

STUMBLING BLOCKS

Series in Acts: Advancing the Gospel

Acts 21:17-22:29

Chadron Berean Church

If you have little kids in the home like I do, you are blessed. However, if you little kids in the home like I do, you also watch where you step! They tend to leave toys and Lego blocks and all sorts of objects in the most random places that can make you trip and stumble – which is why my kids don't own any jax. This week for example, I had to step over my daughter several times as she put a puzzle together in the middle of our narrow hallway. Metaphorically speaking, that's sort of what we're going to talk about today as we look at some of the stumbling blocks that trip up the advancement of the gospel. In the Bible, a stumbling block could be defined as anything we might do that would hinder someone's relationship with God or keep them from a relationship with God.¹

We'll be in Acts 21:17 through the end of chapter 22. We're going to cover a lot of ground, skipping many details, and focusing on the big storyline. This final section of the book of Acts we are entering is replete with Paul's speeches during his arrest, where he explains and defends his ministry as being faithful to God's call for him and God's plan.

I. PAUL'S ARRIVAL. (VV. 17-26)

17 After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. 18 And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. 19 After he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. 20 And when they heard about them, they began glorifying God; and they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; 21 and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to abandon [defect; apostatize] Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. 22 So what is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. 23 Therefore, do as we tell you: we have four men who have a vow upon themselves; 24 take them along and purify yourself together with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads; and then everyone will know that there is nothing to what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also conform, keeping the Law. 25 But regarding the Gentiles who have believed, we sent a letter, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and what is strangled, and from sexual immorality." 26 Then Paul took along the men, and the next day, after purifying himself together with them, he went into the temple giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them.

So Paul arrives in Jerusalem for the last time in May of 57 AD along with thousands of Jewish pilgrims to celebrate the feast of Passover. He receives a warm reception from the church **elders** there, along with **James** as the standout leader. This is not James as in Peter, James and John, but James, the half brother of the Lord Jesus who wrote the epistle of James in the NT. When Paul reports on the work that God has been doing among the Gentiles, they praise God for it. Paul was also finally able to deliver a love **offering** (monetary gift) from the non-Jewish, Gentile churches to the highly Jewish church in Jerusalem. The gift was symbolic of the unity between Jew and Gentile and also practical in that the Jerusalem church was impoverished.

However, almost immediately, without making any mention of the gift or how it was received, we are launched into a sensitive situation. Thousands of Jews in the Jerusalem who are genuine believers in Jesus Christ under the New Covenant, still honor and practice the **Mosaic Law**, the Old Covenant. The Mosaic Law is that which God gave to Moses for the nation of Israel on Mt. Sinai. It contained the 10 commandments, a sacrificial system, a code of ethics, etc. Even though these Jews are genuine believers, this Old Covenant is so deeply engrained within their culture and national identity and government system that it didn't go away easily. In fact, it was an ongoing discipleship issue helping Jew and Gentile believers understand their relationship with the Law in Christ. As Christians, they are not under the Law. No believer had to celebrate any of the feasts or go to the temple, but again, this was an engrained custom and these Jewish believers had the freedom to keep the Law as long as it didn't become a requirement in any respect – for salvation or for fellowship with Gentiles (Rom. 10:4; 2 Cor. 3:6-11; Gal. 3:10-25; Heb. 8:1-13).

Verse 25 makes it clear this is not about the Gentiles' relationship with the Law in this case. We know that because they reaffirm the decision of the Jerusalem council from Acts 15 where they reaffirmed God's revelation that Gentiles do not have to be circumcised to be saved (i.e., keep the Law) although they would do well to abstaining from the idolatrous practices to keep from would offending their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. This case, however, is about Jewish believers who seem to be a little legalistic and overzealous for the Law.

While we're here, let's remind ourselves that no one was ever saved by being circumcised either – ever. Paul argues in Romans that Abraham was justified by faith before he was circumcised. Circumcision had to do with identifying with God's people Israel. In Christ, circumcision and uncircumcision mean nothing (Gal. 6:15). The purpose of the Law, explained in Galatians and Romans, wasn't to give us list of things to do to be saved. It was given to reveal God's holiness and our unholiness (sin), thus revealing to us our need for a Savior who kept the Law perfectly and died in our place (Gal. 3:19-25). It was designed to be a tutor to lead us to Christ.

But anyway, these zealous believing Jews were upset with **rumors** of Paul teaching Jews to forsake the Law and circumcision and customs. Now, Paul did teach that Christians are not under the Law and don't have to keep it, but the rumors are a stretch and distortion of Paul's teaching. In the book of Acts we've seen Paul respectfully honor the Law at times. He took a vow and circumcised Timothy. He felt free to follow Jewish customs when not around Gentiles and when advantageous to reach the Jews. In 1 Cor. 9:20-23 says, *"To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win*

the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak [the weak is the legalistic person not quite settle in the freedom of God's grace in Christ]. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings." So Paul had a mission policy where he tried to prevent **unnecessary obstacles** between him and the people he's trying to reach with the gospel. He was sensitive to peoples' consciences and neutral cultural practices and for him not to practice them would have been like putting a rock or brick in front of a blind person (Lev. 19:14).² Point is:

Avoid unnecessary stumbling blocks to the gospel. (1 Cor. 9:20-23; Rom. 14)

I'm going to trust the Spirit of God this morning to help you understand what stumbling blocks are between you and the person you are trying to reach with the gospel. It tends to vary from person to person and culture to culture. Paul talks about this subject more in Romans 14 if you want to study the subject more or look up the *GotQuestions* article in the footnotes. But Paul here is going to show that he still respects the Law by joining and becoming the patron of four men taking what appears to be a Nazirite **vow**. He voluntarily takes this vow to show his respect for the Law, which requires a week-long purification process.

II. PAUL'S ARREST. (VV. 27-36)

27 When the seven days were almost over, the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, began to stir up all the crowd and laid hands on him, 28 crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who instructs everyone everywhere against our people and the Law and this place; and besides, he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place!" 29 For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him, and they thought that Paul had brought him into the temple. 30 Then the whole city was provoked and the people rushed together, and taking hold of Paul they dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut. 31 While they were intent on killing him, a report came up to the commander of the Roman cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. 32 He immediately took along some soldiers and centurions and ran down to the crowd; and when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. 33 Then the commander came up and took hold of him, and ordered that he be bound with two chains; and he began asking who he was and what he had done. 34 But among the crowd, some were shouting one thing and some another, and when he could not find out the facts because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be brought into the barracks. 35 When Paul got to the stairs, it came about that he was carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob; 36 for the multitude of people kept following them, shouting, "Away with him!"

So just as Paul is about to finish this vow, some unbelieving Jews from Asia (likely Ephesus where Paul spent 3 years and the big riot occurred) stir up the crowd in Jerusalem with **two false**

charges. 1) Paul teaches against the people, the Law, and the temple. 2) Paul brought a Greek, **Trophimus**, into the temple and defiled it, which is simply not true. In the temple area, there were several different courts where only Gentiles could go or certain Jews could go. At one point there was a 4 1/2 foot wall called the **soleg** that only Jews could go beyond. On this wall, written in Greek and Latin, were warnings for Gentiles not to go beyond it. In fact, in the last 150 years, archaeologists have found two of these markers near the temple mount which read, “*No foreigner is to go beyond the balustrade around the plaza of the temple area. Whoever is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his subsequent death.*”³ In Ephesians 2, Paul speaks of this wall when he says that the partition wall between Jew and Gentile has been broken down. In Christ, in the New Covenant, Jesus has broken down this barrier wall and established peace. We are both equal children of God through faith in Christ Jesus (2:15-16). That’s possible because Jesus nailed the Law to the cross by fulfilling it for us. That the Messiah would be crucified to do this was a stumbling block to the Jews (1 Cor. 1:23).

But without questioning or investigating, they irately drag Paul out of the temple area and start to beat him probably in the court of the Gentiles. **Claudius Lysis**, the tribune/commander/chiliarch (23:26) stationed at the **Antonia Fortress** on the northwest corner of the temple, sends 200 troops to put a kibosh to the beating and arrest Paul. This is the last time we will see Paul as a free man in Acts. These sort of uproars, especially during Jewish festivals, were the reason they built that fortress. If the soldiers hadn’t stepped in, Paul would be a dead man. Notice the parallels between Jesus and Paul continue as they shout, “*Away with him!*” (Lk 23:18).

III. PAUL’S DEFENSE. (21:37-22:29)

37 As Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the commander, “May I say something to you?” And he said, “Do you know Greek? 38 Then you are not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?” 39 But Paul said, “I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city; and I beg you, allow me to speak to the people.” 40 When he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the stairs, motioned to the people with his hand; and when there was a great silence, he spoke to them in the Hebrew dialect, saying, “Brethren and father, hear my defense [apologia] which I now offer to you.”

Let’s pause there and think about the situation. Paul is bloodied and beaten. He has been dragged around. He has been mistreated and misunderstood. He has every reason to be angry, belligerent, condemning, defensive, or resentful with his words. Even the commander thinks he’s some Egyptian false prophet from 3 years ago who tried to capture Jerusalem. By letting it all get to him, he could’ve blown his testimony and opportunity to witness. However, that’s not what Paul does (at least in this case; see 23:3). Instead, we see **gentleness and respect**. Politeness. Composure. Self-control. He’s not letting his emotionally skewed sin nature distort his testimony. Claudius was clearly looking more information as to what was going on so he knew what to charge Paul with, but I think part of the reason why the commander lets him speak is

because of Paul's unusual respect and composure for a man in his situation. Notice, he's also very respectful in addressing his Jewish brethren. Principle being,

Defend the faith with wise words.

This can be hard when you're seeking to be a witness because people are very passionate about what they people and they become defensive quickly. But we have to learn to control our tongue. Our tongue can be a major stumbling block, blowing our opportunity to be a light for the gospel. 1 Peter 3:15 says, "*But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer [apologia; defense] to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.*" Proverbs 15:1-2 says, "*A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise adorns knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly.*" We can speak truth, but without love we are a noisy gong, and no one listens (1 Cor. 13:1). Maybe this is especially true during political season when we're tempted to fight against the people we should be trying to reach with the gospel. If we care about people, we have to take a biblical stance on political issues but do so in love.

2 And when they heard that he was addressing them in the Hebrew dialect, they became even more quiet; and he said, 3 "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the Law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today. 4 I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both men and women into prisons, 5 as also the high priest and all the Council of the elders can testify. From them I also received letters to the brothers, and started off for Damascus in order to bring even those who were there to Jerusalem as prisoners to be punished.

6 "But it happened that as I was on my way, approaching Damascus at about noon, a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me, 7 and I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' 8 And I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?' And He said to me, 'I am Jesus the Nazarene, whom you are persecuting.' 9 And those who were with me saw the light, but did not understand the voice of the One who was speaking to me. 10 And I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?' And the Lord said to me, 'Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told about everything that has been appointed for you to do.' 11 But since I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I came into Damascus being led by the hand by those who were with me.

12 "Now a certain Ananias, a man who was devout by the standard of the Law and well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there, [notice the reference to a devout Jewish believer] 13 came to me, and standing nearby he said to me, 'Brother Saul, receive your sight!' And at that very moment I looked up at him. 14 And he said, 'The God of our fathers has appointed [called] you to know His will and to see the Righteous One and to hear a message from His mouth. 15 For you will be a witness [this word witness is used 13 times in Acts; Interesting the word is *martyr* in the Greek. It's a step in the direction of our word for martyr]⁴ for Him to all people of what you have seen and heard. 16 Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins by calling on His name.' [Paul believes in Jesus and thus, is baptized. Baptism

symbolizes identification with Christ and forgiveness of sins; always subsequent to faith]. 17 “It happened when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I fell into a trance, 18 and I saw Him saying to me, ‘Hurry and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about Me.’ 19 And I said, ‘Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You. 20 And when the blood of Your witness Stephen was being shed, I also was standing nearby and approving, and watching over the cloaks of those who were killing him.’ 21 And He said to me, ‘Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

22 They listened to him up to this statement, and then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a man from the earth, for he should not be allowed to live!” 23 And as they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and tossing dust into the air, 24 the commander ordered that he be brought into the barracks, saying that he was to be interrogated by flogging so that he would find out the reason why they were shouting against him that way. 25 But when they stretched him out with straps, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, “Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?” 26 When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and told him, saying, “What are you about to do? For this man is a Roman.” 27 The commander came and said to Paul, “Tell me, are you a Roman?” And he said, “Yes.” 28 The commander answered, “I acquired this citizenship for a large sum of money.” And Paul said, “But I was actually born a citizen.” [Roman citizenship came with certain rights. To arrest or punish a Roman without cause or reason would mean big trouble for the authorities] 29 Therefore, those who were about to interrogate him immediately backed away from him; and the commander also was afraid when he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had put him in chains.”

So this is the 2nd of 3 times where Paul shares his testimony in Acts. There’s a lot here we could discuss, but for the sake of time I just want to bring out two principles. First, if Paul should have considered anyone his enemies, it’s the antagonistic Jews. They have followed him around from place to place, harassed him, spoke evil of him and distorted his teachings. He has been beaten and stoned and whipped. His body is riddled with scars from their persecutions. However, Paul reveals in Romans 9-11 how he honestly feels about his Jewish brethren and he said he had great sorrow and unceasing anguish in his heart for them – so much so that he would willingly give up his own salvation if he knew the Jews would believe. His love was so great he was willing to sacrifice himself for them (Rom. 9:1-3). Even through his ministry to the Gentiles he hoped to move or provoke the Jews to jealousy and save them (11:13-14).

Self-sacrificially love your enemies.

While we naturally want to curse those who don’t treat us right, Paul and ultimately, Jesus, teach us how to love self-sacrificially and not let our selfish, defensive, anger and pride hinder the gospel from reaching even our enemies. While we were still enemies, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:10).

Next, look how Paul identifies with them. He speaks to them in their **Hebrew dialect**. He calls them **brethren** and **fathers**. He talks about his education under **Gamaliel**, the most highly respected Jewish teacher in the first century. He **knows the Law** well. He too **persecuted The Way** (a designation for Christianity). He was a **zealous for the Law**. In essence, he's saying he was where they are now. The only difference is a life-changing encounter with the living Christ who called him to minister both to Jews and Gentiles in accordance with God's purpose in the Law. Here's my point:

Identify with those you are trying to reach.

Sometimes the longer we are Christians, the easier it is to start thinking that we're better than "all those sinners out there". Christian pride is a major stumbling block. After we get saved, we tend to spend more time with Christians than non-Christians, and it's easy to start thinking that it's US vs. THEM. There is an *us*, and there is a *them*. But it's not us vs. them – it's *us trying to reach them*.⁵ To help keep us from this way of thinking, we need to remember constantly that no matter who we are and what we've done for the Lord, **every one of us is simply a sinner saved by God's grace and who serves in the power of His grace**. We remember the quarry from which we were dug (Is. 51:1); that we too were by nature children of wrath and enemies of God (Rom. 3:23; Eph. 2:1-10). All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

The only difference us and our enemies is God's **grace**. Our struggle is not with flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces of darkness holding people captive (Eph. 2:1-3; 2 Tim. 2:26). Unbelievers are blind to the things of God and through our pride, we are putting a brick or stone in front of them to trip them (1 Cor. 2:14; Lev. 19:14). One of my mentors used to imagine a neon sign above peoples' heads that flashed, "*Help! I'm deceived! I need Jesus!*" He did that to remind himself that not everyone had heard the good news before. Or if they have, it's been a distorted version of it – either in the message or in the character of the man presenting it that turned them off.

As a closing challenge, I'd encourage you to share your testimony with someone in spiritual conversation or maybe write it out if you haven't. Think through it. Process how God has worked in your life. However, when you do, don't make it one of those "*I used to be a bad person and now I'm a good person*" stories. Talk about you as a sinner was saved by God's incredible grace and His grace enables you to continue living for Him. Tell them about grace.

¹ *What Does It Mean to Be A Stumbling Block to Someone Else?* <https://www.gotquestions.org/stumbling-block.html>

² Ibid.

³ Titus Kennedy, *Unearthing the Bible: 101 Archaeological Discoveries That Bring the Bible to Life* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2020), 222-223.

⁴ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (PNTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 611.

⁵ Bryan Clark, *Us and Them*, <https://www.lincolnberean.org/sermon/daring-to-be-the-church-acts/us-and-them>