

“I WILL SEND YOU FAR AWAY TO THE GENTILES”

Acts 21:27–22:29

Key Verse: 22:21

“And he said to me, ‘Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

Are you aware of God’s plan for you? Sometimes God makes his plan clear. But honestly, most of the time we’re struggling just to get through the day. Last week the believers in Caesarea said, “Let the will of the Lord be done” (21:14). In today’s passage we see God’s bigger plan for Paul. Earlier he said, “I must also see Rome” (19:21). Now he says the Risen Jesus would send him far away to the Gentiles (22:21). He shares this plan of God with a hostile audience. Paul shows us that a witness of Jesus obeys God’s plan. But how can we, today, see and accept God’s plan for us? May God speak to us through his word.

As we’ve seen, Paul wanted to arrive in Jerusalem by Pentecost (20:16),¹ and he’s made it in time. Pentecost, one of three annual Feasts, was to celebrate the firstfruits of the harvest, so it was also called Feast of Firstfruits.² Jerusalem is now crowded with Jewish pilgrims from all over the world. For years, Paul has been in various nations, sharing the gospel. Now he’s brought with him young men from these nations who’ve been changed by the gospel (20:4). They used to be far away from God, but by receiving Jesus, they’re now close to him. They’re an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit (Rom.15:16). They’re a spiritual harvest from the nations, the firstfruits of the gospel. It’s time to thank God for the life-transforming work of his grace for all the nations. It was God’s original hope for his people, to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation for the world (Ex.19:6), and it’s now being fulfilled through our Risen Lord Jesus.

When Paul arrives in Jerusalem, he’s told that there are thousands of Jews who’ve joined the Christian movement, and they’re all zealous for the law. They’ve been misinformed that Paul has been teaching Jews living among the Gentiles that they can forget about the Law of Moses and stop circumcising their children and living by Jewish customs (21:20b–21). They’re afraid the gospel of Jesus will make their religion and way of life obsolete. They want to preserve their own customs and establishment. And their zealous legalism has darkened their minds to what God has been doing. To them, Paul living among Gentiles has himself become unclean and needs to go through a purification rite. Paul knows this is not necessary. But he humbles himself and agrees to go through it. He’s ready to become all things to all people (1 Cor.9:22b). Yet even this results in a riot and Paul’s arrest. What do we learn from all this?

¹“Pentecost” means 50th, because the holiday was 50 days after Passover.

² Called “Feast of Weeks” (Lev.23:15–21), it’s when God also gave his people the Law (Ex.19:1,10–11).

First, a witness of Jesus gets persecuted (21:27–36). Look at 21:27. The seven days of purification are almost over. Jews from Asia Minor are also at this Feast, knowing Paul will be there. Actually, unrepentant Jews have always been plotting against Paul and chasing him to other cities to stir up riots against him.³ For years they've been trying to stop his gospel ministry, and Paul's been serving in spite of them. Now they again spread lies about him in Jerusalem. Look at verse 28a. They're twisting his teaching to mean that he's speaking against the Jews, the Law of Moses, and the temple. Look at verses 28b–29. They're even spreading a lie that he's taken a Gentile into the holy place of the temple, where they're not allowed. Trophimus the Ephesian is one of the seven Gentile converts Paul has brought to Jerusalem (cf. 20:4 again). But instead of welcoming him as a brother, they're using him as a trigger to incite the crowd into a self-righteous fury, as if their holy place has been desecrated. Nationalistic pride mixed with religious zeal is always dangerous. Look at verse 30. People from all over the city come into the temple to drag Paul out and slam the gates shut. Their message is clear: No Gentiles are ever welcome to worship here.

Look at verses 31–32. “The tribune of the cohort” is a Roman commander, in charge of 1,000 soldiers. They're staying in the Fortress of Antonia, right next to the temple. They're there to prevent riots during the Feasts. The tribune hears that all of Jerusalem is in confusion. So, along with his soldiers and centurions, he rushes down the steps of his fortress, which open to the courtyard outside the temple. There they find a mob beating Paul. Only when people see the tribune, centurions and soldiers do they stop. Look at verse 33. The tribune, not knowing what's going on, arrests Paul and orders him to be bound with two chains, just as predicted (21:11). Then he asks who he is and what he's done. In a confusing moment he arrests the wrong person, then asks questions. Look at verse 34. It's so noisy and chaotic, he can't even hear, so he orders Paul to be taken into the army barracks. Look at verses 35–36. This mob is just like other violent mobs stirred up against Paul in Gentile cities. They're just like the crowd stirred up against Jesus during his trial. Our Lord Jesus told us that when we follow him we too will be persecuted, and he told us to make up our minds not to worry about it (Luke 21:12,14). Paul tells us, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...” (2 Tim.3:12). Even if we're law-abiding citizens just trying to worship God, in witnessing about Jesus we will be persecuted.

Second, a witness of Jesus brings peace and quiet (21:37–22:2). As Paul is about to be brought into the barracks, he asks the tribune, “May I say something to you?” (37) The tribune is surprised that Paul speaks Greek so well. And despite the shouting, violent crowd, Paul is calm. The tribune asks him, “Are you

³ 13:50; 14:2,19; 17:5,13; 18:12; 20:3,19.

not the Egyptian, then, who recently stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins into the wilderness?” (38) It happened several years ago,⁴ but for the Romans trying to keep the peace it had been a traumatizing event. This Egyptian had 4,000 men in a crowd with secret daggers, and they would suddenly start stabbing those deemed to be Roman sympathizers. The Romans were wondering when they’d be back. And this rioting mob during Pentecost is the tribune’s worst nightmare. At that time, Egyptians could speak Greek, so the tribune is jumping to conclusions. Read verse 39. Paul speaks here with dignity and assurance. In an emotionally-charged situation he has peace, because he’s full of the Holy Spirit. He mentions his birthplace: not Egypt, but Tarsus of Cilicia. At that time, Tarsus was a prominent city with people well-versed in philosophy.⁵ Outwardly, Paul doesn’t look impressive. After his hard missionary life, traveling on open roads and on the seas, he must be weathered by the sun and looking haggard. But his calm demeanor and way of speaking persuade the tribune to give him permission to speak. Paul uses his hand like an orator. With his own inner calm he brings calm to the crowd. And he suddenly switches to the Hebrew language, Aramaic (40). Though he’s just been beaten by them, he addresses them calmly and respectfully, “Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you” (22:1a). When they hear him speaking their mother tongue, they become even more quiet (2). To people stirred up and upset, a witness of Jesus brings not noise or tension, but peace and quiet.

Third, a witness of Jesus shares God’s grace (22:3–16). Paul is now in chains, standing at the top of the steps to the entrance to the Roman fortress. Though the crowd in the courtyard below is so violent towards him, he voluntarily shares what Jesus has done in his life. He was born as Saul of Tarsus, but brought up in Jerusalem, educated at the feet of the honored rabbi Gamaliel (5:34). He adds, “...according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day” (3). But what he describes most is his anti-Christian life. He says he persecuted these people “to the death.” He bound and imprisoned both men and women, and journeyed all the way to Damascus, over 100 miles away, to arrest Christians and bring them to Jerusalem to be punished (4–5). The eyewitnesses and evidence of what he did were clear facts. Saul saw the followers of “this Way” as this crowd did: as a dangerous heresy that should be snuffed out. He had their same self-righteous zeal and fervor—maybe more.

But then something happened to him. As he drew near Damascus, a great light from heaven knocked him to the ground. And a voice asked him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” When he asked, “Who are you, Lord?” he answered, “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting” (6–8). Saul’s

⁴ Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War* 2.13.5 (2.261–263); *Jewish Antiquities* 20.8.6 (20:169–172).

⁵ Strabo, *Geography* 14.5.13 (completed circa AD 23), in *The Geography of Strabo*, trans. H.L. Jones, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), 6:399.

self-righteousness was shattered. In this great light he realized Jesus is the Risen Lord, and that he himself had been so wrong. In his great light he experienced his one-sided, undeserved grace. In asking, “What shall I do, Lord,” he was ready to change, surrender, submit, serve...do *whatever* Jesus wanted. Then the Lord said to him, “Rise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do” (10b). Ironically, Saul was now blind and had to be led by the hand (11). Ananias, “a devout man according to the law, well spoken of by all the Jews who lived there,” helped him receive his sight (12–13), then told him what it all meant. Look at verse 14. This was not at all anti-Jewish; it was “the God of our fathers” who “appointed [Saul] to know his will, to see his Righteous One and to hear a voice from his mouth.” God made Saul a prophet, who could see that only Jesus is “his Righteous One.” Read verse 15. In his grace Saul had a new identity and direction as his witness. Ananias said: “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (16). Just like everyone else, and just like us, Saul needed forgiveness and cleansing of his sins in the name of Jesus.⁶ Most of us don’t have such a dramatic life story. But as Christians, we’ve all come into the light of Jesus. We’ve all tasted his grace. So as his witnesses, we all need to be sharing about his grace personally, with real people in real life.

Fourth, a witness of Jesus obeys God’s plan for the nations (22:17–24). Now Paul tells a part of his story told nowhere else in the Bible. Look at verses 17–18. After conversion he was in Jerusalem, praying in this very temple. It was here, of all places, that he again saw and heard the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, who saved us from God’s wrath and justified us by his blood (Rom.5:9). He’s Lord of the temple,⁷ Lord of all (Acts 10:36). The Lord Jesus was saying to him, “Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.” And Paul didn’t want to go! He was sure his own people would accept his testimony, because he used to imprison and beat believers. He was the one standing by and watching over the garments of those who killed Stephen, a martyr for Jesus, and approving when his blood was being shed (19–20). Only the riches of God’s grace, the unsearchable riches in Christ (Eph.3:7–8), could save and forgive such a man.

Read verse 21. “The Gentiles” are not one race; it means “all the nations.” Going to all the nations was not Paul’s idea; the Risen Jesus commanded him to do it.⁸ It was God’s gracious plan from the beginning.⁹ And only in the light of the grace of Jesus could Paul begin to see God’s world-wide plan. He gained what

⁶ It’s the good news that so many Jews had already accepted (2:38–41).

⁷ John 2:19–21; Matt.12:6; Col.1:15–20; 2:9; Heb.9:24.

⁸ See also 9:15; 13:46–47.

⁹ Rom.15:8–12; cf. Isa.49:6; Eph.1:4–5.

all of us so badly need: “grace-healed eyes.”¹⁰ With grace-healed eyes he could deeply love and embrace the Gentiles. God uniquely prepared Paul, the former Pharisee, and his enemy (Rom.5:10), now changed by the grace of Jesus, “to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God...”¹¹ Most Jews couldn’t accept it, stubbornly pursuing righteousness based on the law.¹² Paul’s present visit to Jerusalem shows how virtually impossible it would be for them to accept God’s plan. But through Paul, God would reveal the mystery of his gospel to the people of the whole world (Eph.3:6). God still wants to send the light of Jesus to people of all nations and include all those who receive him into his body, the church.¹³ But we can see and obey God’s plan for the world only in the light of Jesus’ grace.

God wants us all to embrace his plan for the nations. But it’s so easy to get engrossed in where we are. And we may not be able to go anywhere. As witnesses of Jesus, how do we obey God’s plan for the nations? First we need God to enlighten us to the amazing grace of our Lord Jesus in our own lives. Then we can begin to see how he wants to bring this same grace to all human beings, whoever and wherever they are. And we can get started by praying for those around us: our neighbors, people at work, classmates, everyone who does not know him, all those living in spiritual darkness. And to really obey God’s plan, we need to be walking daily in the light of his grace.

Fifth, a witness of Jesus has God’s wisdom to defend himself (22–29). When they hear the words “to the Gentiles,” the Jewish crowd loses it (22–24). Why do they react so violently? It’s because God’s plan to go to the Gentiles hurts their pride. The Roman tribune orders that Paul be examined by flogging. And what happens? Read verse 25. Paul knows he needs to keep living, to keep testifying to Jesus’ grace. And God gives him the wisdom to mention, “Oh, and by the way, I’m a Roman citizen” (Luke 21:15). It was illegal to flog Roman citizens, especially without a trial. Soon the tribune learns that, unlike himself, Paul was *born* a Roman citizen (26–28). How does it end? Read verse 29. It’s a real cliff-hanger. God begins to use Paul’s Roman citizenship to protect him from the Jews, and to bring him where God wants him, to Rome.

So, how can we see and accept God’s plan for us today? Read 22:21 again. May God enlighten us with the amazing grace of Jesus in our lives, so that we can embrace his plan to bring the light of Jesus to all the nations.

¹⁰ Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace? Revised and Updated: The Key to Transforming a Broken World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), 177.

¹¹ Eph.3:9,11; cf. Rom.16:25b.

¹² Rom.10:2–3; Phil.3:6.

¹³ Rom.10:12; 1 Cor.12:13; Gal.3:28; Eph.2:14–16; Col.3:11.