

# THROUGH THE BIBLE STUDY

## ACTS 22-23

The all-time greatest Atlanta Brave was home run king, Henry Aaron. From 1954-1974 Hammering Hank, wore Braves' jersey #44. He belted long balls and covered right field for Atlanta... *Until 1975, when after 21 all-star years, Hank was traded to the Brewers.*

And trust me, it was a strange sight for Braves fans to see the face of their franchise in a different uniform.

It just didn't seem right. Hank was a Brave not a Brewer. All long-time Braves fans, like myself, felt just a little twinge of betrayal. We felt stabbed in the back.

Hank changed teams... *as did the Apostle Paul.*

Early in his career Paul had been an all-star for the Jews. He boasted, he was **"a Hebrew of the Hebrews."**

Formerly called Saul, he'd been a leader within Jerusalem's religious establishment. He even oversaw the stoning of that Jesus' preacher named Stephen.

*Yet now, here he is playing for the opposing team!* A once-leading Jew had become a follower of Jesus.

Paul was downplaying the importance of the Temple, and offering salvation to Gentiles. The Jews seethed at his conversion. So when they saw him in the Temple they mobbed him and beat him. If the Romans soldiers hadn't come to his rescue, he would've been killed.

As Acts 21 closes Paul is on the steps of police headquarters. The mob still wants to stone him.

There's been such bedlam the chief of police can't even reconstruct what's happened. That's when Paul asks to address the hostile crowd. *And this is amazing.*

His goal for 20 years has been to preach the Gospel of Jesus and God's grace to his Jewish peers. *Never in his wildest dreams did he think it'd be like this, but who's to argue with God's plan.* He's fixed on the opportunity. And in Acts 22 Paul shares his testimony.

Let me emphasize, this is incredible poise under pressure. If you'd just been roughed up and your life threatened, wouldn't safety be your top priority? I'd beg the Romans to lock me up, and save me from the mob.

*But not Paul!* He came to Jerusalem with a message, and he won't be satisfied until it's been delivered.

Years earlier on the Road to Damascus Paul had been blinded by the glory of Jesus. Even after his eyes were opened - since that day - he'd been blinded to everything else except his desire to share the Gospel.

So Paul stands on the Temple steps and fearlessly declares to his fellow Jews, verse 1, **“Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now. And when they heard that he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, they kept all the more silent.”** His use of their mother-tongue, rather than Greek, hammered home the fact he was one of them. Paul had been privileged with the same orthodox upbringing and religious heritage. *But something had happened to Paul...*

Again, this is Paul's big opportunity. He's finally able to preach to Temple Jews, *and I'm sure he had been planning his sermon for years... what will he say?*

It's interesting to me, that rather than expound on OT prophecy, or launch into Levitical typology, or overview God's redemptive plan through the ages... Paul uses a simpler approach... He shares *his testimony!*

**Paul tells them what happened to him.** And this should encourage us all! For every Christian has a testimony. People can argue theology, or eschatology, or apologetics, but you can't deny a testimony. It's said, "A man with an experience is never at the mercy of a man with an argument." Testimonies are powerful. No one can dispute the change Jesus has made in my life.

So Paul shares his testimony. "Then he said (verse 3): "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today." Paul was a Jew - a local boy - who'd studied in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, one of Judaism's greatest rabbis. And he'd adhered to a strict interpretation of the Law of Moses.

Paul thought he was being zealous for God, so much so, he tells them, "I persecuted this Way (his name for Christianity) to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, as also the high priest bears me witness (he probably pointed to him), and all the council of the elders (people Paul knew personally), from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even

those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished.” Paul had served as the Priest’s henchman. It’d been his job to round up believers for persecution.

But Paul got intercepted. “Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon, suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?’ So I answered, ‘Who are You, Lord?’ And He said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’

“And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me.” Before we go further, let me clear up a supposed problem, *that’s not a problem...* When Luke initially records Paul’s conversion in Acts 9:7 he tells us his companions heard a voice, but saw no one.

Here though, Paul seems to contradict Luke. His colleagues **did not hear the voice...** *So what gives?*

In Acts 9 the Greek word translated “hear” means “to hear a noise.” Whereas, in Chapter 21 the word “hear” means to “hear articulated sounds or words.” Evidently, they heard a voice, but couldn’t grasp what was said.

Perhaps the risen Lord Jesus spoke to a multi-lingual Paul in a language his Jewish entourage didn’t grasp.

But Paul heard it and understood! The Jesus he had persecuted was the risen Lord! Verse 10, “So I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ “Lord” means “Master or Boss.” And if Jesus

is Lord - and Paul has surrendered to His authority - then he has no other choice but to obey.

Which is what he does. “And the Lord said to me, ‘Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do.’” Paul’s conversion begins with a “who,” and ends with a “do.” At first he says, “*Who are you, Lord?*” Then once Paul is converted, he asks, “*What shall I do, Lord?*” And this is how all conversions transition. When you see Jesus for who He really is, you’ll want to bow and obey Him.

Verse 11, “And since I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of those who were with me, I came into Damascus.” Physically, Paul was blind as a bat. The light from heaven temporarily blinded him. Yet spiritually this rabbi had never seen clearer!

“Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt *there*, came to me; and he stood and said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that same hour I looked up at him.” The last sight Paul saw before the lights went out was the Head of the Church, Jesus.

When the lights come back on the first sight he sees is a faithful servant of the Church named Ananias.

“Then (Ananias) said, ‘The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard.’ *God had chosen*

*Paul for what he was doing now - witnessing before the Jews in Jerusalem!*

Ananias continues, “**And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.**” Water baptism is a symbolic washing - a demonstration of our conversion.

And if you’re a Christian and haven’t been baptized you should be asked as Paul, “**why are you waiting?**” *It’s an important step.* Paul was baptized in Damascus; then returned to Jerusalem to witness to the Jews.

“**Now it happened, when I returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, that I was in a trance and saw Him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, for they will not receive your testimony concerning Me.’**” When first converted *Paul assumed since he was a Jew, and thought like a Jew, and was respected by Jews, that the Jews would listen to him.* Not so. Instead, God will use Paul to reach the Gentiles. He’s even called “**the apostle to the Gentiles.**”

**Yet he never gave up on trying to reach the Jews.**

I’m not sure he fully identified with his role to the Gentiles; for he loved his countrymen with all his heart.

Verse 19, “**So I said, ‘Lord, they know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believe on You. And when the blood of Your martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by consenting to his death (Rabbi Saul actually supervised the grizzly murder), and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’**”



Paul looked after the warm-up jackets of the executioners who pummeled Stephen with stones. He assumed the Jews would listen to a former henchman.

But the Lord had a different plan. “Then He said to me, ‘Depart, for I will send you far from here to the Gentiles.’” It’s ironic, where Paul thought he would be most effective, Jerusalem, he didn’t make a dent; yet everywhere he preached to Gentiles revival broke out.

It just goes to prove that relevance and relate-ability (*advantages he had with the Jews*) can be great assets, but they’re worthless if you’re not in God’s will.

“And they (the Jewish mob in the Temple) listened to him until this word...” *They hung with his talk until what word? “Gentiles.”* **A Gentile is anybody who’s not a Jew.** The Jews of Jerusalem couldn’t stand the thought that God would shower His grace upon **Gentiles**.

Realize, self-righteous pride and racial privilege kept the Jews from embracing the Gospel of God’s grace.

“And then they raised their voices and said, “Away with such a fellow from the earth, for he is not fit to live!” Then, as they cried out and tore off *their* clothes and threw dust into the air...” All these antics, were Jewish reactions to blasphemy. The rabbis at the time taught that God made Gentiles as kindling for the flames of hell - starter logs for hellfire. They considered Paul a heretic for believing God could save Gentiles.

Then “the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, and said that he should be examined under

scourging, so that he might know why they shouted so against him.” The Roman in charge planned to interview Paul with enhanced interrogation techniques. *Not waterboarding, but the flagellum.* They were going to brutally beat the information out of him.

“And as they bound him with thongs (or strips of leather), Paul said to the centurion who stood by, “Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman, and uncondemned?” Realize, **Paul was no masochist.** He wasn’t afraid to take a beating for Christ, *but neither did he egg one on.* If he could avoid pain; then great!

Once again Paul pulls out his trump card - his get out of jail free card - his Roman citizenship. It was against Roman law to scourge a citizen without due process.

So “When the centurion heard *that* (he was a Roman citizen), he went and told the commander, saying, “Take care what you do, for this man is a Roman.”

Then the commander came and said to him, “Tell me, are you a Roman?” He said, “Yes.” The commander answered, “With a large sum I obtained this citizenship.” And Paul said, “But I was born *a citizen.*” The commander had gained his citizenship with a bribe, but Paul having been born in Cilicia - an official Roman province - was a citizen by birth.

Remember, Jesus told His disciples to be as shrewd as serpents. It surprises some folk that cleverness and caginess is a Spirit-led virtue. Paul used his citizenship when it helped his cause. He moved about shrewdly.

“Then immediately those who were about to examine him withdrew from him; and the commander was also afraid after



he found out that he was a Roman, and because he had bound him.” Treat a Roman citizen illegally and the guilty soldier would be subject to the punishment he’d administered. This Commander doesn’t want his back cut to ribbons, so he backs off...

Verse 30, “The next day, because he wanted to know for certain why he was accused by the Jews, he released him from *his* bonds, and commanded the chief priests and all their council to appear (This council was the Sanhedrin, 70 members of the Jewish Supreme Court. This was the body that condemned Jesus. And Paul may’ve at one time been a member) they “brought Paul down and set him before them.”

“Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council...” What a moment this was! The last time Paul had eyeballed these men he was on their side. He was their heavy hitter - *their hit man!* Now he's in the opposing dugout.

And look at how he addresses them, “Men and brethren.” Normally, a defendant before the Sanhedrin would address the court, “Rulers of the people.” For someone to say, “*men and brethren*” was to put himself on their level. Yet this is how Paul saw them, *as peers*.

In his past life Paul had been one of them. But you can be certain that’s not how they viewed him. Addressing them as “*Men and brethren*” angered them.

As did his next comment, “Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.”

This statement caused the Jews to rip their clothes. It would’ve been blasphemous to them. Under the Law the

Jews had no understanding of the righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus, any talk of a “*good conscience*” was arrogant at best... heretical at worst. *How dare Paul claim to be right with a holy God?*

In fact, the high priest orders a crony to cold cock Paul. “Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth.” *But Paul strikes back!* “Then Paul said to him, “God will strike you, *you whitewashed wall!* For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?”

Paul counterpunches the high priest... *And in my opinion, here is where Paul may've lost his cool...*

His goal is to preach the Gospel. Starting out his sermon by calling the High Priest a hypocrite may not be the best introduction. *Apparently, Paul could lose his temper.* Here, he gets angry at Ananias’ brutality.

Verse 4, “*And those who stood by said, “Do you revile God’s high priest?”* Then Paul said, “I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, *‘You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.’*” Paul quotes Exodus 22:28. And his rebuttal can be taken a couple of ways... **First**, he could be speaking sarcastically, *“I didn't know a guy like this could be High Priest.”* Paul could’ve been referring to Ananias’s poor priestly reputation. History tells us the man was a miserable High Priest. He served for twelve years and used his Temple oversight to pad his own pockets. He was eventually murdered by the Jews.

Or **second**, Paul might not have actually seen that it was the High Priest to which he was speaking. We've talked about the eye problems that plagued Paul. His inflammation may've flared up and impaired his vision.

Whatever the reason, Paul realizes he's dug himself a hole with the High Priest. *He's looking for a way out.*

*He finds it*, verse 6, "But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, "Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!"

And when he had said this, a dissension arose between the Pharisees and the Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For Sadducees say that there is no resurrection (And of course, that's why they're so **sad-you-see**) - and (they also say there's) **no angel or spirit; but the Pharisees confess both.**" Again Paul is a shrewd dude. He finds a clever way to escape his jam.

At the time there were two main priestly parties in Judaism - the Pharisees and the Sadducees - and here, Paul cleverly diverts attention off himself by pitting these two factions against one another.

The Sadducees were liberals, the materialists. They denied *the existence of angels - the immortality of the soul - and the resurrection of the body.* They believed that only the first five books of Moses were inspired.

Whereas the Pharisees were the supernaturalists. They believed in angels, and eternal life, and a physical

resurrection. They held the whole OT as inspired by God - the Law, Poets, and the Prophets.

*And Paul knew these groups were fierce rivals...*

So he appeals to Pharisaical pride. All the Jews were angry Paul preached Jesus had risen, but here he reminds the Pharisees they believe in the resurrection of the physical body. In a sense, Paul is on their side.

Paul cleverly reframes his trial as an attack on Pharisee-ism. **“Then there arose a loud outcry. And the scribes of the Pharisees’ party arose and protested, saying, “We find no evil in this man; but if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him, let us not fight against God.”**

In a roundabout way the doctrine Paul taught substantiated the Pharisees, *so they back off Paul*. But this created a heated reaction from the Sadducees...

**“Now when there arose a great dissension, the commander, fearing lest Paul might be pulled to pieces by them, commanded the soldiers to go down and take him by force from among them, and bring him into the barracks.”** Again the commander was fearful for Paul’s safety. The Jews were treating him like a pulley-bone. They were just about to tear him in two. So again, the chief Roman dispatches a garrison to save Paul’s skin.

And imagine, Paul’s discouragement. Three times now he’s tried to preach the Gospel to his fellow Jews, and with little to no success. *He’s sunk into a funk...*

But *the God of all comfort* comes to him, as He often comes to us in our times of discouragement, verse 11, **“But the**

following night the Lord stood by him and said, “Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome.” I’m certain Paul considered his efforts in Jerusalem a failure. I’ll bet he wondered, “*Maybe I should’ve heeded the warnings, and stayed away.*”

But that wasn’t God’s opinion. God commends Paul’s efforts: “*Be of good cheer, Paul, for as you have testified of Me in Jerusalem...*” God speaks of Paul’s witness to the Jews in a positive light. Let’s always remember our responsibility is to simply share the Gospel. How folks respond is between them and God.

Remember last week we discussed whether Paul was right or wrong to visit Jerusalem in the first place.

God had called Paul to be “*the apostle to the Gentiles.*” And everywhere Paul preached to Gentiles, He saw positive results - folks got *saved*. But whenever he tried to preach to Jews, he got *jailed*, or worse.

Recall, prior to his visit to Jerusalem, believers and prophets alike had warned Paul of danger ahead.

The Prophet Agabus had even gone theatrical. He had taken Paul’s belt, tied up his own hands; then said the owner of this belt will be bound in Jerusalem. But Paul was adamant in his desire. *It was Jerusalem or bust.* He loved the Jews and wanted them to be saved.

Yet when Paul arrived, it was the leader of the Church, James, who suggested he participate in a ritualistic vow that

would court Jewish sympathies and prove that Paul respected God's Law. Paul agreed.

Yet the effort failed. It was Paul's presence in the Temple that set off a riot, and led to his arrest. As Agabus had prophesied Paul ended up incarcerated.

We could call Paul's visit a mistake, and conclude his trip was born out of stubbornness, not God's will...

*But not so fast...* Earlier in Acts 19:21 we're told Paul "purposed in the Spirit" to go to Jerusalem. His determination was born of the Spirit. He said in Chapter 20 none of the warnings moved him. He was ready not only to be chained, but to die for Jesus' sake.

In fact, in Romans 9:3 Paul had even said he was willing to go to hell if it meant the Jews got to heaven.

*I don't know about you, but I'm not sure I can say that about anyone...* My point is, how do you say a man with this passion for the lost is outside God's will?

In fact, turn to Acts 9 and review Paul's calling at the time of his conversion. Jesus said Paul would "bear My name before Gentiles, kings, **and the children of Israel.** For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake." Notice, it was part of God's initial will - His marching orders for Paul's life - that he bear Christ's name to the children of Israel, the Jews.

As Christians we should know that favorable results aren't always an indicator we're walking in God's will.

So again what's my answer to the question, "Was it God's will for Paul to visit Jerusalem and enter the Temple at this



time?” As I said last week, *I have no idea!* **It's not always easy to discern the will of God.**

There are times when we can go to God's Word and find the answer to our questions in chapter and verse.

*Is it okay to cheat on your income tax, or have sex with your girlfriend, or consult your horoscope, or flirt with someone else's spouse, or work nonstop?* The answer to all the above is **no**. All these practices are clearly forbidden in Scripture. I can say definitively that none of these practices are God's will for your life.

But what about the subjective issues in life that aren't spelled out in the pages of Scripture? For example, *What college should I attend? Who do I marry? Where do I buy a house? Or send my kids to school?*

These are the questions where you can't just open a Bible and get a clear-cut answer from God. Like the situation Paul faced, *do I participate in a Temple ritual?*

Surely, Paul lived a life pleasing to God. *He read the Scriptures - he adopted godly priorities - he was open to the advice of Christian friends - he was sensitive to the promptings of God's Spirit...* but what if you do all that and the decision you're facing is still unclear?

I'm just saying we are such physical creatures it's often hard for us to tune in to spiritual communications.

But here's what we need to realize about God and His will - *God is experienced in working with frail and fallible people...* Sometimes I have a difficult time discerning my wife's desires, *and we can talk and text.*

How much more difficult is it for me to pick up on the spiritual nuances and leadings of the Holy Spirit?

My point is, **God understands my dilemma**. He knows how dense I am. The psalmist says, "He knows that we're but dust." That's why I believe He factors some latitude into His will. When I discern His will I think the Lord includes a plus or minus margin for error.

Walking in God's will seldom requires me to stop on a dime. I don't have to hit a bull's eye from a thousand feet. I think God makes allowances for my humanness.

In Psalm 18:36 this is what David meant when He prayed, "You enlarged my path under me, so that my feet did not slip." He's saying, as long as his heart was right, God made sure his feet stayed on the right path.

It wasn't just up to David to stay in line, when he slipped God enlarged his path to keep him on track.

Even if we get out of step - or veer a bit right or left - God doesn't abandon us. To the contrary, God stretches out the white lines beneath us - He enlarges our path - to keep us in His will. He stretches the lane to keep us moving in the right direction. Here, God may've widened His will to accommodate Paul's zeal for the Jews, and approved of His visit to the Temple.

Again, I believe God loves us, and won't let us forfeit His blessings just because we miss a cue, or there's a little play in the steering wheel of our lives. God is big enough to accommodate His children's weaknesses.

Here's what I'm saying, *did Paul do everything right? I doubt it.* But in the end God got him where He wanted him. God fulfilled His will for Paul. And He'll fulfill His will for you if your heart is right and you trust in Him.

Verse 12, "And when it was day, some of the Jews banded together and bound themselves under an oath, saying that they would neither eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. Now there were more than forty who had formed this conspiracy. They came to the chief priests and elders, and said, "We have bound ourselves under a great oath that we will eat nothing until we have killed Paul." These fellows harbor some serious angry toward Paul. They all go on a "Kill The Christian Weight Loss Program." No matzo balls, no falafels, no lamb chops until Paul is dead meat. Forty men take this oath.

"Now you, therefore, together with the council, suggest to the commander that he be brought down to you tomorrow, as though you were going to make further inquiries concerning him; but we are ready to kill him before he comes near." These hungry assassins conspire with priests to set up an ambush. Forty supposed religious *men* plot Paul's bloody *end*.

"So when Paul's sister's son heard of their ambush, he went and entered the barracks and told Paul." It just so happened Uncle Paul has a nephew who was within earshot of the conspirators as they made their plans. *What are the odds of this happening by chance?*

This was obviously, God's providential will at work.

This was nothing short of a miracle. God made sure *the right boy was in the right place at the right time!*

“Then Paul called one of the centurions to him (one of the Roman soldiers who was guarding Paul) and said, “Take this young man to the commander, for he has something to tell him.” So he took him and brought him to the commander and said, “Paul the prisoner called me to him and asked me to bring this young man to you. He has something to say to you.”

Then the commander took him by the hand, went aside, and asked privately, “What is it that you have to tell me?” And he said, “The Jews have agreed to ask that you bring Paul down to the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire more fully about him.

Verse 21, “But do not yield to them, for more than forty of them lie in wait for him, men who have bound themselves by an oath that they will neither eat nor drink till they have killed him; and now they are ready, waiting for the promise from you.” So the commander let the young man depart, and commanded him, “Tell no one that you have revealed these things to me.”

And he called for two centurions, saying, “Prepare 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen, and 200 spearmen to go to Caesarea at the third hour of the night...” which was around 9:00 pm. They’ll move Paul just after dark, and he’ll travel with a heavily-armed military detachment.

“And provide mounts to set Paul on, and bring him safely to Felix the governor.” Remember, Caesarea-by-the-Sea was

the Roman headquarters in Israel. The Roman governor traveled to Jerusalem only on special occasions. The procurator preferred life on the coast.

That's why for Paul to be tried by Felix he had to be transported from Jerusalem to Caesarea... which would put him at serious risk for the promised ambush.

The Commander knows Paul is a high value target for the forty terrorists planning his murder, so he puts together a show of force - a military escort to transport Paul the 65 miles from Jerusalem to Caesarea.

And along with the prisoner, the Commander, “wrote a letter in the following manner: (verse 26) Claudius Lysias, to the most excellent governor Felix: Greetings.

This man was seized by the Jews and was about to be killed by them. Coming with the troops I rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman. And when I wanted to know the reason they accused him, I brought him before their council. I found out that he was accused concerning questions of their law, but had nothing charged against him deserving of death or chains. And when it was told me that the Jews lay in wait for the man, I sent him immediately to you, and also commanded his accusers to state before you the charges against him.” And he closes, “Farewell.”

“Then the soldiers, as they were commanded, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatris.” This was the half-way marker. The road from Mount Zion in Jerusalem to Antipatris was narrow and mountainous, *perfect for an ambush*. But the road north of Antipatris toward Caesarea was flat and open.

At this point, the half-way, the dangerous part of the journey was over.

Thus, “The next day they left the horsemen to go on with him, and returned to the barracks.” The infantry returned to Jerusalem. The cavalry completed the trip.

Verse 33, “When they came to Caesarea and had delivered the letter to the governor, they also presented Paul to him. And when the governor had read it, he asked what province (Paul) was from. And when he understood that he was from Cilicia, he said, “I will hear you when your accusers also have come.” And he commanded him to be kept in Herod’s Praetorium.”

Paul now occupies a cell in Herod’s sea-side palace. Not a bad place to have to spend the next two years. Which we’ll study next week after you read Acts 24-25.