

Acts

Lesson #17

St. Paul's Arrest in Jerusalem

(21: 15 – 23: 35)

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Review

After three years in Ephesus, St. Paul left for Macedonia and traveled leisurely to Greece, where he stayed for three months. Preparing to leave for home, probably from the port at Cenchreae, he learned of an assassination plot and instead traveled by land through Macedonia, where he stayed in Philippi for Passover, and then he went on to Troas. During the journey Paul developed a deep and dreadful foreboding that he must get to Jerusalem by Pentecost (50 days after Passover), and that when he arrives, he will be killed. His companions sailed from Troas to Assos, while Paul walked, pondering his options.

His decision made, St. Paul sailed from Assos with his companions, past Ephesus to Miletus, where he met with the leaders of the church at Ephesus and said a final goodbye to them. He then sailed on to Caesarea Maritima, where he prepared to walk the final leg of his journey to Jerusalem . . . and to his death.

Preview

Sure enough, when St. Paul arrives in Jerusalem trouble greets him: word is out that Paul has been *“teaching all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to abandon Moses and . . . not to circumcise their children or to observe their customary practices”* (21: 21). When Paul is spotted near the Temple, a riot erupts and Paul is nearly torn to pieces, saved only by the quick intervention of the Roman authorities.

Wanting to get to the bottom of the issue, the Roman commander has Paul brought before the Sanhedrin to listen to their charges and to give Paul an opportunity to defend himself. It doesn't go well. Again, a near riot erupts and Paul is escorted to the Roman barracks, where—as a Roman citizen—he is placed under protective custody.

Meanwhile, Paul's nephew learns of an assassination plot against Paul. He reports it to the commander, who transfers Paul from Jerusalem to Caesarea Maritima, with a protective guard of 200 soldiers, 70 cavalry and 200 auxiliaries, 470 armed soldiers, in all.

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“After these days we made preparations for our journey, then went up to Jerusalem. Some of the disciples from Caesarea came along to lead us to the house of Mnason, a Cypriot, a disciple of long standing, with whom we were to stay. When we reached Jerusalem the brothers welcomed us warmly. The next day, Paul accompanied us on a visit to James, and all the presbyters were present. He greeted them, then proceeded to tell them in detail what God had accomplished among the Gentiles through his ministry.”

(21: 15-19)

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So far, so good! The journey from Caesarea to Jerusalem goes smoothly. St. Paul walks the 72-mile journey, accompanied by friends, and he has a nice place to stay in Jerusalem, the home of Mnason*, an early believer from Cyprus.

Once the group arrives, Paul meets with James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, and with the elders, who welcome him warmly.

** Μνάσων is a Hellenistic Jew from Cyprus, like Barnabas. His name is a variation of "Jason," a common Greek name.*

“They praised God when they heard it, but said to him, “Brother, you see how many thousands of believers there are from among the Jews, and they are all zealous observers of the law. They have been informed that you are teaching all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to abandon Moses and that you are telling them not to circumcise their children or to observe their customary practices. What is to be done? They will surely hear that you have arrived. So do what we tell you. We have four men who have taken a vow. Take these men and purify yourself with them, and pay their expenses that they may have their heads shaved. In this way everyone will know that there is nothing to the reports they have been given about you . . .

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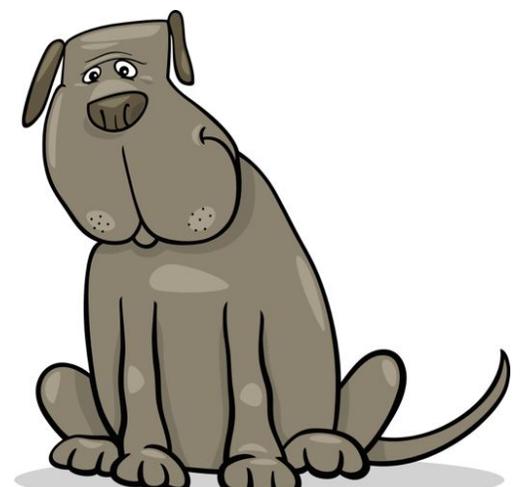
“. . . but that you yourself live in observance of the law. As for the Gentiles who have come to believe, we sent them our decision that they abstain from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from unlawful marriage.” So Paul took the men, and on the next day after purifying himself together with them entered the temple to give notice of the day when the purification would be completed and the offering made for each of them.

(21: 20-26)

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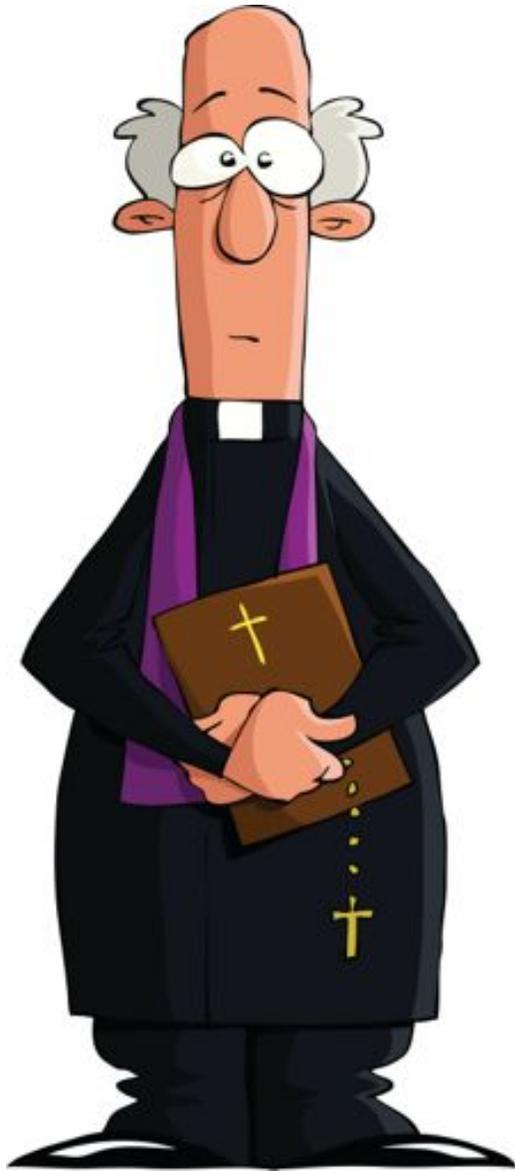


**Trouble is about to begin!
Even though the Council had made
the decision eight years earlier that
Gentiles need not observe the
Mosaic law, the Jewish believers in
Jerusalem still clung tightly to their
religious and cultural customs.**



**I have a bad feeling
about what's going
to happen.**

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- We are saved by grace through faith in Christ, not by observing the Mosaic law . . . or any other law, for that matter. But deeply-held beliefs, especially if they are culturally engrained, are hard to abandon.
- As we noted previously, it takes an entire generation—and often more—for new norms to replace old ones. Frankly, the entire older generation that lived under the old norms has to die, and a new generation must grow up under the new ways. Only then will the changes become institutionalized and the new ways become cultural norms.
- Witness the changes that emerged out of Vatican II, as an example.

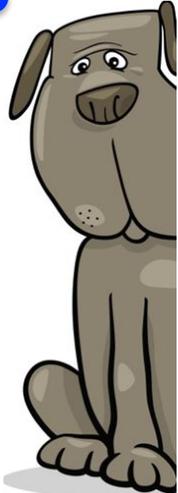


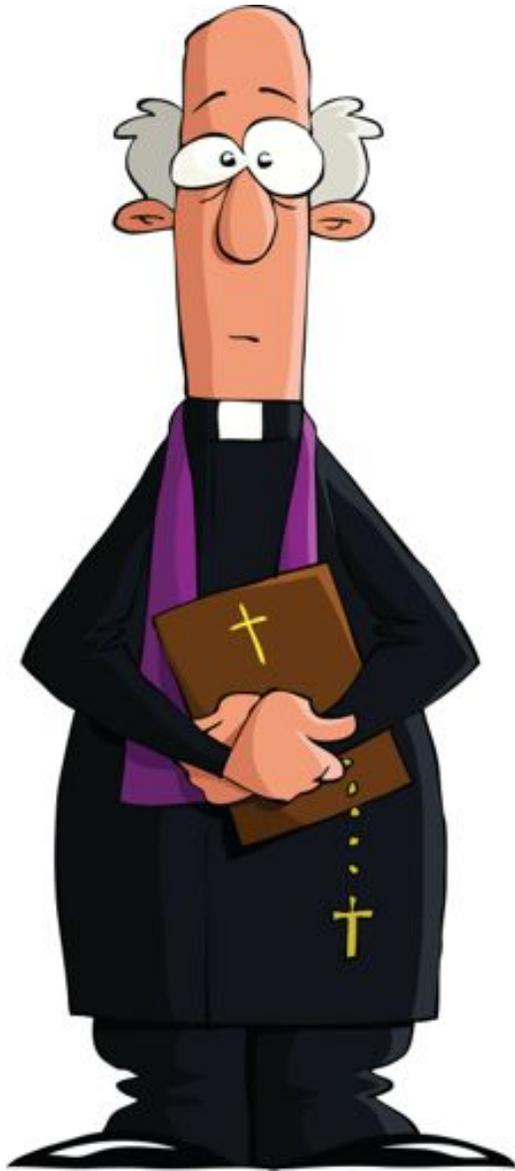
- Even though the Council had decided that Gentiles need not observe the Mosaic law, James and the other leaders of the Jerusalem church advise Paul to observe the law very publically to avoid a heated encounter with the Jewish believers.
- Paul agrees to do so. Just as Paul circumcised Timothy at the beginning of his 2nd missionary journey, purely as a practical matter, so does he now agree to observe the Mosaic law to avoid unnecessary conflict within the church.



Well, I think Paul's a big, fat hypocrite!

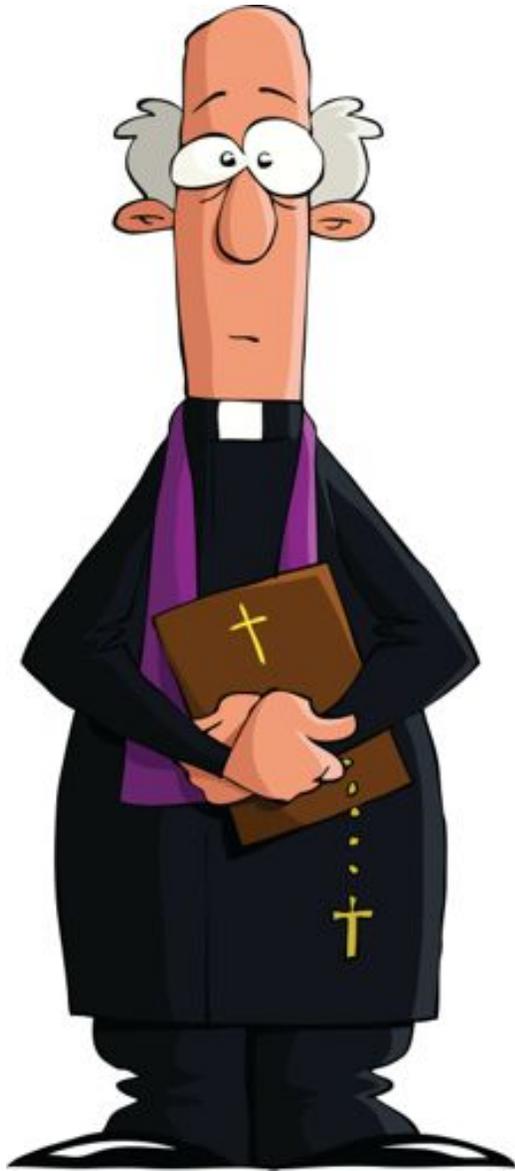
Yikes!!!





Theologically, St. Paul is very insistent that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ, not by observing law. If a Jewish father becomes a believer, but then has his son circumcised, just in case faith in Christ is insufficient, then Paul would rightly condemn such an action, as he does in Galatians 5: 2-4—

“It is I, Paul, who am telling you that if you have yourselves circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. Once again I declare to every man who has himself circumcised that he is bound to observe the entire law. You are separated from Christ, you who are trying to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.”



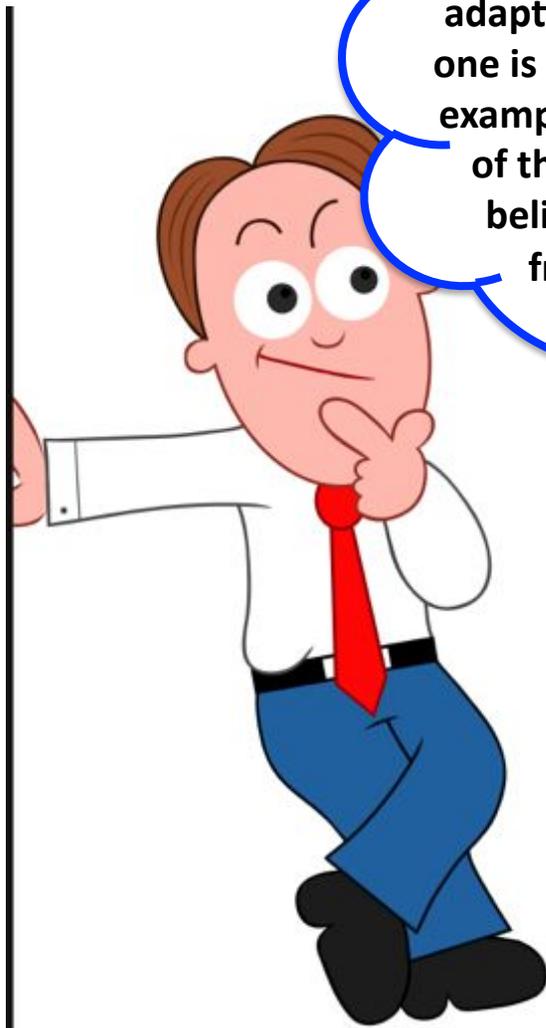
St. Paul was indifferent, however, if a father has his son circumcised as a matter of ancestral custom or practical necessity, as in the case of Paul circumcising Timothy.

Paul is equally flexible in other matters of the law, as well, such as dietary restrictions and the observance “special days”:

“One person believes that one may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. The one who eats must not despise the one who abstains, and the one who abstains must not pass judgment on someone who eats; for God has welcomed him” [O]ne person considers one day more important than another, while another person considers all days alike. Let everyone be persuaded in his own mind.

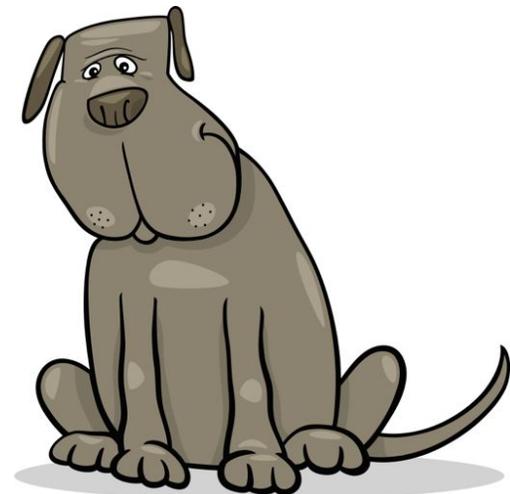
(Romans 14: 2-5)

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I get it! There is a big difference between compromising one's core beliefs to appease others and retaining those beliefs, while adapting to the circumstances and company one is in. A Jew living in a Gentile society, for example, either adapts to the cultural norms of that society, while retaining his Jewish beliefs, or he separates himself entirely from it, as the "ultraorthodox" do.

So, Paul will "go with the flow"!



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- Recall that St. Paul had taken a Nazirite vow in Corinth, A.D. 50-52, and on leaving Corinth he had his hair cut at Cenchreae. As we noted then, anyone can take a Nazirite vow, a temporary vow of separation to God. Numbers 6: 1-21 offers details. When the vow ends, a person cuts the hair that grew during the vow as a symbol of his time spent with God, and he offers the proper sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem: ritual purification by immersion in a mikvah, a ram as a fellowship offering, along with a grain offering.
- The church leaders in Jerusalem suggest that Paul join four local believers who had ended their Nazirite vows, have his hair cut with them, and arrange their immersion, the fellowship offering and the grain offering. This would demonstrate publically that Paul did not hold the law in contempt, ending any potential conflict with the Jewish believers.
- Paul agrees to do so.

“When the seven days were nearly completed, the Jews from the province of Asia noticed him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd, and laid hands on him, shouting, ‘Fellow Israelites, help us. This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place, and what is more, he has even brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this sacred place.’ For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him and supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. The whole city was in turmoil with people rushing together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the gates were closed. While they were trying to kill him, a report reached the cohort commander that all Jerusalem was rioting . . .

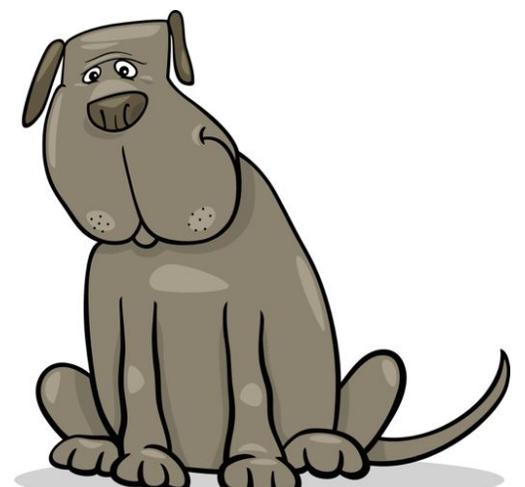
“. . . He immediately took soldiers and centurions and charged down on them. When they saw the commander and the soldiers they stopped beating Paul. The cohort commander came forward, arrested him, and ordered him to be secured with two chains; he tried to find out who he might be and what he had done. Some in the mob shouted one thing, others something else; so, since he was unable to ascertain the truth because of the uproar, he ordered Paul to be brought into the compound. When he reached the steps, he was carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob, for a crowd of people followed and shouted, ‘Away with him!’”

(21: 27-36)

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A cartoon illustration of a man with brown hair, wearing a white shirt, a red tie, and blue pants. He is leaning against a vertical line on the left, with his hand on his chin in a thinking pose. A large blue thought bubble is connected to his head.

Here we go again! Paul triggers another riot. There are Jews from Asia at the temple, perhaps some of the very people who had dogged Paul in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium and Lystra; maybe even some who had stoned Paul in Lystra and left him for dead!

A cartoon illustration of a grey dog sitting down. A blue thought bubble is connected to its head.

So much for going with the flow.

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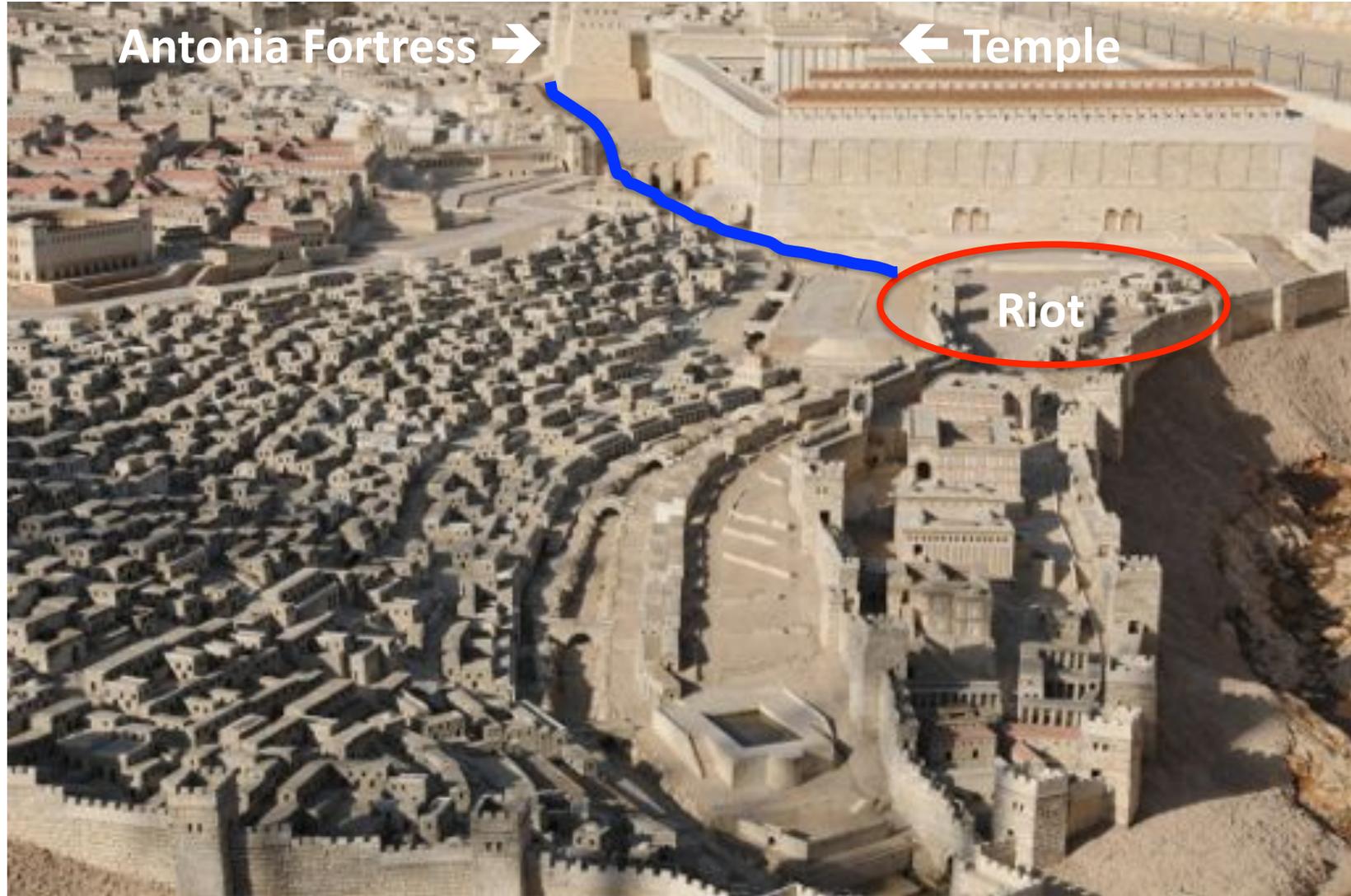


- St. Paul had been spotted in Jerusalem with Trophimus, a Gentile from Ephesus, one of Paul's traveling companions who had walked with him from Greece to Macedonia, and who had sailed with him from Troas to Jerusalem. Although not at the temple with Paul, the troublemakers thought he must be around somewhere! Gentiles were forbidden to go beyond the "court of the Gentiles," under penalty of death.

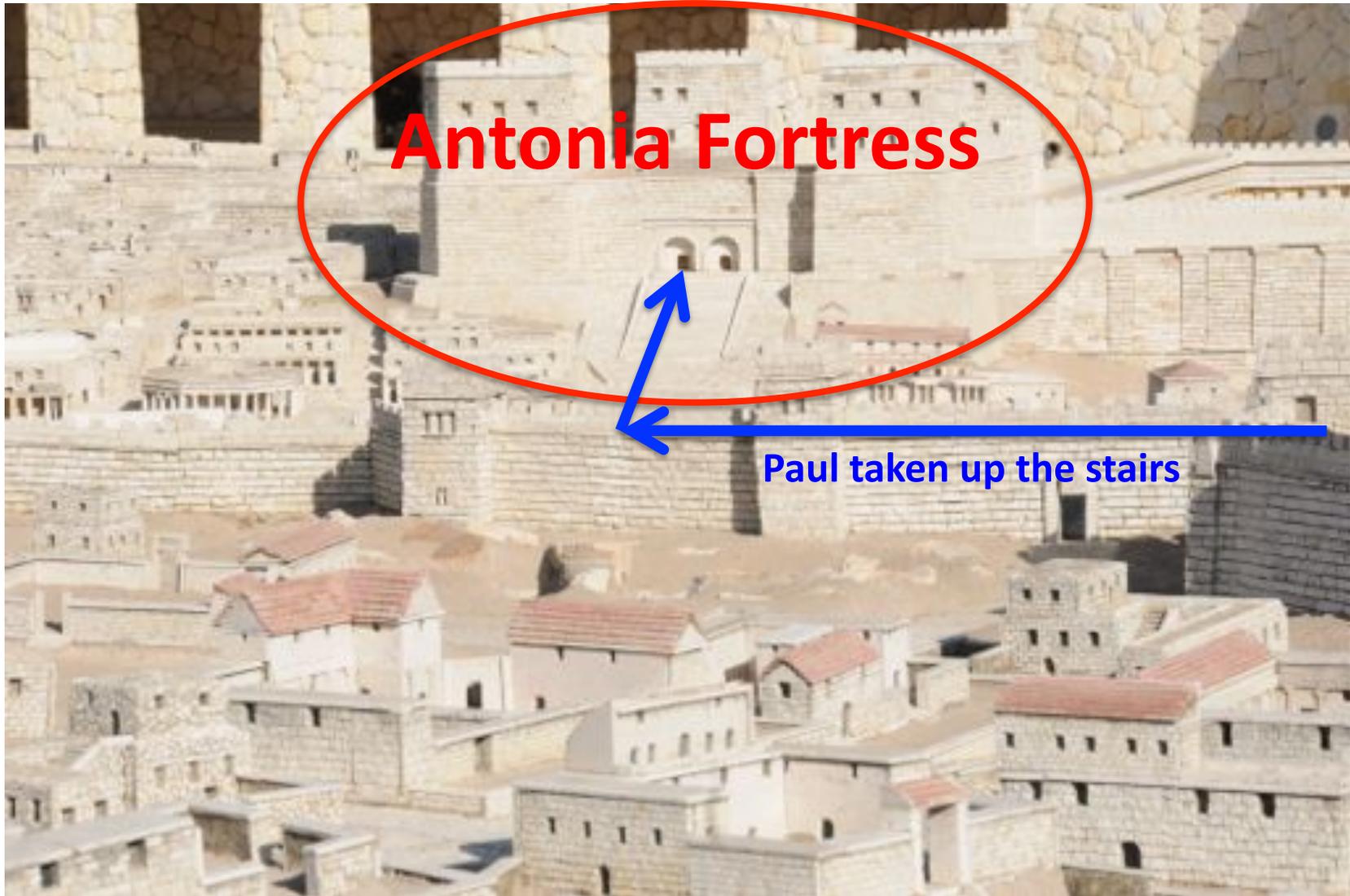
- Much as in Ephesus, a violent mob forms and they drag Paul away from the temple precincts and begin beating him. The scene probably takes place around the southern steps area.

- Paul would have been torn to pieces, were it not for the Roman cohort commander [Claudius Lysius, (23: 26)] * and his legionnaires who rescue him.

** A Roman legion consisted of 6,000 men divided into ten cohorts of 600 each. A cohort commander was the senior officer in charge of a cohort; a centurion commanded 100 men within a cohort.*



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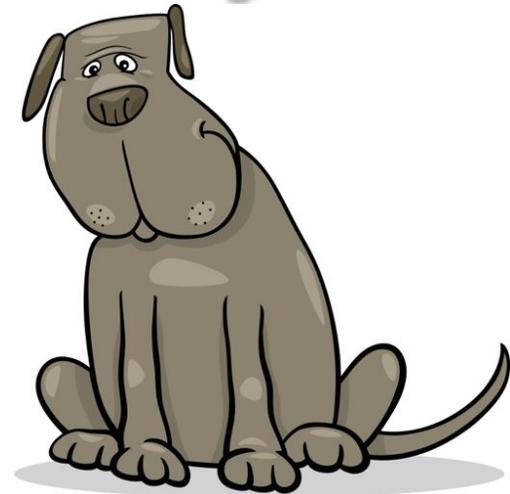
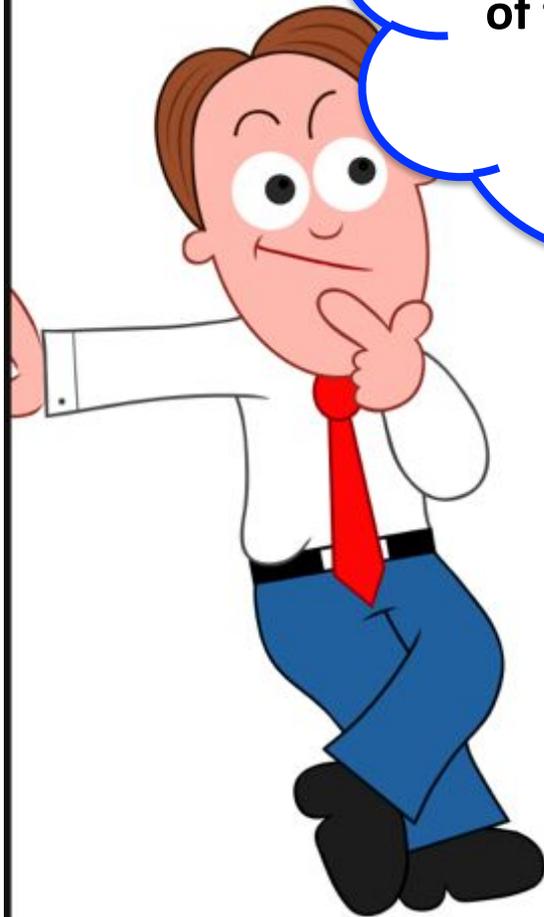
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“Just as Paul was about to be taken into the compound, he said to the cohort commander, ‘May I say something to you?’ He replied, ‘Do you speak Greek?’ So then you are not the Egyptian who started a revolt some time ago and led the four thousand assassins into the desert?’ Paul answered, ‘I am a Jew, of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city; I request you to permit me to speak to the people.’ When he had given his permission, Paul stood on the steps and motioned with his hand to the people; and when all was quiet he addressed them in Hebrew.”

(21: 37-40)

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This is a funny scene! The Roman soldiers are carrying Paul up the stairs, horizontally above their heads, to keep him out of the hands of the crowd. The commander is certain he has captured an infamous international terrorist!



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“My brothers and fathers, listen to what I am about to say to you in my defense.’ When they heard him addressing them in Hebrew they became all the more quiet. And he continued, ‘I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city. At the feet of Gamaliel I was educated strictly in our ancestral law and was zealous for God, just as all of you are today. I persecuted this Way to death, binding both men and women and delivering them to prison. Even the high priest and the whole council of elders can testify on my behalf. For from them I even received letters to the brothers and set out for Damascus to bring back to Jerusalem in chains for punishment those there as well”

(22: 1-5)

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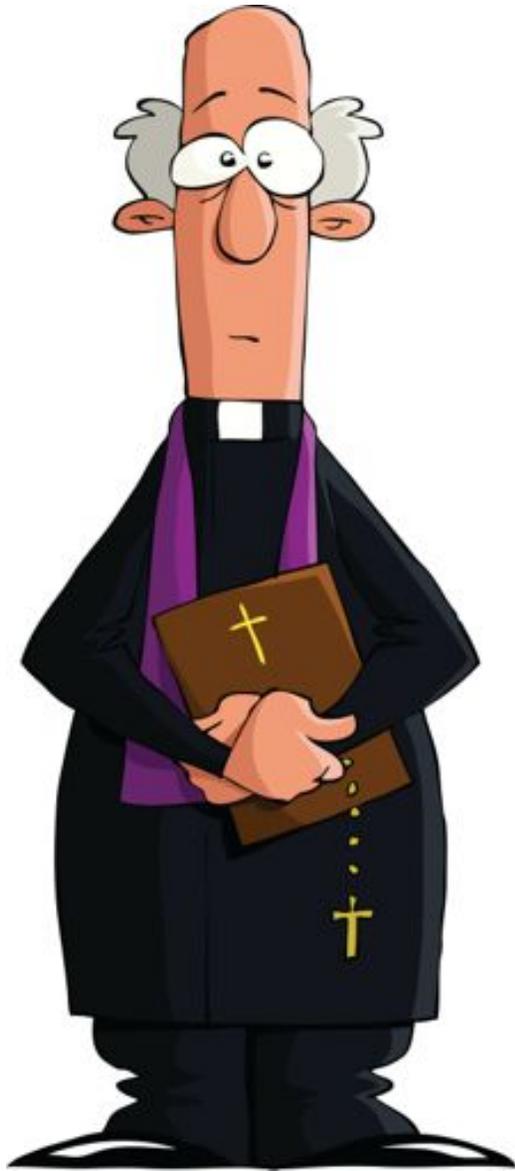


- St. Paul begins his defense by establishing his credentials: he is a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia; brought up in Jerusalem; a student of Gamaliel; an intimate of the Jewish leadership; delegated authority by the high priest, himself; a leading persecutor of the Church; and so on.

- Paul then goes on to recount the story of his conversion on the road to Damascus and of how the risen and glorified Christ commissioned him to take the gospel message to the world. Paul does quite well until he recounts that the Lord said to him:

“Go, I shall send you far away to the Gentiles”

(22: 21).



**With that, all
hell breaks
loose!**

“They listened to him until he said this, but then they raised their voices and shouted, ‘Take such a one as this away from the earth. It is not right that he should live.’ And as they were yelling and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, the cohort commander ordered him to be brought into the compound and gave instruction that he be interrogated under the lash to determine the reason why they were making such an outcry against him. But when they had stretched him out for the whips, Paul said to the centurion on duty, ‘Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman citizen and has not been tried?’ When the centurion heard this he went to the cohort commander and reported it, saying, ‘What are you going to do? This man is a Roman citizen’ . . .

(22: 22-26)

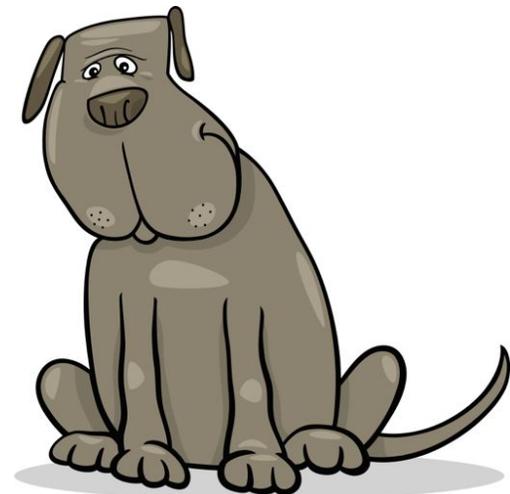
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A cartoon illustration of a man with brown hair, wearing a white shirt, a red tie, and blue pants. He is leaning against a vertical black line on the left, with his hand to his chin in a thinking pose.

Remember when St. Paul asserted his Roman citizenship in Philippi? Roman citizens had rights under Roman law, and those rights were sacrosanct. Now Paul asserts his Roman citizenship again, and everything changes!

A white thought bubble with a blue outline and a blue tail pointing towards the man's head.

Whew!



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“The commander came and said to him, ‘Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?’ ‘Yes,’ he answered. The commander replied, ‘I acquired this citizenship for a large sum of money.’ Paul said, ‘But I was born one.’ At once those who were going to interrogate him backed away from him, and the commander became alarmed when he realized that he was a Roman citizen and that he had had him bound.”

(22: 27-29)

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Once Paul establishes his Roman citizenship he is no longer a prisoner under arrest; he is a Roman citizen under protective custody, the Roman military protecting him from the Jewish religious leaders and the mob.

“The next day, wishing to determine the truth about why he was being accused by the Jews he freed him and ordered the chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin to convene. Then he brought Paul down and made him stand before them. Paul looked intently at the Sanhedrin and said, ‘My brothers, I have conducted myself with a perfectly clear conscience before God to this day.’ The high priest Ananias ordered his attendants to strike his mouth. Then Paul said to him, ‘God will strike you, you whitewashed wall. Do you indeed sit in judgment upon me according to the law and yet in violation of the law order me to be struck?’ The attendants said, ‘Would you revile God’s high priest?’ Paul answered, ‘Brothers, I did not realize he was the high priest. For it is written, ‘You shall not curse a ruler of your people.’”

(22: 30-23: 5)

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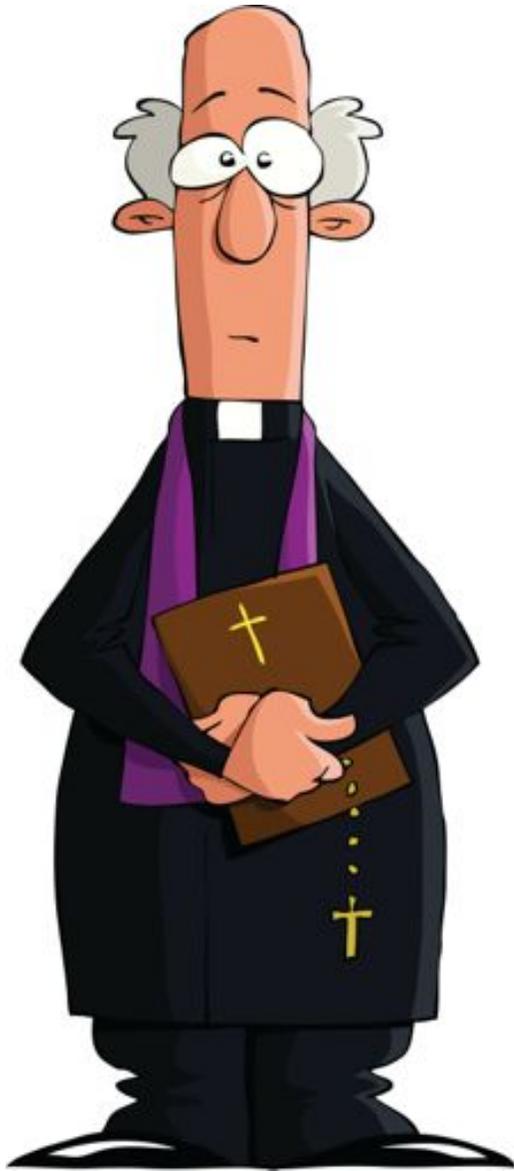


- Notice that Paul has been set free and the entire Sanhedrin, including the high priest, has been ordered by the Roman commander to convene—and they do.
- As a Roman citizen, Paul has the right to face his accusers, and the commander intends to get to the bottom of this dispute between Paul and the Jews of Jerusalem.
- Once slapped hard across the face, Paul scrambles to his feet and attacks, not knowing he is speaking to the high priest, Ananias.

This is odd, since Paul clearly knows the high priest. This supports our argument that Paul's "thorn in the flesh" is his poor eyesight, damaged on the road to Damascus.



**You . . . you . . .
you big, fat
smelly buffalo!**



St. Paul then presents his case before the Sanhedrin, and he does so in a very sly way, saying:

“My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of Pharisees; [I] am on trial for hope in the resurrection of the dead.”

(23: 6)

Knowing that the Sadducees and the Pharisees differed fundamentally and vehemently on the issue of resurrection, Paul plants a seed of conflict between the two contending groups, identifying himself with the minority Pharisees. It’s a brilliant rhetorical move, one that takes the spotlight off Paul and throws it on the two contending groups.

The tactic works like a charm!

“When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the group became divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection or angels or spirits, while the Pharisees acknowledge all three. A great uproar occurred, and some scribes belonging to the Pharisee party stood up and sharply argued, ‘We find nothing wrong with this man. Suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?’ The dispute was so serious that the commander, afraid that Paul would be torn to pieces by them, ordered his troops to go down and rescue him from their midst and take him into the compound. The following night the Lord stood by him and said, ‘Take courage. For just as you have borne witness to my cause in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness in Rome.’”

(23: 7-11)

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**But the conflict
doesn't end there—
not by a long shot!**

“When day came, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul. There were more than forty who formed this conspiracy. They went to the chief priests and elders and said, ‘We have bound ourselves by a solemn oath to taste nothing until we have killed Paul. You, together with the Sanhedrin, must now make an official request to the commander to have him bring him down to you, as though you meant to investigate his case more thoroughly. We on our part are prepared to kill him before he arrives.’”

(23: 12-15)

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Holy cow!!!!

A cartoon illustration of a man with brown hair, wearing a white shirt, a red tie, and blue pants. He is leaning against a vertical black line on the left side of the frame. He has a thoughtful expression, with his hand to his chin. A large blue thought bubble is connected to his head.

**St. Paul's in a real
pickle! How will
get out of this
mess?**

A cartoon illustration of a grey dog sitting down. It has floppy ears and a slightly nervous or scared expression. A blue thought bubble is connected to its head.

**I'm really
scared now!**

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“The son of Paul’s sister, however, heard about the ambush; so he went and entered the compound and reported it to Paul. Paul then called one of the centurions and requested, ‘Take this young man to the commander; he has something to report to him.’ So he took him and brought him to the commander and explained, ‘The prisoner Paul called me and asked that I bring this young man to you; he has something to say to you.’ The commander took him by the hand, drew him aside, and asked him privately, ‘What is it you have to report to me?’ He replied, ‘The Jews have conspired to ask you to bring Paul down to the Sanhedrin tomorrow, as though they meant to inquire about him more thoroughly, but do not believe them . . .

“. . . More than forty of them are lying in wait for him; they have bound themselves by oath not to eat or drink until they have killed him. They are now ready and only wait for your consent.’ As the commander dismissed the young man he directed him, ‘Tell no one that you gave me this information.’”

(23: 16-22)

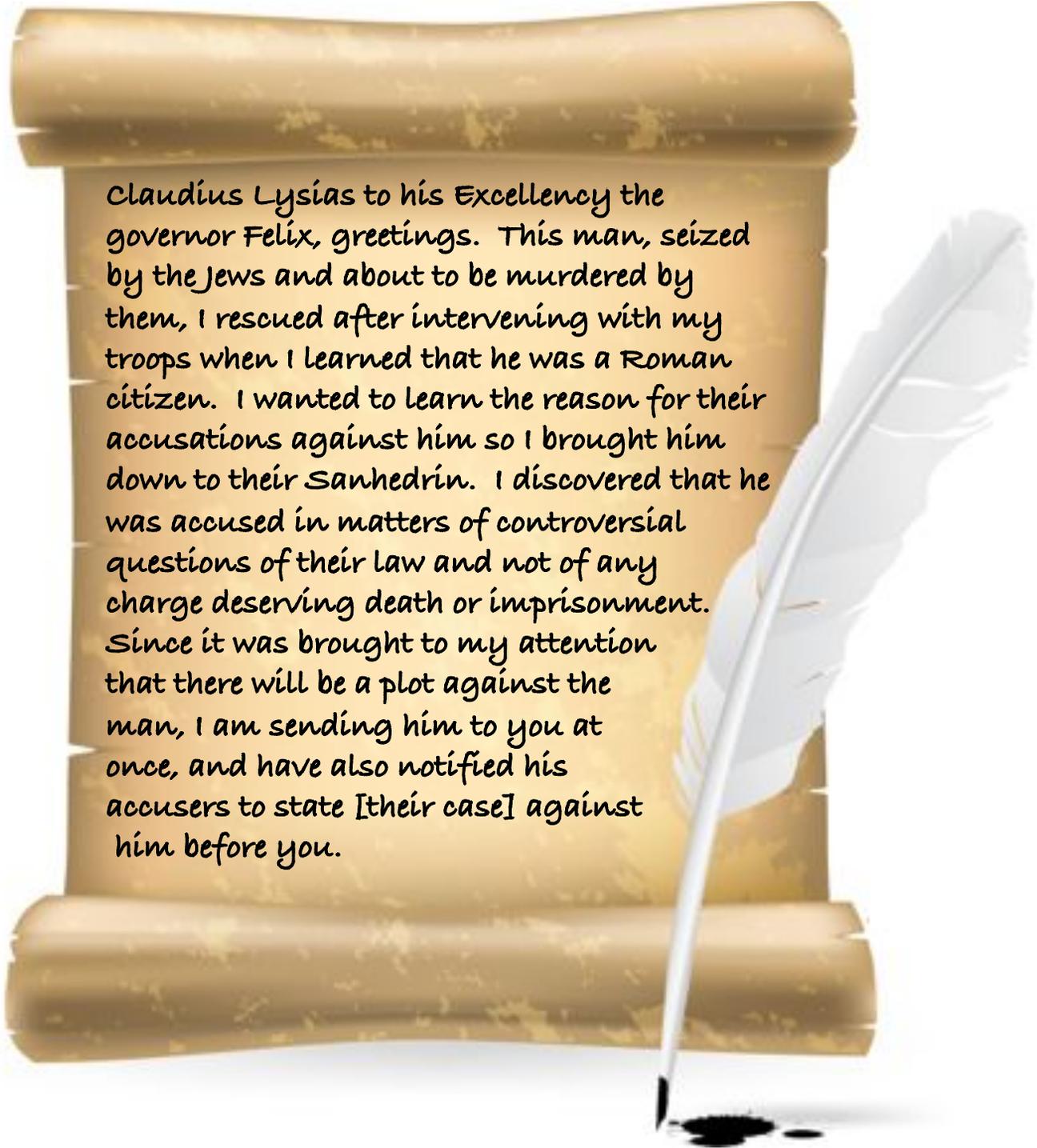
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- We learn that St. Paul has a sister living in Jerusalem (this is the only mention anywhere of Paul having brothers or sisters), and her son—Paul’s nephew—overhears men discussing their assassination plot. The boy rightly brings the information to Paul.

- The commander interviews Paul’s nephew privately, believes him, and orders him to tell no one else of the plot. With such a conspiracy afoot, the commander doesn’t know who he can trust, but he forms a plan.

“Then he summoned two centurions and said, ‘Get two hundred soldiers ready to go to Caesarea by nine o’clock tonight, along with seventy horsemen and two hundred auxiliaries. Provide mounts for Paul to ride and give him safe conduct to Felix the governor.’ Then he wrote a letter with this content:

A scroll of parchment is unrolled, showing a letter written in a cursive script. A white quill pen with a black ink reservoir is positioned to the right of the scroll, with its tip touching the parchment. The scroll is set against a plain white background.

Claudius Lysias to his Excellency the governor Felix, greetings. This man, seized by the Jews and about to be murdered by them, I rescued after intervening with my troops when I learned that he was a Roman citizen. I wanted to learn the reason for their accusations against him so I brought him down to their Sanhedrin. I discovered that he was accused in matters of controversial questions of their law and not of any charge deserving death or imprisonment. Since it was brought to my attention that there will be a plot against the man, I am sending him to you at once, and have also notified his accusers to state [their case] against him before you.

“So the soldiers, according to their orders, took Paul and escorted him by night to Antipatris. The next day they returned to the compound, leaving the horsemen to complete the journey with him. When they arrived in Caesarea they delivered the letter to the governor and presented Paul to him. When he had read it and asked to what province he belonged, and learned that he was from Cilicia, he said, ‘I shall hear your case when your accusers arrive.’ Then he ordered that he be held in custody in Herod’s praetorium.

(23: 23-35)

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- **This is Roman law operating at its best. The commander, Claudius Lysias, recognizing that he has a very serious problem on his hands, properly transfers St. Paul from Jerusalem to governor Felix at Caesarea Maritima.**
- **On the journey, St. Paul has deeper protection than a head of state: 200 soldiers; 70 cavalry; and 200 auxiliaries—470 armed men, in total!**
- **The commander writes a concise letter, transferring custody of Paul to governor Felix, explaining the details of the case.**
- **Felix, assuring himself that Paul was from Cilicia, and therefore under Felix’s jurisdiction, agrees to hear the case, and he has Paul quartered, not in prison, but in the praetorium, Herod’s palace.**
- **St. Paul is emphatically NOT a prisoner in Caesarea; he is a Roman citizen, whose person and rights are being carefully protected.**



St. Paul's Arrest in Jerusalem

Questions for discussion and thought

1. If the Church decided at the Council of Jerusalem in A.D. 50 that a believer need not observe the Mosaic law, why do they suggest that St. Paul very publically do so?
2. Why does Paul agree?
3. Should a believer today observe ritual church laws regarding food, special days, and so on? If so, why? If not, why not?
4. Are there any similarities between the riot in Ephesus and the riot in Jerusalem?
5. How is St. Paul treated by the Roman authorities when he is arrested in Jerusalem?

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