



STUDY 8 || ACTS 21:1-23:11

# GOSPEL POLITICS

This week we move into a new section of Acts. From chapters 13-20 Paul has been free to move around the Roman empire sharing the good news about Jesus - often opposed, sometimes beaten, temporarily imprisoned and then evicted from the city, but ultimately free. Yet from chapter 21 to chapter 28, *Paul will not be free again*. Many Christians around the world are, like Paul, prohibited from meeting together around Jesus or sharing the good news about Jesus. How did Paul respond to that? And, as Australia becomes increasingly less tolerant of Christianity, how will we respond? These are some of the questions we'll be reflecting on in the next few weeks.

Do you often think about the great freedom we've had in Australia? Or do you tend to take it for granted? Do you ever worry we might lose it?

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## GOSPEL VISION

To hear how Paul deliberately heads for trouble, read **Acts 21:1-16**.

1. What matters most to Paul's friends? (v4,10-12)

In contrast, what matters most to Paul himself? (v13)

Which matters more to you, your personal freedom or your faithfulness to Jesus?  
Can you empathise with both sides of the argument here?

As predicted, it's in Jerusalem that the real trouble starts. Read **Acts 21:17-26**.

2. What's the accusation brought against Paul? (v20-21)

What's the action recommended by James? (v23-24) Why would he recommend this?

Paul doesn't *have* to take this action. But he does so anyway (v26). What principle does this suggest about Christian conduct in politically charged situations?

It seems Paul actually can placate the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. But the non-Christian Jews from outside Jerusalem may be a different story: read **Acts 21:27-22:39**.

3. Paul is accused by both the Jews from Asia and the Roman soldiers. What can we say about their accusations?

Jews from Asia (21:27-29)

Roman Soldiers (21:38)

**Accusation**

**Truthfulness**

What pattern do you see in the way Paul is treated by those around him? How can we learn from this?

4. When Paul is falsely accused, he doesn't simply accept it. Yet his defence doesn't show any of the hatred that he's been shown. How does Paul accommodate himself to his different accusers?

Jews

Roman

**Language Used**  
(21:37, 40)

**Background appealed to**  
(21:39; 22:3, 25-29)

*NOTE: Greek was the common language around the Roman empire.*

Paul leveraged his strong connections with his society to share the gospel in that society. What does that suggest we should do in our society?

5. Even when Paul is accused specifically of disrespecting the law of Moses, his defence centres not on himself, nor on the law of Moses, nor on political ideals of liberty. What's his focus? (22:6-16)

Do you find this surprising? How so?

What principle does this suggest about our interactions in politically charged situations? Should Christians *always* have the same central message, no matter the specific issue at hand?

**Sidelight**

Many scholars think it's during this imprisonment that Paul actually writes his famous "prison epistles" like Ephesians. Having been arrested for daring to bring a gentile into the temple, it's fascinating to see themes of Jews, Gentiles, and dividing temple walls spring to life so vividly in Ephesians. (Read Ephesians 2 sometime and see what you think!)

The accusation against Paul has been that he disrespects the law of Moses. But Paul's speech brings to light the real issue: many Jews hate the idea that God might offer salvation to Gentiles as well (22:21-22)! Paul has just one more chance to persuade the Jews in Jerusalem of his innocence and his right to share the good news about Jesus, this time before the gathering of Jewish leaders called the Sanhedrin. However, when it quickly becomes clear that Paul won't get a fair trial, finally he plays hard ball. To see how, read **Acts 22:30-23:11**.

6. What hypocrisy of the high priest does Paul expose? (v1-5)

What hypocrisy of the whole Sanhedrin does Paul expose? (v6-9)

**Possible responses**

- Simply accept the HR directive, stop meeting and stop speaking for Jesus.
- Simply ignore the HR directive, keep meeting and keep speaking for Jesus regardless of the consequences.
- Propose a compromise whereby you keep meeting, but agree to stop all speaking about Jesus outside the meeting.
- Try to persuade HR to change their mind by:
  - Shaming the company on facebook.
  - Threatening legal action.
  - In protest, reducing your work performance and team engagement until they change.
  - Presenting the gospel to HR – the one who died for sin is King – as the reason meeting around Jesus and speaking for him is so important to you.
  - Pointing to the strong work performance and team engagement of those involved.
  - Pointing to the allowance made for Muslim staff to pray together at regular times.
  - Pointing to HR's own stated principles of workplace and work and life balance.
- Something more creative and wise for the gospel than these?

What does this suggest is the last resort in handling false accusations?

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## GOSPEL POLITICS

7. Even Paul's defense of his *gospel-sharing rights* was shaped by the gospel. How might this look today? A small group of Christians working at a major energy company in Brisbane meet at lunch time once a week to read the Bible, pray, and encourage one another to share their faith. It starts small but quickly grows to over 30 people. But soon, HR informs them that other staff complained, and directed them to stop using the workplace for religious purposes. Trying to imagine you were Paul, using the principles you've seen him put into practice, how could you respond in a gospel-shaped way? There are some possibilities in the *sidebar* if you want to get your juices flowing...

For Paul, it's not his personal freedom that matters, it's his faithfulness to Jesus. But because his faithfulness to Jesus is enhanced by keeping his personal freedom – it makes him free to share the good news about Jesus – he defends it whenever it's under attack. And because he defends his personal freedom for the sake of sharing the gospel, his defence is always shaped by that gospel. It centers on the gospel message about Jesus himself - the one who died for sin is King - while accommodating his accusers as much as possible. That's a lot harder than either giving in or lashing out. But it's the gospel-shaped response. As Australia becomes increasingly hostile to Christianity, we may need to help each other respond to such hostility in a similarly gospel-shaped way. Let's pray that we can.