

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY

PART 22 - CHAPTERS 21 AND 22

As on a number of other occasions, Luke gives us seemingly unimportant detail of Paul's travel itinerary and of the personal conversations he had along the way. Why do we need to know that he briefly visited a couple of beautiful Greek islands, Cos and Rhodes? Can all missionaries expect a Mediterranean cruise to be fitted into their ministry every now and then?

Both places had a fascinating history. Cos was famous as the home 500 years before of Hippocrates, the founder of medical science, who still today has a substantial impact on the ethics of doctors. Rhodes had been a powerful city state because of its excellent harbour. For sixty years in the third century BC the harbour entrance had been spanned by the Colossus of Rhodes, from which comes our word 'colossal', a statue of a man more than 100 feet high which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was finally destroyed by an earthquake. The reputation of Cos and Rhodes lived on even in Paul's day. The mention of these two islands is further reminder of the temporary nature even of man's greatest achievements, but also of the way the Christian message is grounded in real events and places in history. At the same time it is to be lived out in the real world of places like Patara, now part of Turkey, and Phoenicia, now the coastal strip of modern Lebanon.

Paul, Luke and the rest of the travelling Bible school landed at Tyre and immediately sought out the Christians. No-one had to ask them which denomination they were looking for! Tyre was another ancient city with a rich history. It probably went back about 2000 years before Christ. It had risen as a powerful centre of the wealthy Phoenician shipping trade with Europe and North Africa, helped by its excellent harbour and almost impregnable position on an offshore island. Success based on a unique location brought pride so that God warned Tyre through Ezekiel in Ezek.27 & 28 that her arrogance was like that of Satan in the Garden of Eden, and would also meet eventual total destruction. In the 4th century BC, Alexander the Great fulfilled this prophecy by besieging and capturing Tyre after building a causeway from the mainland. The city was destroyed and though attempts were made to rebuild it nearby, it never regained its independence and greatness.

By the time Paul's ship docked in Tyre, the former stronghold of human self-sufficiency had been infiltrated by the Christian church. They received Paul with great affection and seemed to have enjoyed every moment of his week with them. But a shadow hung over their fellowship. Paul made it clear that he was on his way to Jerusalem - and the Holy Spirit made it clear that trouble lay ahead for him if he did so. The Christians jumped to the conclusion that Paul should not therefore go, and urged Paul to cancel his trip. Paul long ago had learned that his instructions came from God, not man. (Acts 15:36-41, 16:6-10, Gal.1:1,12,16,17.) He had also learned that the Lord could, if He wanted to, give us a glimpse beforehand of what was to come whether good,(Acts 18:9,10) or bad, (Acts 9:15,16) not to change our course of action but to prepare our hearts for the challenges ahead.

Ptolemais was another ancient city rich in history. It was originally known as Acco, and is today called Acre. Although more pagan than Jewish it had a Christian church firmly planted there by the time of Paul's visit. Two personalities already well known to us, Philip and Agabus, were key figures among the Christians. It is lovely to see that Philip once a travelling evangelist (Acts 8) was now married and the father of 4 daughters. It is even better to see that his home was obviously a Christian home, open to visitors like Paul, and that his daughters clearly followed in the faith of their father. Like Dad they knew how to let the Lord speak through them. They provide an interesting glimpse into the important role of women in the early church who were definitely not silent.

Agabus and Paul had met some 10 years before in the exciting church at Antioch where Paul had been a teacher and Agabus a prophet, accurately foretelling a world-wide famine. (Acts 11:28) Again Agabus was God's instrument in warning Paul of what was to come. As before, Paul saw Agabus' information not as a reason for changing his plans but as an opportunity to be prepared in his heart for the difficulties to come. These Christians, like those in Tyre, tried to persuade Paul as a matter of common sense, and out of love for him, to alter his plans. When he persisted in his conviction that God had led him to go to Jerusalem however tough it turned out to be, they respected his determination and decided to give him every support. All too often when people fail to follow our advice we write them off instead of giving them our help through a difficult and lonely time.

Much had happened in Jerusalem since the days when Saul of Tarsus, enemy of the Christian church, had driven most of the Christians out of the city leaving only the apostles behind. (Acts 8:1) When Paul returned about 15 years later to seek the help of the apostles in resolving the dispute about Gentile Christians and the Jewish law (Acts 15) a whole new

generation of Jews had come to know Jesus as the Christ. Now 7 more years have passed and much more growth has taken place. On the face of it the very Jewish church in Jerusalem seemed like it might have grown apart from the mixed congregations among whom Paul had moved. In fact this was not so because Paul and the elders in Jerusalem were able very quickly to pick up on their warm unity of 7 years before. Each group shared how God had led them and rejoiced in the experiences of the other. Based on such mutual confidence they were able frankly to identify a possible source of conflict through inaccurate rumours about Paul's ministry being anti-Jewish, and to make plans to deal with it.

The suggestion of Paul undertaking a very Jewish ritual seems on the surface to be a compromise of the principle of grace for which he had fought so hard and suffered so much. Far from it; it was entirely consistent with his teaching in I Cor.9:20, "to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews..." Paul had no trouble accepting cultural customs providing they did not conflict with the gospel. He was not prepared to inflict one culture on a group with a different culture as if it were part of the gospel. European Christians have frequently made this mistake with other cultures and by it hindered the gospel from taking root in a non-European culture. Paul was prepared to go to tremendous lengths to win Jews to Christ. The mob reaction and his arrest do not mean that the principle was wrong. The Jewish Christians would still have heard his message of love clearly. So it was not necessary to make Jewish Christians stop being Jewish anymore than it was right to make Gentile Christians behave as if they were Jewish. God is not pleased by our change of culture or behaviour; He is only pleased because Jesus took our place on the cross.

As so often before (Acts 13,14,17 and 18) the outburst of persecution against Paul was engineered by Jews from elsewhere who jumped to wrong conclusions and then stirred up an emotional response by a mob who probably knew next to nothing about the issues involved. Manipulating people by playing on their fears and prejudices is a sure sign that our argument is weak. Ironically it happened just when Paul was going to great lengths to show he was still Jewish. Paul nearly suffered the same fate he brought upon Stephen in Acts 7, but the Roman authorities stepped in and rescued him from the lynch mob. Once more the value of government even by heathens was demonstrated in providing some protection for the free movement of the gospel. Yet again Paul made use of his citizenship to give himself due process of the law. (Acts 16:37) His purpose was not self-preservation because ultimately his fate would be worse, but to use the system to give maximum opportunity for his message.

Having gained a temporary advantage, he worked it to the full by asking permission to address the mob who had tried to kill him. The authority of Paul's calm Christ-likeness won him a unique opportunity to testify to the Jerusalem Jews in a way he would never have been able to do as a mere visitor to the city. His journey to Jerusalem had not been wasted.

Chapter 22 records Paul's testimony before the Jewish crowd who a few minutes earlier had been trying to kill him.

22:1,2 Q.1 How would you have addressed your would-be murderers once you were safely under police protection? How does Paul greet them? How could he genuinely speak to them in such a polite and caring way after what had just happened? (Rom.9:1-5; 10:1) What effect did the fact that he spoke their language have upon their preparedness to listen? In what way does our religious language sometimes turn off those to whom we seek to witness? What should we therefore consider before ever we open our mouths?

22:3-5 Q.2 What does Paul describe about his background, upbringing and previous behaviour towards the Christian church? What impact would this have upon his hearers? What else do we know about Gamaliel? Was Paul before his conversion like his former teacher? What difference might it have had on his attitude towards Christians, before he became one, if he had been like Gamaliel?

22:6-10 Q.3 What Old Testament stories about people being confronted with God might have come to the minds of Paul's hearers when they heard how the risen Lord Jesus stood before him that day on the road to Damascus? (Exod.3; Num.22; Josh.5; Isa.6; Ezek.1) What would Paul have hoped was happening in the hearts of the crowd as he repeated his conversation with the Lord? What can we also hope will occur in our hearers as we give testimony of God's meeting with us? (Jn.16:8-11) In what way was Paul's experience that day different from that of those travelling with him on the road to Damascus? Why do you suppose that was? Was Jesus yet Paul's Saviour?

22:11-16 Q.4 What was Paul's condition as he entered Damascus? Why might God have done this? (II Cor.4:4) What did Paul emphasise about Ananias? Why does he make so much of his Jewish credentials? What were the 4 points in God's plan for Paul as Ananias outlined it? In what sense are they also God's plan for all of us? (I Jn.1:1-3) But what was the essential condition if this plan was to come into operation? Could Paul have been a Christian before this moment in his story?

22:17-21 Q.5 Why did Paul leave out, on this occasion, his ministry in Damascus and his time away in Arabia? (Acts 9; Gal.1) He jumped ahead to his first visit as a Christian to Jerusalem when he established fellowship with the church there. (Acts 9:26-30) What instead, for the benefit of his audience, did he describe? Again what do you suppose was going through their minds as Paul spoke? Why did it produce such a hostile reaction?

22:1-21 Q.6 What have you learned from this testimony of Paul about how to be an effective witness of Christ? Be sure to compare this testimony with his earlier one, presumably given to Luke, in Acts 9.

22:22-23 Q.7 Paul's final statement that it was the God of the Jews who had sent him to preach to the Gentiles was the last straw and produced a violent outburst. How had the Jews overlooked God's clear commission to all of them? (Isa.42:6; 49:6) How does prejudice cause us also to forget the Lord's commission to us?

22:24-29 Q.8 The law was harsh and arbitrary for those who were not Roman citizens. Torturing the prisoner was the easy way to discover what crime had supposedly been committed. Why did Paul once again use his Roman citizenship to get justice? What positive benefits apart from avoiding a scourging does this achieve? Why was the commander afraid at this point? What can we learn this time about using the system of government to further the gospel?

22:30 Q.9 What was the first valuable consequence of Paul's claim to be a Roman? How had the commander's attitude changed overnight? How does God use time today to change the heart?