jerusalem, he simply warned him what awaited him when he did go. (Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 638.) Much like back in Acts 20:23, the Holy Spirit doesn’t tell Paul not to go to Jerusalem, just that prison and hardships lie ahead. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. In verse 13, “The verb for ‘breaking’ the heart is vivid, as it is often used for beating clothes to clean them: they are pounding on Paul’s emotions.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 639. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. When verse 12 says “we” it reveals that “Now Luke, in the company of travelers with Paul, joins in urging Paul not to go to Jerusalem.” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1869 footnote on Acts 21:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Paul’s determination to go to Jerusalem “parallels Jesus’ final journey to Jerusalem” during His earthly ministry. See Luke 9:22, 44; 13:33-34; and 18:31-33. *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2265 footnote on Acts 21:1-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See James 4:13-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 639. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Bock then goes on to say, “some might not understand why the hard path chosen is being taken, especially when it seems that such a difficult path could be avoided. Sometimes, the easy way out, is not the right path to take. Only discernment, engagement, and prayer, however, can determine when the hard path is to be taken and when an easier escape should be sought. In acts we have seen both routes followed at different times.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 640. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Paul will later refer back to this in Acts 24:17, “…I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings.” This is “The only explicit reference in Acts to the collection that was so important to Paul” (*NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1874 footnote on Acts 24:17). See also Romans 15:25-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This is NOT the Apostle James who’d been martyred long ago by King Herod back in Acts 12:2. This is James the brother of Jesus, the author of the New Testament book of James, and the leader of the Jerusalem Church. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. You see, Paul’s ministry had been mostly focused on bringing Gentiles to faith in Jesus; but the Jerusalem church was focused on bringing Jews to faith in Jesus Paul is well known as a representative for gospel outreach to the Gentiles, which is why his presence in Jerusalem raises the stress level for the church there, made up of mostly Jewish Christ-followers. Read Galatians 1:19 and 2:7-10. There was an understanding that Paul and Barnabas would focus on the Gentiles, while James, Peter, and John would focus on Jews. It’s also interesting to consider John 7:5 from earlier in James’ life. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. In Romans 9:2-4 Paul declares, “I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. 3 For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, 4 the people of Israel….” Consider similar words by Moses back in Exodus 32:32. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For example, see Romans 3:28. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See note in *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2265-2266 footnote on Acts 21:20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Consider the story of Cornelius in Acts 10:1-11:18. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For example, in Christ, Paul had the freedom to eat pork, to enjoy a big plate of bacon! But he also had freedom to abstain from bacon, in order to help the gospel advance in his own sphere of influence, among his own people. Also consider Romans 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. “…Paul, as a Jew himself, is quite willing to continue to observe certain Jewish practices, but he insists that these acts do not bring salvation.” *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2266 footnote on Acts 21:22-23. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 643. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. “In all of this, we see Paul committed to the unity of the Christian body as he honors the request of his Jerusalem hosts. He is willing to do this provided nothing central to salvation is compromised.” Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 643-644. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 649. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. We are truly free when we are not in bondage to our own freedom. F.F. Bruce says it more profoundly. This is my attempt at putting his sentiment in my own words. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 651. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. These Jews in verse 27 are the same ones we learned about back in Acts 20, when Paul faced, “severe testing” by the plots of his Jewish opponents in the province of Asia. You see, Paul wasn’t the only one who traveled to Jerusalem. Jews from the various outlying areas would often visit the temple in Jerusalem. That’s where they bumped into their “old friend” Paul. And they didn’t hesitate to plot against him once again. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. “Explicitly forbidden according to inscribed stone markers” that laid out the boundaries of the temple courts; Any Gentile found within the bounds of the court of Israel would be killed.” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1870 footnote on Acts 21:28. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Darrell L. Bock citing Wikenhauser, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 651. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, p. 651. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. In Acts 24:18 Paul says, “I was ceremonially clean when they found me in the temple courts doing this. There was no crowd with me, nor was I involved in any disturbance.” Paul will later make his defense in Acts 25:8, “…I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar.” [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. In verse 30, these were the “gates separating the court of the Gentiles from the inner courts of the temple. The Jews shut the gates to keep the rioting crowds from defiling the inner temple courts and especially to keep out the Roman troops who would arrive shortly.” *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2266 footnote on Acts 21:30. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1870 footnote on Acts 21:32. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See discussion by Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2007, bottom of p. 652. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. There are many similarities here to the Gospel Riot back in Acts 19:21-40 in the city of Ephesus. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. This may indicate that each of his hands was chained to a soldier on each side of him. Or, perhaps more likely, there was one chain for his hands, and one for his feet, more like what Agabus had predicted back in verse 11. See note in *The NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2266 footnote on Acts 21:33. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. The crowd was SO worked up and out of control, that verse 35 says that Paul had to be lifted up off of the ground and carried by the soldiers! If you’ve ever been to a music concert where they have crowd surfing, that’s the picture that comes to my mind! [↑](#footnote-ref-40)