

Empowered

The Amazing Church of Jesus Christ

Week 10

“Away With Him!”

Acts 21:17 – 23:35

Teacher Notes

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*Bible versions used throughout the Empowered teacher notes are
NASB, ESV, NLT, and CEB.*

✧ Introduction to Week Ten

ILLUSTRATION: “In Yann Martel’s bestseller *The Life of Pi*, a Hindu boy named Pi finds himself a castaway in a lifeboat with a hyena, zebra, orangutan, and tiger. The tiger kills the hyena who killed the zebra and orangutan. Pi and tiger drift for days eyeing each other warily and talking about life. There is a twist at the end revealing that the central theme of the book is “storytelling is a way to get around telling the boring or upsetting or uninteresting truth.” (Sparknotes)

At one point, Pi recounts meeting a Catholic priest, Father Martin, who tells Pi the story of the gospel. Pi asks for more: “I asked for another story, one that I might find more satisfying. Surely this religion had more than one story in its bag—religions abound with stories. But Father Martin made me understand that...their religion had one Story, and to it they came back again and again, over and over. It was story enough for them.” As recounted by Paul E. Miller, *A Praying Life*.

- Story enough. Why is the Gospel “story enough” for the believer?
 - ~ Because it begins with God. It is ultimately God’s story.
 - ~ He is holy. Other Other. Transcendent. Completely, beautifully, gloriously, perfect in every way.
 - ~ He stands in justifiable judgment over His creation—His image bearers who have broken His law and fallen so far short of His vision for our lives. This should strike terror in us.
 - And YET, instead of remaining justifiably distant from His creation, He crossed that divide between us in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the intersection between God and man.
 - ~ He lived the perfect life we can’t, and He died the death we deserve, and God raised Him from the dead on the third day to reign forever on the throne of heaven and earth.
 - ~ He offers salvation by grace through faith.
 - This is why the Gospel is the Christian’s only story.
- ⇒ **It’s important to see that we don’t just know a story about God. As a believer in Jesus Christ, our life, our story, has intersected with God’s story. We find ourselves in His story.**
- ~ We see who He is and like Isaiah “we are undone.”
 - ~ But instead of being destroyed by the reality of His holiness and our sin, we are awed that He offers us His hand and, like children, we take it.
 - ~ We believe in Jesus and receive forgiveness and salvation. But not only that, we receive His Spirit.
- ⇒ **But the story doesn’t end there. We are now empowered by the Holy Spirit to participate in God’s story.**
- ~ To live the Gospel story every day.
 - ~ To die to self, take up our individual cross, and follow Jesus.

~ To incarnate Christ to everyone we meet in every situation we find ourselves. Dying to self, living to Christ.

⇒ **There is hardly another character in the Bible who exemplifies this more than the apostle Paul.**

- In the next section of Paul's life, we can see the parallels between Paul's life and Jesus' life.
 - ~ Paul offered his life as a "living sacrifice" as he taught the Romans—simply put, he told the Gospel with his life.

TEACHING TIP: There is only one just like Jesus. Paul knew that suffering, possibly death, was coming. It had even been confirmed by prophecies received by others.

Luke tells us the Holy Spirit revealed these things to others, but Paul had purposed in Acts 19:21 that he would go to Jerusalem and then to Rome for the cause of Christ despite the danger from the Jews and the Romans. Such a reminder of Luke's description of Jesus in Luke 13:22 *"And He was passing through from one city and village to another, teaching, and proceeding on His way to Jerusalem."* Even though, Jesus knew that the cross awaited Him there.

~ Even though Paul knew from the general climate of opposition and the specific prophecies the Holy Spirit had revealed to others that Jerusalem was dangerous for him, "he would not be persuaded."

⇒ **Paul's unwavering commitment led everyone to affirm, "Let the will of the Lord be done."**

Study One:

Acts 21:17-26 Paul Arrives in Jerusalem

- The year was approximately 57 AD. Almost thirty years after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus—thirty years after that blessed church gathering in the upper room in Jerusalem that first Pentecost.
 - ~ One hundred twenty believers in Christ Jesus gathered in unity—meeting in one accord and devoting themselves to prayer.
- When he arrived in Jerusalem, Paul went to James (half-brother of Jesus), a leader in the church, and the other elders and shared what God had done through his ministry among the Gentiles.
 - ~ The Gentile converts accompanying him on this very missionary journey would have also been a strong testimony to the success of the ministry.

TEACHING TIP: Things have gotten messy in the meantime. Everyone—Jew and Gentile—were laying down their own version of how salvation would come and what Jesus Christ had done. Not forsaking the old but taking the old and seeing it in light of the Truth, in light of Christ.

- Paul also presumably brought the monies he had collected from the Gentiles for the church in Jerusalem. (Romans 15:25-31)

- The elders shared with Paul the concern they had for the thousands of Jews who had converted to Christianity in Acts 21:20b-22a.

† Acts 21:20b-22a *“You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. What, then, is to be done?”*

TEACHING TIP: The elders rejoiced to hear it all. Paul could have only hoped that this would serve to unify the Jews and Gentiles of the church. But not so...

- God had prepared and placed Paul uniquely between the Jew and the Gentile. It is as if he has had to grab hold of two pillars and do everything in his power to pull them together.

~ To the Jew, he preached that they should pursue the law of righteousness in faith not as though righteousness were by works trying to justify themselves.

~ And to the Gentile he preached that they should *“walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which [they] have been called.”* (Ephesians 4:1)

TEACHING TIP: Paul’s words in his first letter to the Corinthians are proving true again and again. *“We preach Christ crucified, which is a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.”* (1 Corinthians 1:23, Common English Bible)

- The elders knew the problem—the Gentiles needed to know that their faith should produce fruit—a desire to keep the law of God. We see this in their reference to the letter in Acts 21:25—

† Acts 21:25 *“But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication.”*

- But the immediate problem here was with the Jews.

~ They wanted to keep the law. In fact, the elders reminded Paul that these converted Jews were *“zealous for the law.”*

~ They were keeping the law for the wrong reason—they, like many of us, were struggling with the desire to work for their own salvation.

TEACHING TIP: Many Jews stumbled over the stumbling stone of Jesus. But some converted Jews continued to stub their toe.

TEACHING TIP: Jesus encountered Jews who were zealous for the law as well.

- ~ He described it as zeal without knowledge of God.
 - ~ Our sin is so problematic that even our zeal for the things of God can blind us to God Himself.
 - ~ Why? Because of the state of our hearts. We pursue the law of righteousness not by faith but as though it were by works.
 - ~ Paul explained this in his letter to the Romans which he had just written a few months earlier (Romans 9:30-10:4).
 - ~ He said that Gentiles did not pursue righteousness and yet obtained it. While Israel did pursue righteousness but missed it.
- ⇒ **What is the difference? FAITH. We cannot attain righteousness—rightness with God—without faith. Believe and receive Jesus Christ.**

- The elders came up with a plan. (Acts 21:23-26)
 - ~ There was a small group of Jews who had apparently taken the vow of the Nazirite (Numbers 6). Their time of separation to God had come to an end and they were to shave their hair and make sacrifices to God in fulfillment of the vow.
 - ~ The elders asked Paul to participate and pay for their sacrifices.

TEACHING TIP: Some commentators believe this plan was hatched in sin. And that Paul was culpable for participating. Others see Paul merely staying true to his pledge in his first letter to the Corinthians in 9:19—22. *“To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews.”*

Still others argue that the elders were not saying salvation lies in keeping the law or that Paul and other believers were still under the law, but they recognized that some brothers were weaker in the faith than others. They let people grow in grace. They were loving God and His people. Keeping the conversation about the Gospel.

⇒ **Regardless of the sin or lack thereof on the part of Paul and the elders, we can all agree on this—the Gospel is simple, but people are complicated.**

- Why did Paul go along with the elders’ plan?
 - ~ He was threading a needle that only the Spirit of God could help him do.
 - ~ It could be interpreted that the law Paul agreed to participate in was the Nazirite vow.
- ▲ **QUOTE:** Iain M. Duguid in his commentary on Numbers— *“The Nazarites were called to be holy because Israel wasn’t holy...the very existence of the Nazirite vow shows us the weakness and inability of the Old Testament people of God to meet God’s standard of perfect holiness.”*

TEACHING TIP: Perhaps Paul was saying something with the part of the law he chose to participate in—the end of a Nazarite vow. In the Old Testament, the end of the vow was a celebration of joy.

But think of the greater joy now because the need for the Nazarite vow has truly ended. The great divide between holy God and sinful man has been crossed by Jesus Christ. We can receive salvation by grace through faith.

⇒ **Participating in the end of the Nazarite vow was a really profound picture of the purpose of the law—to lead us in our weakness to look to a holy God for His salvation and His alone.**

- The profundity was lost on the crowd because Jews from Asis arrived in Jerusalem—Paul’s old enemies, possibly from Ephesus.

TEACHING TIP: Again, we see the parallels to Jesus’ dealings with the religious Jews.

- In Acts 21:28 we can see the lack of purity in these Jews’ zeal and the lack of truth in their accusations by the words they chose— *“Men of Israel, come to our aid! This man who preaches to all men 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.”*

TEACHING TIP: The Greek that they were referring to was probably Trophimus, an Ephesian convert who had accompanied Paul on this trip.

- The Jews whipped the crowd into a frenzy and began beating Paul.
 - ~ *The Romans had built the fortress, Antonia, to overlook the temple.*
 - ~ *It had been built to monitor disturbances among the Jews.*

TEACHING TIP: Using the plural of centurion has led many commentators to believe that approximately two hundred men came out to rescue Paul from this mob.

- The Roman commander over the fortress ran out with soldiers and centurions to subdue the crowd and rescue Paul.

- ▲ **QUOTE:** N.T. Wright, a British theologian in his commentary Acts for Everyone, Part 2 wrote—
“Nothing could have prepared the [tribune] for the intricacies of the first-century Jewish political and religious life. I once met a university professor in the holy land who said to me, wearily, that it might be just about possible to explain the Palestinian question to an intelligent listener, given enough time and goodwill, but that if I want to understand Lebanon, I would have to do at least a Master’s degree in Middle-Eastern politics first before I could even begin. Jerusalem in the 50s of the first century would take at least that.”

Study Two:

Acts 21:37-22:21 Paul Testifies to the Jerusalem Jews

- What happened next is almost comical, if it were not so painful for Paul. (Acts 21:38)
 - ~ Paul, beaten and bloody, turned to the tribune and asked if he could say something.
 - ~ The commander was surprised that Paul knew Greek; he had assumed that the Jews were beating an Egyptian who had stirred up a revolt and led four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness.
 - ~ His thinking had to have been—surely only a bad guy of that magnitude would cause the Jews to mob a man.
 - Paul turned to the crowd, including his enemies and attackers, and threw up his hand. The crowd quieted. And he spoke—
 - ~ In their Hebrew language—most likely Aramaic, which had been predominately spoken among the Jews since the exile. And Paul began to testify.
 - ~ Respectfully—referring to them as “brothers and fathers.”
 - ~ Identifying with them—a Jew of Jews, educated by Gamaliel, a Pharisee, a keeper of the law, a persecutor of the church. He was zealous for God just like them.
 - Paul then testified in Acts 22:6— *“...a very bright light suddenly flashed from heaven all around me”*—on the road to Damascus.
- ⇒ **Here Paul is stating that God met him on that road in the person of Jesus Christ who asked him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”**
- Paul further explained that there were witnesses to this event:
 - ~ Men who were with him on the road saw the light but they did not hear the voice or
 - ~ Ananias (Acts 22:12), a man of good reputation who was devout by the standard of the Law, understood that Paul had had an encounter with the covenantal God’s own “Righteous One,” the Messiah.
 - Paul continued sharing that he returned to Jerusalem and went to pray in the temple and received a word from the Lord. (This offered credence to the calling he received for these Jews who revered the temple.)

TEACHING TIP: Luke recorded Paul giving his testimony three times in Acts—chapters 9, 22, and 26. He wanted the people (and us) to understand it well.

TEACHING TIP: To the Jews ‘a light from heaven’ meant the very Old Testament presence of God.

TEACHING TIP: In Acts 22:15 Ananias confirmed that Paul would *“be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard.”*

- The message Paul received from Jesus: (vv18-21)
 1. Leave Jerusalem because they will not believe you.
 - ~ In verse 19 Paul agreed, saying something to the effect of— *“I know! I was their star player! And now I am going to the other team.”*
 2. His mission for Paul—take the gospel to the Gentiles.

TEACHING TIP: Here we learn that Paul had been present and guarded the coats of those who had stoned Stephen.

Study Three:

Acts 22:22-23:5 A Roman Citizen Revealed

- When Paul mentioned the Gentiles, the crowd lost its mind.
 - ~ They tore their clothes and threw dust—a very dramatic show of lament.
- They also moved to kill him.
- The Roman commander heard enough and took Paul back to the fortress Antonia. His plans were to flog Paul to make him talk—tell him the truth about what was going on.
- Paul’s sense of dramatic timing is something to behold. After he was stretched out and bound, Paul said to the centurion, *“Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is Roman and uncondemned?”* (Acts 22:25)
- The Romans were now in danger themselves for binding a Roman citizen without a trial, but the commander still wanted to know what was going on.
 - ~ In Acts 22:30 we read that the next day the commander took Paul before the Sanhedrin, the chief priests, and council.
- At the beginning of Acts 23, Paul began by stating basically, *“I am innocent.”*
- ✚ Acts 23:1 *“Paul, looking intently at the Council said, ‘Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day.’”*
- In response to Paul’s statement of innocence, the high priest Ananias commanded those standing next to Paul to punch him in the mouth. (Acts 23:2)
- Then Paul said to Ananias, *“God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall! Do you sit to try me according to the Law, and in violation of the Law order me to be struck?”* (Acts 23:3)

TEACHING TIP: Imagine if they had had zeal for the promise of God that exceeded their zeal for the Law of God. After all, the promise came first, at least 430 years before the Law. They were full of themselves instead of full of the Spirit.

TEACHING TIP: At this moment in the story, we also see a fulfillment of the prophecy of Agabus.

TEACHING TIP: Paul’s recognition of the hypocrisy of this Council is reminiscent of John the Baptist calling them ‘a brood of vipers,’ and Jesus calling this same crowd “whitewashed tombs.”

- The bystanders who witnessed this exchange asked Paul if he was reviling God’s high priest.

TEACHING TIP: Some commentators believe that Paul went too far. But to his credit, Paul apologized. By way of explanation, he said that he did not know that Ananias was the chief priest—this would be understandable given Paul’s long absence from Jerusalem (at least eight years).

Study Four:

Acts 23:6-22 A Conspiracy Unraveled

- Paul knew his audience. He knew they had no interest in the truth. He knew what they had done to His Lord!
- Both Pharisees and Sadducees were in the room.
 - ~ The Pharisees were conservative traditionalists.
 - * They revered the law and made rules upon rules on how to keep it.
 - * Even though they had completely missed the purpose of the Law—to lead them to the promised Messiah—they believed in a future resurrection.
 - ~ The Sadducees, for lack of a better term, were sellouts. They were compromisers—Hellenized, wealthy, and political animals.
 - * They controlled the priesthood and solicited political power from the Romans.
 - * Their secular pursuits had led them into a spiritual wasteland—rejecting many orthodox Jewish beliefs such as angels, spirits, and most importantly here, the resurrection.
- Recognizing his audience, he shrewdly addressed them. Paul basically lit a match in a powder keg of a room by his words in Acts 23:6b—
- ✠ Acts 23:6b *“...’Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead.’”*
- A fight broke out. Some Pharisees actually defended Paul. The Roman commander feared they would tear Paul to pieces, so he brought him back to the barracks.
- At this point Paul was beaten and bloodied. He had faced three explosions of angry crowds who demonstrated resolute blindness to the plain truth.
- It would be easy for us to imagine how Paul must have collapsed in that cell, exhausted and perhaps disheartened by these events. But look at Acts 23:11—
- ✠ Acts 23:11 *“But on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his side and said, ‘Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also.’”*

TEACHING TIP: According to the ESV commentary: “This confirms Paul’s own understanding of his calling, expressed in [Acts] 19:21, and also echoes Christ’s words to Ananias concerning Paul’s mission, recorded in 9:15. Regardless of well-intentioned warnings from prophets such as Agabus, pleadings of friends, plots and schemes of the Jews, the force of the entire Roman Empire, or even the power of the sea, the Lord has a mission for Paul, and it will be fulfilled.” *ESV Commentary, John-Acts*, p. 547

- Paul was so despised that we see a replay of the plot to kill Jesus. (Acts 23:12-15)
 - ~ Forty men vowed to neither eat nor drink until they had killed Paul.
 - * They never stopped to question how their ‘zeal for God’ had led them to plot murder.
 - ~ They told the chief priests to go to the Roman commander and request Paul’s presence under the pretense of the need for further questioning.
 - ~ They would then ambush and kill Paul.

TEACHING TIP: The plot was preposterous! Wouldn’t they be weak from not eating or drinking? How would they overpower a Roman guard? Wouldn’t they be easily caught and executed for killing a Roman citizen?

God allowed these men to continue so far down a path that they became caricatures of themselves. These leaders who professed to be wise had become fools. They had forgotten their own wisdom literature: Ecclesiastes 7:17 *“Do not be excessively wicked and do not be a fool. Why should you die before your time?”*

- God foiled the plot with a young man, Paul’s nephew, who overheard the plot and reported it to Paul who then told his nephew to relay the story to the Roman commander. (Acts 3:16-22)
- The commander decided to remove Paul from Jerusalem and sent him to the Governor Felix in Caesarea.

Study Five:

Acts 23:23-35 From Jerusalem to Caesarea

- The Commander took protecting Paul very seriously. In Acts 23:23-24 we read about the number of men he employed as protection as Paul traveled north to Antipatris and then on to Caesarea.
- Paul was headed in the opposite direction of Rome! But he was not worried because he understood that his life was not in the hands of the Romans so much as in the hands of God.
- ✠ Proverbs 19:21 *“Many plans are in a person’s heart, but the advice of the Lord will stand.”*
- We are told the name of the Commander in Acts 23:26—Claudius Lysias who wrote a letter to Felix condensing the recent events.

~ He painted his personal role in the saga in the best possible light—leaving out how he had tied up an uncondemned Roman citizen with the intent to flog him.

- The most important thing to note in this letter was his findings—that there was no accusation against Paul that merited death or imprisonment.
- Yet, even with this conclusion of innocence, Paul remained in custody, imprisoned, for the next two years until his martyrdom.
- Paul would never be free from chains on this earth. But he was completely free to lay his life down as a willing sacrifice—to gladly tell the gospel story with his very life.

TEACHING TIP: Paul was innocent. Just as he was in Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica, and Ephesus. Just like Jesus was innocent.

TEACHING TIP: Think about how much his suffering results in our great joy. Out of his darkness came this incredible beacon of light. How would we, whether Jew or Gentile, begin to understand the weight of what we have been given without the suffering and labor of Paul? And what about all of those who have come since? Who faithfully spoke and lived the Gospel?

ILLUSTRATION: Charlotte Digges Moon was born on December 12, 1840 in Albemarle County, Virginia. She resisted Christ and His wooing her all through her childhood and teenage years. But at the women’s college counterpart to the University of Virginia, Lottie met Jesus and never turned back.

Her sister Edmonia went to China as a missionary. Lottie soon followed and spent thirty-nine years as a missionary in China’s Shantung province. The Chinese people initially feared and rejected her, but she would not be deterred. She was passionate that others should know Christ. She baked cookies to draw them to her house. She gave up everything of her Southern upbringing and fully identified with the people of China—in dress, language, and customs. As many know, her letters home were instrumental in the Southern Baptist Convention raising needed funds and future missionaries to serve underserved people groups all over the world. Her legacy continues today in a global Christmas offering for missions.

She summed her life up in this way, *“How many there are...who imagine that because Jesus paid it all, they need pay nothing, forgetting that the prime object of their salvation was that they should follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ in bringing back a lost world to God. Why should we not...do something that will prove that we are really in earnest in claiming to be followers of Him who, though He was rich, for our sake became poor?”*

Lottie, too, gladly sacrificed to tell the Gospel with her life.

✧ FINAL THOUGHTS

✧ **Paul E. Miller writes in *A Praying Life*:**

“In the gospel, Jesus took my sin, and I got his righteousness. That is how gospel stories work ... Consequently, gospel stories always have suffering in them. American Christianity has an allergic reaction to this part of the gospel. We’d love to hear about God’s love for us, but suffering doesn’t mesh with our right to ‘the pursuit of happiness.’ So we pray to escape a gospel story, when that is the best gift the Father can give us ... The Father wants to draw us into the story of his Son. He doesn’t have a better story to tell, so he keeps retelling it in our lives. As we reenact the gospel, we are drawn into a strange kind of fellowship. The taste of Christ is so good that the apostle Paul told the Philippians that he wanted to know ‘the fellowship of sharing [Jesus’] sufferings (Philippians 3:10, NIV). It was Paul’s prayer.”

✧ **May this be our prayer.**

✧ **This week remember that when you believe in Jesus, you are empowered by His Spirit to be a living sacrifice.**

✧ **To put it another way—you are *empowered* to not only be a recipient of salvation but to be a participant in God’s Gospel story. It is the only story worth telling with your life.**