Acts 21:37-22:29 - Williams

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Preacher: Tad Williams

[0:00] Good morning. Welcome to visitors, especially maybe, especially for the sake of visitors, let me remind us all that we started preaching through the book of Acts on the Sunday after Easter in April.

We're going to do this, but we're going to do this, but we're going to do this.
After this morning, we have six more sermons in Acts. It'll take us up through the end of November, near the end of November, and then we'll start a special series for Advent in December. I was looking over the remaining chapters of Acts, and by way of introduction to our passage this morning, I want to point out two features of the remaining chapters in the book of Acts.
Two features. Look for these over the next few weeks. Okay, here's feature number one. There's a very clear emphasis on this theme that Paul is an innocent prisoner.
Paul is an innocent prisoner. We saw last week the Apostle Paul. He's completed his three missionary journeys, they're called. He has come back to the city of Jerusalem, bringing with him a group of fellow travelers and a gift of money that he's raised from his travels to bring to the Jerusalem church.
[2:00] He meets with the elders, James and the elders of the Jerusalem church. They asked him to comply with some Jewish purification rituals, actually.

And so he does that. And he is in the temple in Jerusalem when essentially a riot breaks out. We saw this last week. A mob grabs him, drags him out of the temple.
It says the doors of the temple were closed. So Paul is outside of this temple complex in Jerusalem. When Roman soldiers come and break up this mob and they grab Paul and it says they arrested him.
It's really more like they rescued him. They grabbed him away from this mob. So that is what has just happened. And we are picking up, we're jumping back into this scene.
Paul is standing outside the closed gates of this temple mount. Roman soldiers have grabbed him and here's this mob who it says have been beating him and trying to kill him.
[3:06] So Paul becomes a prisoner and Paul will remain a prisoner for the rest of the book of Acts. And he will endure something like five different trials or examinations.

And the remaining chapters of the book of Acts are very interested in giving us a lot of detail about these trials. Paul gives long speeches defending himself.
Some of these speeches are repeated almost verbatim. And so the author of the book of Acts is clearly interested in demonstrating for us as readers that Paul is innocent.
And that's very curious. Why does he take so much time? 25% of the book of Acts, the final 25%, is really focused on Paul as an innocent prisoner.
In these different trials with different Roman leaders and authorities and a Jewish king. So why is the author so interested in showing us that?
[4:13] He's clearly interested in it. There's a couple different hypotheses. One is called the legal brief hypothesis. And this holds that Luke, the writer, actually writes the book of Acts when Paul is in prison in Rome.

We see right at the end of Acts, Paul's in Rome in prison. And this theory holds that Luke writes this whole book in order to be used in the trial of Paul as sort of a character witness or a character brief demonstrating Paul's innocence.
That's a theory. But when you see this focus in these final chapters, you say, well, that maybe makes sense. Because a lot of attention is given to Paul's innocence.
So look for that theme. Paul as the innocent prisoner. And we'll think more about why so much attention is given to that. Here's the second theme to look for in these remaining sermons.

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The theme that Paul may not always make the right decision or act wisely. This is very curious because the author is clearly trying to establish Paul's credentials and prove his innocence.
[5:31] But then he very curiously includes a number of these stories and episodes that invite us as readers to ask the question, did Paul make the right decision?

Did he do the right thing? Maybe he did the wrong thing. We saw a very clear example of that last week. You remember multiple spirit-filled Christians come to talk to Paul before he goes to Jerusalem.
And they say, and the text says, in the spirit, they say, don't go to Jerusalem. Don't go to Jerusalem. You're going to be captured. You're going to, don't go. Paul goes anyway.
And so the text really invites us to ask the question, well, did he make a mistake? Did he mess up? We'll see an example of that in our passage this morning.
Next week, Dan's going to preach. We're going to see Paul kind of losing his temper, actually, in a trial setting. And pretty clearly making a mistake, I would say. And then in a few chapters, maybe the most famous example, where Paul, he appeals to Caesar.
[6:41] He asks to actually be transported to Rome for a trial in front of Caesar. And then the author gives us a little side conversation between these two Roman rulers, where they say, this guy is innocent.

And if he hadn't appealed to Caesar, we would let him go. So it's an overt invitation for us as readers to say, is Paul doing the right thing?
Is he making the right decisions? Why does he do that? Very curious feature of the text. Look for that. We'll think through it. Why would an author do both these things?
I think the simplest explanation is because he's telling a true story. Just a true story. The author of Acts clearly wants to draw out some parallels between Paul and Jesus, actually.
Brought to trial in Jerusalem by an angry mob. But he also, the author of Acts, clearly wants to show us that Paul is not Jesus.
[7:53] And Paul is not perfect, or at least he invites us to question Paul's wisdom. It sounds like a true story. It sounds like Paul is a real human being, a real leader, who doesn't always make the right decision, or doesn't always know in the moment if he's making the right decision.

So look for that. Well, let's look at our text this morning. Like I said, Paul is outside the gates of the temple. This mob has been beating him, it says.
We don't know how severe the beating is. Because these Roman soldiers grab him and rescue him from the mob. And then Paul stands up and holds forth with quite a long speech that's eloquent and involved.
And so some critics have said, well, there's no way he could have given a speech if he'd just been beaten up by a mob. Others say, well, we don't know how severe the beating was. Maybe they were getting ready to really beat him.
But that's the scene. That's the setting. There's chaos on the steps of the barracks. Let me give you a little Roman military background here.
[9:01] At this time in history, the Roman army has a permanent standing cohort of soldiers stationed at the temple in Jerusalem. Somewhere between 500 and 1,000 soldiers.

Organized, each 100 soldiers organized under a centurion. And then maybe 5 to 10 centurions have over them a tribune.
Okay, a Roman military tribune. We would, this is an important military officer, a high-ranking military officer in the Roman army.
We would say something like a colonel in our army today. Not quite a general, but just below a general, a tribune. And our text says the tribune himself comes with the soldiers in response to this mob.
Look at verse 37 as we get into our text. As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the tribune, may I say something to you?
[10:06] And now we have a funny little scene. And the tribune says to Paul, do you know Greek? Are you not the Egyptian then? Who recently stirred up a revolt and led the 4,000 men of the assassins out into the wilderness?

It's a funny scene. I think we're supposed to remember the chaos of this moment. Angry, shouting mob. And these soldiers rush in and grab them. And then, who are you?

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Aren't you the, what? You know, it's just confusion. Aren't you the Egyptian? The Jewish historian Josephus tells a story similar to this of a Jew from Egypt who actually comes to this region around this same time and stirs up a revolt and leads, Josephus says, 30,000 men out into the wilderness. So, some discrepancies on the numbers. But historians think this is the same incident. And so, this Roman military commander, the tribune, thinks, okay, it's that guy.
It's that Egyptian Jewish guy. It's just, it's a confusing, chaotic scene. Paul replies, in Greek, speaking in Greek to this Greek-speaking Roman tribune.
[11:19] Paul replies, verse 39, I am a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no obscure city. I beg you, permit me to speak to the people. And he, the tribune, gave him permission to do that.

Very unusual. You would not grab a prisoner and then turn around and let him make a big public speech. So, it's an unusual thing this tribune lets Paul do.
And it seems because Paul fairly quickly makes a good impression on this tribune, or at least good enough for the man to say, all right, go ahead, give a speech.
So, that's what he does. Verse 40, when he, the tribune, had given Paul permission, Paul standing on the steps, mind you, he's standing on the steps of the Roman barracks, outside of the temple. This mob is around. They're ready to kill him. He motions with his hand. And when there was a great hush, he addressed them in the Hebrew language.
[12:25] So, what a scene. Paul raises his hands. This mob quiets down. And then he starts speaking to them. It says in the Hebrew language that probably, you might have a footnote in your Bible, that probably means Aramaic, which is the language the Jews at that time spoke.

So, Paul begins speaking to them. And what Paul does in this speech is he recounts the story of his Damascus Road conversion experience.
Okay, we read about this in Acts chapter 9, when the author just sort of gives us the narrative account of what happened to Paul as he was traveling to Damascus in the bright light.
Paul now, in his own words, recounts that speech or that scene, what happened. In, I think, three chapters, Paul gives another version of this same account.
So, we get this three times in the book of Acts. Quite a long, detailed description of what happens to Paul on the Damascus Road. This telling of it by Paul is clearly pitched or crafted for a Jewish audience.
[13:42] Paul is speaking to his fellow Jews. And he wants to emphasize certain Jewishness things in this story.

We'll look at these details in a minute. But just know that that's the scene and that's what Paul's trying to do. He's trying to connect with this Jewish audience and persuade them that what he's doing is not in contradiction to the right worship of the God of the Old Testament and the God of the Jewish religion.
So, that's his goal. He's trying to persuade an angry mob that what he's doing actually does honor the God of the Old Testament, the God of the Jewish people.
Look how he begins the speech, verse 1 of chapter 22. He says, Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you. When was the last time the angry mob was trying to kill you and you said, Brothers and fathers.
Very respectful, sort of opening. Calming. He speaks to them in their native tongue. They quiet down even more. He says, Hear the defense that I now make to you.
[15:00] And when they heard he was addressing them in the Hebrew language, they became even more quiet. And so, Paul begins and he tells his story. And I won't read all of it again.

I'll point out a few things to show that what he's doing is he's clearly trying to connect with this Jewish audience and make the case that the worship of Jesus Christ is not in contradiction to the worship of the God of the Old Testament.
This is such a major issue in the first century between Christians and Jews. And so, here goes Paul trying to make the case.
He says, I am a Jew born in Tarsus in Cilicia, brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day.
So, you see what he's doing there? He's just clearly trying to make these connections. Our fathers, I'm zealous for God as you are zealous for God. Very gracious description of what they're doing.

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[16:21] He commends them for their zealousness towards God. Well, that's one way of describing it, right? They're trying to kill him in a mob, riot action.

But he says it's zealousness for God. The city of Tarsus is in modern-day Turkey. Paul says he was born there, but then raised in Jerusalem.
We don't know at what point in Paul's life he moved to Jerusalem. He was educated by Gamaliel, a very famous rabbi. We've met Gamaliel earlier in the book of Acts.
He's presented as a sort of calm and wise figure. So, Paul's got these great credentials. He talks about how he persecuted the way, the Christians, and the council in Jerusalem gave him letters and authority to do that.
And so, he went to Damascus to do that. And verse 6, And as I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon, a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me.
[17:33] And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And I answered, Who are you, Lord? And he said to me, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.

So now Paul's starting to make a big argument. In the Jewish imagination and in the Jewish literature, the idea of God speaking out of a bright, unnatural light is a somewhat common idea. The most famous example is Moses and the burning bush. And then Moses on Mount Sinai. We read some of that earlier in our reading.
God descends in lightning and bright lights, unnatural light, and then a voice comes out of the bright light and speaks. So, this taps very clearly into a known motif in Old Testament scripture and in the Jewish thinking.
Ezekiel and Isaiah describe similar scenes. God speaking to them out of bright light. So, Paul is intentionally placing himself in that stream, but then he says, the voice that comes out of this bright light says, I am Jesus of Nazareth.
[18:57] In the three tellings of this story in the book of Acts, this is the only place where Paul says the voice says, I am Jesus of Nazareth. So, he's clearly making this very Jewish connection with his Jewish audience.

Like, this is Jesus of Nazareth. But that's a big argument. That the voice that speaks from the supernatural bright light is Jesus of Nazareth.
but they keep listening. He hasn't lost the audience yet. He's made that big claim. Paul says, those others who were with me saw the light.
They did not understand the voice. I said, what shall I do? And the Lord said to me, rise and go into Damascus. And so, Paul says, I was led by the hand of those who were with me and we came into Damascus.
And there, verse 12, one, Ananias, a devout man according to the law. Okay, so Paul wants to emphasize the Jewish credentials of this man who comes to meet him and speak to him and really disciples him.
[20:13] Paul's first teacher, a devout man according to the law who's well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there. he, Ananias, came to me standing by me and said to me, brother, brother Saul, receive your sight.

Okay, so again, Paul's emphasizing this Jewishness, the respectable Jewish man who's well thought of by everyone there comes to him and at that very hour I received my sight and he, Ananias, said, the God of our fathers appointed you to know his will to see the righteous one.
The righteous one is a term for the anticipated Jewish Messiah. The righteous one.
The Jews of the Old Testament looked forward to the righteous one, the Messiah. And now this man, Ananias, says, our Lord appointed you to see the righteous one and to hear a voice from his mouth.
And so, Paul's again making the argument that Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus has appeared to Paul, spoken to him. In verse 15, Ananias, speaking to Paul, says, And you, Paul, will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard.
[21:44] And now, why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins calling on his name. So, the righteous one who is the Messiah has appeared to Paul and Paul, that has been affirmed by a devout Jewish man who's well thought of.

So, this is what Paul's doing. He's making this argument. Now, verse 17, Paul says, When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him saying to me,

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Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly because they will not accept your testimony about me. This is the only place in the three accounts where we hear anything about a trance. Paul says, I came back to this temple in Jerusalem and I was praying and I fell into a trance and then a funny, I think a funny phrase, And in my trance I saw him saying to me.
How do you see someone saying something to you? You hear someone saying, Paul says, I saw him saying. So, maybe again a bright light. This again is a very Jewish, how to say it, this is something that will really build Paul's resume.
Oh, you had a trance experience while praying in the temple, that's big time. That's very desirable. This sort of ecstatic, mystical encounter with God in the temple, this is really what Jews longed for, this was a motivation, this is why actually you would go to the temple or the great longing you would have in going to the temple is to encounter God and have a very powerful encounter with God.
[23:38] And so Paul says, well I had that and God talked to me in a sort of mystical or a prayerful trance type experience in the temple and Paul sees and hears the voice of God saying, make haste, go out of Jerusalem because they will not accept your testimony and Paul says, Lord, they themselves know that in one synagogue after another I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you and when the blood of Stephen your witness was being shed I myself was standing by and approving.

So Paul brings up his own shameful past past that he stood by and approved at the stoning of Stephen. Paul brings this up to the Lord and now he tells this mob about this reminds them that he was there when Stephen was stoned and he, verse 21, he, the voice of the Lord said to Paul said to me, go for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.
And it's at the mention of this word Gentiles that the mob breaks forth shouting and we'll look at that in a minute. I want to back up though before we move on back to verse 18 the Lord speaks to Paul in this prayerful trance and he says make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly because they will not accept your testimony about me.
And here's one of these opportunities in the text when we should ask, okay, God told Paul to make haste and get out of Jerusalem and leave the temple and so why is Paul in the temple?
Why has Paul come back to Jerusalem and why is he doing this ritual purification stuff in the temple and hanging out in the temple where mobs can get a hold of him?
[25:50] We don't know. The text doesn't answer these questions but it quite deliberately will see, it quite deliberately invites us to ask these questions.

I read some commentators this week who made much of this actually. One, of course, there's always critical commentators who will say, oh, everything's terrible and Paul's terrible. These are biblically faithful commentators, one who was very clear to say, Paul is in the wrong at this point. He is in error doing what he's doing, doing these purification ritual things in the temple. Paul wants to be everything to everybody body.
But this biblically faithful, I would say, pastor, commentator said, no, he is in the wrong. I'm not arguing that here right now.
I'm not telling you that that's absolutely the case. But the text does invite us to ask that question and wonder about it. And I think it's permissible to ask that question about the Apostle Paul, who's a human, sinner, clearly appointed by God.
[27:08] But why is he in the temple if God has told him to go? Anyway, back to the riot starting up again. Paul says, God told him, the righteous one, the voice from the bright light says, go far away to the Gentiles.

Okay, so now the God of the Old Testament and Paul's argument is commissioning him to go to the Gentiles. And this is unacceptable. The crowd had been listening, verse 22, up to this word.
They listened to him. Then they raised their voices and they said, away with such a fellow from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live. And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, the tribune again, this important Roman military leader, the tribune ordered him to be brought up into the barracks saying that he should be examined by flogging to find out why they were shouting against him like this.
A lot of stuff there. Some funny stuff. I think it's funny. Let's ask a couple questions here. What is it about Paul's mention of the Gentiles that caused the crowd just to lose it?
Some people like to say, oh, racism. Racism. It's difficult when we use the word racism today. Things come into our mind that would not at all have come into the minds of these first century people.

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[28:53] They did not have our conception of race. So it's not, I don't think it's most helpful to say, oh, it's just racism here. The Jewish people are convinced they are God's chosen people, that God has revealed himself to them, that they are the stewards of the law and the prophets and the message of God.

But as we've talked in this series, it seems at this time in history, the worship of God has sort of faded into the background and what has risen to prominence are the traditions and the customs that have come to surround all of this.
And so the Jewish believers in the first century seem to be absolutely convinced that you have to worship God through the customs and traditions and practices.
that's the only way to God. I appreciated how John Stott, a commentator, puts it here.
This is what he says, quote, it is important to understand why the crowd reacts so strongly at this point. It is important to understand why. Quote, in their eyes, proselytism making Gentiles into Jews was fine.
[30:19] But evangelism making Gentiles into Christians without first making them into Jews was an abomination.

It was tantamount to saying that Jews and Gentiles were equal for they both needed to come to God through Christ and that on identical terms.
End quote. So Jews and Gentiles are equal because they both need to come to God through Christ not through traditions and customs and all that had come to accumulate around the practice of the worship of the God of the Old Testament.
Do you ever get upset in that way? Do we want to introduce people to Jesus and invite people to come to Jesus and to come to God through Jesus graciously and openly or do we really just want people to become like us?
Maybe we even insist that they must become like us and adopt our customs and practices and traditions and all of our things.
[32:06] I think that's the issue here. This week I thought I would exhort us all to actually see ourselves in this rioting Jewish mob angry at the idea that God would invite anyone and everyone to come to him on equal terms, on equal grounds, on the basis of his grace alone, not our works, not our customs, not our traditions, and because of that we are all equal at the foot of the cross as sinners.

And that is actually destabilizing, especially if we've put a lot of stock in our traditions, in our customs, in our upbringing, in the family we were born into, whatever it is.
So up to this word, they listen to him, the Gentiles, the idea that the Gentiles are welcomed in by God. They raise their voices, they start rioting, the tribune at that point takes him up the steps, there were steps into this barracks area, says he's going to examine him by flogging.
Well, that's a way, I guess, one way to ask some questions. The beatings will continue until morale improves. This guy seems to be a disciple of that idea.
Verse 25, Here's another real curiosity.
[34:03] Why does Paul wait until this time, this point, to reveal his Roman citizenship? Why didn't he say that earlier? Like, right away on the steps when the centurion's like, are you the Egyptian?

He's like, no, I'm a Roman citizen. He didn't do that. Why not? No one knows. That's the answer. No one really knows. It's a curiosity. We saw a similar thing back in Acts 16 in Philippi when Paul is beaten and whipped and then imprisoned and the Philippian jailer, you remember that, comes to faith in the middle of the night, the earthquake, and then in the morning the magistrates come and say, okay, you can let him go now.
And Paul says, no, no, no, no, we're Roman citizens and you just beat us and imprisoned us. Why does Paul wait until that moment?
Why didn't he say that when they first got out the whips, you know, the evening before? It's a curious thing. No, yeah. it could be that being a Roman citizen or being identified as a Roman citizen would actually diminish Paul's credibility with the Jews, with the Jewish audience.
[35:16] That's probably the most likely reason. Paul is somewhat hesitant to play the I'm a Roman citizen card.

But he waits anyway until this kind of 11th hour. He's about to be flogged. This is the terrible Roman flogging with the whip that has glass and stones embedded.

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This is the same beating that Jesus was beaten with by Roman soldiers in this temple area. A beating that had killed many people.
Paul's about to receive this. He says, I'm a Roman citizen. And the tribune answers, I bought this citizenship for a large sum. Paul said, but I am a citizen by birth.
So those who were about to examine him withdrew. And the tribune also was afraid for he realized that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.
[36:24] Violates the Roman law at that time. You couldn't just bind a Roman citizen. You certainly could not beat a Roman citizen. without a proper trial in the Roman Empire.

And so, but again, curious that Paul waits until this moment and then the author reveals it in this very dramatic sort of way. Ah, Paul's a Roman citizen. That's our story, friends.
It's our preaching passage for the morning. Come back the next five weeks, we're going to hear a very almost identical version to this in a few weeks, but we need to think about it.
Let me close with two sort of concluding lessons that I've drawn from the text this week. Number one, God works in the chaos even when we don't make the best decisions.
That thought has comforted me enormously this week. Paul may or may not be making the best decisions at this time in his life.
[37:32] He may or may not be thinking with total clarity, okay, guess what, he's human. None of us make the right decision all the time.

None of us. But yet God works in the chaos of our lives and even the chaos of a mob to reveal Jesus Christ and invite everyone to come to God through Christ, to receive the grace of Jesus Christ, to not rely on our traditions, our customs, our family heritage, whatever it may be.
God works in the chaos even when we don't make the best decisions. Praise God for that. There is such comfort, especially for those of us who try to lead.
Okay, you want to never be accused of making the wrong decision? Well, just don't ever try to lead. Don't ever propose a new idea or say, hey, I think we should all do this.
But if you do, and if God has made you into someone who proposes new ideas and leads, be comforted to know that God works in the chaos even when we don't make the best decisions.
[39:03] That's number one. Here's the final thing, and we'll end with this. God honors those who faithfully bear witness to his word in this world, and so let's invite people to come to Jesus, and let's not insist that people become just like us.

God honors those who faithfully bear witness to his word and who bear witness to Jesus Christ, his son, and he asks us to serve as witnesses in this world, and so let's do that openly, trusting in God and his grace and his work through his spirit and his word, and let's not insist that everyone has to be like us.
And the Lord bless us as we understand and apply his word. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for your word.
Help us to read it well, help us to think carefully, to ask good questions, to trust in you, to teach us, help us to rely on your grace and come to you through Christ on the basis of your grace alone, I pray in Jesus' name, amen.
Friends, let's stand, let's greet one another with the peace of Christ, and in a minute or so we'll come to the communion table. to to to to to to

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