

# Acts 21:17-40: If God Lets the Worst Happen, How Should We Respond?

Ricardo Campos, Pastor    Grace Chapel, Orange, CA    January 14, 2018

## I. Introduction

Have you ever said to yourself, “Why would God let this happen to me? Why doesn’t He stop this!” Why does God allow terrible things into our lives? How are we supposed to remain calm while our world is falling apart?! What would enable us to go through the pain and heartache yet keep our heads about us? You have to ask, “Who is God and can He save me, even if I die?”

## II. Acts 21:17-40: If God Lets the Worst Imaginable Thing Happen to Us, How Should We React?

**21:17-26**, having left Caesarea with Agabus’ warning of what would happen to Paul when he got to Jerusalem, Paul and his team arrive in Jerusalem. The church gladly welcomed them. The next day Paul and his team (including Luke and the Gentile representatives, Acts 20:4, who’ve brought financial support for the Jerusalem church) met with the elders and James (not the apostle whose name is now dead, Acts 12:2, but the ½ brother of Jesus). Paul then proceeds to report in detail what God had done among the Gentiles during the three missionary journeys, which span about 9 years. When they heard the news, they glorified the Lord. Then they inform Paul about the potential trouble on the horizon: there are tens of thousands of new Jewish believers but they are all zealous for the Law and they’ve been told that Paul has been running around the Gentile world telling Jewish folks to forsake Moses’ Law and customs and to stop circumcising their children.

Concerning the Mosaic Law and customs, Paul never said that Jews couldn’t observe the Law. They could do so voluntarily; what they couldn’t do is make it mandatory for themselves or anyone else, especially Gentiles (Acts 15). In fact, Paul himself kept the Law, likely on a regular basis (Acts 18:18; 26:5; 1 Corinthians 9:20). Regarding circumcision, he wasn’t against it, which is why he had Timothy circumcised (Acts 16:3; 1 Corinthians 7:18). What he said is that circumcision could not save you, only faith could (Galatians 5:2-6). Why were these new Jewish believers zealous for the Law even though it wasn’t mandatory? They might’ve been doing it out of freedom but since they’re zealously keeping it, it may’ve been out of obligation since that’s all they’ve known their whole lives. They’re not mature enough in their Christian faith to see it otherwise.

Fearing what might happen and knowing that the whole assembly will know that Paul is in Jerusalem, they have a plan. In order to show that the allegations against Paul are false and that Paul himself keeps the Law, they want him to take four men who have taken a Nazarite vow (Numbers 6:1-21), be purified with them (including shaving the head marking the completion of the vow), and pay for their purification expenses. However, James and the elders make it clear that Gentiles are excluded from keeping the Law by repeating the injunction they established in Acts 15, which didn’t mandate but encouraged Gentiles not to do certain things that would offend their Jewish brethren (eating meat offered to idols or from strangled animals, eating blood, and sexual immorality). They want to reaffirm Jewish freedom to keep the Law voluntarily and Gentile exemption from the Law entirely. So Paul took the four men, was purified with them, and informed the priest when their days of purification would be over so he could have the sacrifices ready for them (a costly expense for one person, much less five, Numbers 6:13-20). Was Paul vacillating on his principles by doing this? No, he had complete freedom to keep the Law voluntarily (Acts 18:18) and wouldn’t hesitate to do so in order to save his fellow Jews (1 Corinthians 9:20). He was also not ashamed of this act when recounting it later (Acts 24:17-18). And by doing this, he was keeping the unity of the church.

**21:27-36**, when the days of purification were almost over for Paul and the four men, unbelieving Jews from Asia (likely the same ones who persecuted Paul during the First Missionary journey, Acts 13:50; 14:2, 5, 19, they came to Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost) when they saw Paul in the temple, they agitated the whole crowd by telling them that Paul taught against Jewishness, the Law, the temple and they accused him of defiling the temple by bringing Gentiles into a forbidden area. These allegations were false: Paul taught that Jewishness alone couldn't save you, that the Law was no longer binding on Jews and especially Gentiles, that the temple wasn't the only place to worship God (in fact, Paul was honoring the temple when they grabbed him), nor had he brought any Gentiles into the Court of Women or Israel (Gentiles could be killed for entering these courts, even if they were Roman citizens). These accusations against Paul didn't remain with the temple crowd, it spread throughout Jerusalem and soon a massive mob descended on the temple. They seized Paul, dragged him out of the Court of the Women, and the temple guards were likely the ones who shut the doors behind them to keep the temple from being defiled by the riot and killing. They were trying to get Paul to a place where they could execute him (you could not shed man's blood in the inner court).

At one end of the temple was the Antonia Fortress which overlooked the temple compound. It had stairs that led down to the Court of the Gentiles where Paul was being beaten. It housed a military tribune (Claudius Lysias, Acts 23:26) and a cohort (600-1,000 soldiers), who could quickly step in to stop any riot. Word came to the commander that all Jerusalem was in an uproar, so he took at least two centurions and 200 soldiers and ran down to the mob. When they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. The commander took Paul and ordered him bound with two chains (normally reserved for dangerous criminals). He then tried to find out who Paul was and what he'd done. Some in the crowd said one thing, others said another. Since he couldn't ascertain the truth, he commanded Paul to be taken to the barracks. When they got to the stairs, Paul had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob who cried out, "Away with him!" (similar to what they said regarding Jesus, Luke 23:18)

**21:37-40**, as Paul was about to be led into the barracks, he asked the commander in Greek if he could speak to him. The commander was surprised to hear Paul speak Greek. He assumed Paul was the Egyptian who stirred up a rebellion and led 4,000 assassins into the wilderness. This was an Egyptian who claimed to be a prophet who promised that the walls of Jerusalem would collapse at his command. He led a fanatical group of Jews who planned to take over Jerusalem and were known as sicarii (assassins) due to the sica (dagger) they used on pro-Roman Jews as they slipped in and out of a crowd. At one point governor Felix (Acts 23:24) set his troops against them, killing some and the remainder scattered, but the Egyptian escaped. The commander assumes that Paul is this man. Paul corrects him and gives his credentials: he's a Jew from the province of Cilicia, from the city of Tarsus, which is not an insignificant city. Paul is basically telling the commander that he's a Greek-speaking, educated man and not a rebel rouser. Then Paul asks for permission to address the people who want his life. The commander lets him and Paul stood on the stairs, waved his hand, quieting the mob, and began speaking to them in Hebrew.

**Do we really trust God when the worst happens?** We live in a broken world that will always bring terrible things to our doorstep. If God allows these things into our lives and He is in fact a God of love, what is it that He wants us to realize about ourselves, Him, and His ability to save us? Job lost everything yet said, "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). But when his eyes were focused on his tragedy, he wished he'd never been born (Job 3:1-3) and began to question God (Job 7:20-21). It wasn't until Job returned to his original understanding of God that he was once again at peace even though he still had nothing (Job 42:1-6). There is nothing, not life, not death, nor anything in between that can ever separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:31-39). Paul was at peace facing this mob who wanted his life because he knew who God was...whatever the reason, He trusted God.



### III. Conclusion

*And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law; but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come. Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law." ....Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them. Now when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." (For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.) And all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut.*