

ACTS 22–28

A MINISTER AND A WITNESS

Acts 21:10–22:29. Precedent 47: Paul Is Arrested at the Temple in Jerusalem

The next case in the book of Acts presents a legal turning point in which custody over Paul is taken out of Jewish hands and moved into the Roman legal system. The remainder of the book of Acts deals with the prosecution of a case against Paul triggered by his bringing Gentiles into the temple. This series of steps is replete with legal precedents that offer examples of appropriate conduct for the early Church community.

Paul had made a temple vow of some kind, and he needed to return to Jerusalem to complete it (Acts 18:18). Vows were accompanied by a commitment to make a personal sacrifice or donation, and those who were diligent paid their vows only at the temple in accordance with Deuteronomy 12:4, 11, 26. Paul had been determined to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost (Acts 20:16). Once back in Jerusalem, Paul first met with the Apostle James, who was serving, as we might say in modern terms, as the presiding bishop of Jerusalem, and James issued a warning. He recommended that in order to confirm Paul's reputation positively among the Jews, Paul should demonstrate his faithfulness to Jehovah by taking four Gentile converts, men who were also under vows, with him to the temple where they could all fulfill their vows. Paul was to go through the ritual cleansing with them and pay their donations together. These four men would then be adopted into the house of Israel (see Paul's subsequent teaching of this doctrine in Romans 11) and therefore would be worthy to enter beyond the Court of the Gentiles and go into the Court of the Men, also called the Court of Israel.

However, angry Jews from the Roman province of Asia (around Ephesus) recognized Paul and accused him of violating the law and the posted warnings about taking Greeks into the temple, and they believed that he was desecrating the people, the law, and the temple by doing so (Acts 21:27–29). They seized Paul and attempted to kill him (21:31), but the Roman captain, Claudius Lysias, intervened with his troops and bound Paul and took him into the Antonia Fortress. Notably the four men were not ar-

rested; no matter who had gone into the inner court of the temple with Paul, the agitators were only interested in getting Paul.

Claudius Lysias allowed Paul to speak to the crowd from the steps of the fortress (21:40). He was surprised that Paul spoke flawless Greek, which lends support to the common view that Paul received an excellent Hellenistic education in his hometown of Tarsus. Paul did not waste any opportunity to testify of Jesus. He also declared that he had been “brought up in this city [Jerusalem] at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous towards God, as ye all are this day” (22:3). He reminded them of his own persecution of Christians until Jesus personally intervened in his life while he was on official business for the Sanhedrin on the road to Damascus. However, the crowd only accused him further.

A Roman military tribunal planned to examine Paul next by scourging him in the Antonia Fortress. For the Romans, this was a standard part of the judicial process. It was a pretrial procedure to determine the facts, to warn the alleged miscreant, to teach him a lesson, and to establish the authority of the Roman administrators. But at that point Paul invoked his Roman citizenship (22:25), and instantly all Roman charges against him were dropped and the picture changed. The chief captain arranged for a hearing with the Sanhedrin to establish the facts and learn “whereof he was accused.”

Acts 22:30–23:22. Precedent 48: Success before the Sanhedrin

This section is heavy with legal terminology because of the legal circumstances in which Paul was placed. The initial issue was a jurisdictional question: Why did the Romans take Paul, a Roman citizen, to the Jewish Sanhedrin after he had been arrested by the Roman chief captain? (Acts 22:30–23:11). Lysias, the Roman captain, took him back to the Jews for questioning by the Sanhedrin for two main reasons: (1) Lysias wished to find out exactly what Paul had done wrong in the eyes of his Jewish opponents (22:30), and (2) he probably wanted to demonstrate goodwill between the Jews and the Romans at this time. A riot was looming as a result of this incident, and the Romans always sought to prevent riots.

Speaking before the Sanhedrin, Paul opened by stating that he had always been an observant Jew, to which Ananias, the chief priest, responded by ordering the people standing by Paul to slap him (23:2). Paul objected and insulted the high priest, putting himself in danger for speaking evil of the ruler of the people (see Exodus 22:28). He therefore backtracked rapidly, stating that he did not know that Ananias was the high priest.

Perceiving that the council was made up of both Sadducees and Pharisees, Paul strategically raised what he knew would have been a point of contention between them. Sadducees did not believe in the existence of spirits and angels or in resurrection, whereas the Pharisees believed in life beyond the grave, heavenly messengers, and resurrection. Paul pointed out that both he and his father were Pharisees and cleverly crystalized the case by pointing out that he was simply being called into question for believing

in the resurrection of the dead. This caused immediate upheaval, with the Pharisees pulling for Paul's view. If Paul really had the conversion experience as he claimed, they recognized that they would then be fighting against God. The Sadducees were more ready to punish him, especially because he taught that Jesus had been resurrected.

Lysias, fearing that Paul would be physically torn apart, took Paul back to the Antonia Fortress (Acts 23:10). Lysias had now saved Paul for the second time, this time fully aware that he was a Roman citizen.

That night, Paul was visited by the Lord and told to be of good cheer because he had fulfilled his assignment to testify in Jerusalem. He was commissioned to bear witness to the Gentiles in Rome (23:11). The precedent of receiving continuous guidance of where to go and what to do was of great comfort and aid to the growth of the Church, as it is now.

The next morning, a group of at least forty Jews swore a conspiratorial oath that they would ask Lysias to bring Paul back to them so they could question him further, but really so that they could kill him (23:12–15). They bound themselves not to eat or drink until the deed was accomplished (23:21). But this plot was quickly exposed. A nephew of Paul heard of it and went straight to the fortress to tell Paul, who then advised the chief captain, who questioned the young man and believed his story. After telling him to go home and not tell anyone about having spoken with him, the commander ordered two hundred centurions, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen to take Paul to Caesarea to see Felix, the governor, and they departed in the middle of the night (23:23–24).

Christians could find in this precedent confidence that God would provide miraculous support for them if they would remain faithful in testifying of the Resurrection and divinity of Jesus Christ. Using their own wisdom, they could see that divine help could come to their aid through unexpected sources. With this, they could remain “of good cheer.”

Acts 23:23–35. Precedent 49: Paul before Felix, Part 1—Receiving and Accepting the Case

Claudius Lysias prepared an official report, and Paul's case was removed to Caesarea. Felix, the Roman governor of the province of Judea, asked Paul which province he was from, and when he understood that Paul was from Cilicia, he accepted the case and had Paul stay in Herod the Great's former official quarters in Caesarea.

In order to inform Felix of what had happened, Claudius Lysias had written an official report. This document was a doubled, sealed, witnessed report, commonly called a *typos* (Acts 23:25), the official text of which is included in Acts 23:26–30. It introduced Paul and the issues of this case from the perspective of a Roman official who did his duty well, protecting Paul as a Roman citizen from threatened danger, and seeking information from the Sanhedrin. Parenthetically, when Paul in his pre-conversion days went to

arrest the Christians, he had carried such a letter from the chief priests, officially authorizing him to arrest and bind them in Damascus, in the Roman province of Syria.

After reading Lysias's formal report, Felix took cognizance of Paul's case under the laws of appeal or complaint. The charges were not stated in Roman terms. The accusations were of stirring up discord among the Jews of all the world and being the founder of the sect of the Nazarene. Hence, it is not surprising that Felix adjourned the case for the arrival of Lysias the tribune, the only independent witness to the fact of any civil disturbance (Acts 24:22). Felix took jurisdiction over the case but postponed trial until the accusers from the Sanhedrin could appear to make their accusations in person (23:35).

Acts 24:1–27. Precedent 50: Paul before Felix, Part 2—Hearing the Case

After five days, Ananias, the chief priest, and a group of the elders arrived in Caesarea with a professional orator named Tertullus to press charges and argue the case they wanted to bring against Paul. Whereas orators were prevalent in the Greek legal system, they were not typically used in strictly Jewish courts and were uncommon in Roman courts. Tertullus followed a pattern of flattery toward the judge and emotive language to fashion charges against Paul, accusing him of disruption, sedition, and profaning the temple (Acts 24:5). Felix suspended the case for lack of proof (24:13), awaiting Claudius Lysias's personal testimony. Meanwhile, Paul affirmed that his alleged heresy consisted only of belief in God, in the law, and in the prophets (24:14).

The original action was started by Jews from the Roman province of Asia who recognized Paul in Jerusalem. However, they were either no longer in the area or at least never appeared in court to testify (24:19). In Acts 24:18–19, Paul objected to their absence since dropping out of a lawsuit was normally not an option in a Roman court. Once an accuser had begun a case, he was required and committed to following through. Also, there was no provision for an out-of-court settlement once a case had been initiated, and accusers and witnesses were punished for falsehood or failure to prove the case.

For two years, Felix held Paul in friendly house arrest, allowing Paul to receive visitors, which may have included Luke and many other members of the Church (24:23). Felix may well have been using this time to send messengers to Rome to verify Paul's status as a Roman citizen. Records of Paul's father becoming a Roman citizen before Paul was born should have been available, although not easy to locate. Felix was also willing to take money, as a bribe or as bail, to allow Paul to go free, but Paul would have had little money at this point in his life, and Felix enjoyed talking with Paul, probably about all kinds of things (24:26). After those two years, Felix completed his seven years in office and was released as governor (procurator), and his successor, Porcius Festus, was appointed by the emperor Nero to take his place (24:27).

Paul's relatively successful experiences in this case offered some hope to members of the Church that they could interact reasonably with Roman leaders and work within the empire's legal system. At least at this time and away from Rome, Paul was not persecuted or treated badly for being a prominent Christian.

Acts 25:1–26:32. Precedent 51: Proceedings before Festus and King Agrippa

The legal procedures followed in Paul's hearings before Festus align well with Roman provincial practices during that period in Roman law and history. Once Festus arrived as the governor of Judea and visited Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders again accused Paul of offending both Jewish law and Caesar, but the charges could not be substantiated (Acts 25:7). The Jews wanted Paul to be brought back to be tried in Jerusalem, again with a hidden agenda of capturing Paul and executing him on the way. Paul refused to be tried in Jerusalem and exercised his right as a Roman citizen to appeal in person before Emperor Nero in Rome (25:10–12).

Paul's appeal was accepted, but Festus was unsure what charges he should report when sending Paul to Rome. Herod Agrippa II, also known as Marcus Julius Agrippa, and the brother-in-law of Festus volunteered to help Festus with the case, but together they found Paul innocent of all charges, especially because Roman law required an accuser to make his case face to face (25:13–26:32, esp. verse 16). Moreover, the Jews had only raised questions against Paul based on their own religious views. Paul was teaching about Jesus, who was dead but whom Paul affirmed to be alive (25:19). At one point, Paul took the occasion to tell Agrippa his story, including Jesus's appearance to him on the road to Damascus (26:2–23). Sharing that significant experience may have been sparked by the fact that the main road to Damascus in upper Galilee runs through Caesarea Philippi, right past Agrippa's palace there. While Festus was not favorably impressed, Agrippa said to Paul, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian" (26:28).

Soon Festus sent Paul to Rome with a very limited accusation. He should have been sent with a bill of particulars about the crimes laid against him, but Paul had done nothing in public that was worthy of death or imprisonment (26:26, 31). Even though the cause of action had failed, Agrippa strongly advised Festus that Paul's appeal to Caesar must stand and could not be revoked, and thus Paul and his case were transferred to Rome, fulfilling the prophetic word of the Lord that Paul should "bear witness also at Rome" (23:11; 26:32).

Acts 27:1–28:13. Precedent 52: Paul Is Preserved during His Journey to Rome

This episode in the book of Acts recounts Paul's voyage to Italy, the shipwreck along the way on the island of Malta, and his respite in Syracuse and landing in Puteoli as he headed up the famous Appian Way toward Rome for his appeal to Caesar.

Paul used a combination of skills and spiritual guidance to survive. An angel told Paul that none would die in the storm because Paul must be brought to Caesar (Acts 27:24). When a venomous snake bit Paul but did not hurt him, the men with him determined that he was a god, rather than a murderer as they first thought (28:4–6; see Mark 16:18).

This record provides models for coping with the privations suffered by many early Christians. They could trust God and receive guidance, and they did not have to regard all Romans as enemies. Paul was

again placed in the custody of a friendly Roman commander. This, as well as Paul's previous relationship with Claudius Lycias in Jerusalem, provided encouraging precedents for Saints in legal crises with the Romans. When they reached the first port of Sidon, the centurion who was escorting Paul kindly allowed Paul the liberty of going to visit with his friends and "to refresh himself" (Acts 27:3).

The account of this journey is recorded in first-person plural language, so Luke was apparently traveling with Paul. The weather required that they sail south of Cyprus. Upon reaching Myra, the group boarded another ship from Alexandria on its way to Rome, most likely carrying grain from Egypt to Rome. They sailed south of Crete and almost stayed there for the winter as it was rather late in the season, but against Paul's inspired warnings, they sailed on, gradually losing control against the storm. Paul remarked, "I told you so."

After various privations, Paul was able to reassure the rest of the sailors that he had been told by an angel that no one would be lost since he was divinely ordained to reach Rome. However, the ship did wreck, leaving the travelers on the island of Melita (Malta). There Paul began healing people, and he was thus able not only to testify of how much he served and trusted God, but also to use divine gifts just as he had in the healings. Paul prophesied and testified to the crew, the military unit, and the other prisoners that God would protect them.

The details of this excursion are quite particular. Luke writes here very precisely in mechanical and practical details, adding to his witness of the power of Paul's divine authority. For example, Paul advised that the lifeboats be disconnected as the crew was about to leave the ship, and he took a leadership role and advised everyone to eat well before the grain had to be thrown overboard to lighten the ship (27:31–35).

Acts 28:14–31. Precedent 53: Paul in Rome to Appeal to Caesar

Presumably, the word of Paul's coming was passed along since Christian friends met the group upon landing in Puteoli and at the forum at Apii and at the Three Taverns, a place about eighteen kilometers from Rome that was designed for travelers. Again, the popularity of Paul and the fellowship exhibited by the early Saints is evident.

The prisoners were turned over to the captain of the Praetorian Guard as was to be expected, but Paul was placed under arrest in a guarded house. He remained there under some light form of house arrest in Rome for two years (Acts 28:16). He had enough money to rent that house as "his own," and there he was able to meet with Jews, Christians, and "all that came unto him" (28:30).

He was able to address the chief of the Jews in Rome (28:17) and many others to whom he expounded the gospel of Jesus: "And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him" (28:30–31).

As far as the record indicates, Paul's hearing before the emperor may never have happened, but his time in Rome was the most effective of all his missionary efforts and is viewed as the foundation of the Christian movement going forward. Paul wrote several letters from Rome, and according to early traditions, he also traveled west to Spain and Sicily. An important precedent that resounds throughout the book of Acts and is evident here is that Christians should continually strive to do the work of Jesus no matter the circumstances.

Paul, in a farewell mode, wrote to Timothy, one of his early converts and companions: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7–8).

Credits

Authors: John W. Welch and Rita Spencer

New Testament Insights Series Editor: John W. Welch

General Editor: Taylor Halverson

Associate Editor: Morgan Tanner

Senior Editor: Sarah Whitney Johnson

Assistant Editors: Sam Lofgran, Verlanne Johnson

Content Manager: Jasmin Gimenez Rappleye

Source: *New Testament Insights: Acts*, by John W. Welch and Rita Spencer