

The Book of Acts, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 25: To Jerusalem: Farewell, Arrest, and Defense

Acts 20:1–23:35

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Acts 20-23 follows Paul's journey to Jerusalem, his farewell to the Ephesian elders, his arrest, and his defenses. What is doctrinally at stake includes the apostolic pattern of first-day worship and the breaking of bread, the responsibility to declare the whole counsel of God, the surrender of our will to God's even unto suffering, the resurrection as the central Christian hope, God's sustaining providence, and the nature of the church purchased with Christ's own blood and shepherded by elders.

The heaviest doctrinal weight falls on Paul's charge to the Ephesian elders (20:28-31): the church is God's own, obtained with His own blood, and elders are made overseers by the Holy Spirit to shepherd and guard it against false teachers. Teach the preciousness of the blood-bought church, the work of elders as shepherds and overseers, and the duty to guard the flock. Teach also the first-day worship pattern (20:7), the whole counsel of God (20:27), and the resurrection hope.

Yet aim at the heart. This passage calls students to treasure the Lord's Day assembly and the Lord's Supper, to welcome all of God's word, to pray the will of the Lord be done even when it costs them, to anchor their hope in the resurrection, and to love and guard the blood-bought church. Help them become surrendered, well-taught, hope-filled members of Christ's church.

Question 1

Student Question:

Luke notes that on the first day of the week the disciples gathered together to break bread, and Paul taught them (v. 20:7). What does this verse reveal about the pattern of the early church's worship, and why is the first day of the week significant?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This verse gives us a clear window into the worship pattern of the early church. On the first day of the week the disciples came together to break bread, and Paul preached to them. The phrase to break bread here, in the context of the gathered assembly, centrally refers to the Lord's Supper, the central act of their worship.

Notice the day: the first day of the week, which is Sunday, the day of Christ's resurrection. This was the regular day on which Christians gathered. Paul also instructed the Corinthians to take up their collection on the first day of every week (1 Corinthians 16:2), and John refers to it as the

Lord's Day (Revelation 1:10). The first day of the week was the appointed day for Christian assembly and worship.

This shows the apostolic pattern that guides the church still. Christians gather on the first day of the week to worship, and the Lord's Supper is a central part of that gathering, observed each week as they came together to break bread. This is not an arbitrary tradition but the pattern revealed in the New Testament for the worship of the Lord's people.

Help students value this pattern. The Lord's Day is significant because it is the day our Lord rose, the day His people have gathered from the beginning to remember Him in the breaking of bread and to worship together. To gather faithfully on the first day of the week and to partake of the Lord's Supper is to follow the apostolic pattern and to keep the resurrection of Christ central in the rhythm of our lives.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The first day of the week as the day of Christian assembly (v. 20:7)
- The breaking of bread (the Lord's Supper) central to the gathering
- The first day linked to Christ's resurrection (the Lord's Day, Revelation 1:10)
- Giving on the first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:2)
- The apostolic pattern guiding the church's worship

Discussion Prompts

- What does this verse reveal about the early church's pattern of worship?
- Why is the first day of the week significant for Christians?
- What place did the Lord's Supper have in the gathering?

Question 2

Student Question:

The early Christians gathered on the first day of the week to worship and break bread together (v. 20:7). How do you regard the weekly gathering of the saints and the Lord's Supper? Is it a priority and a delight, or has it become routine or optional?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The early church's faithful gathering on the first day of the week invites us to examine our own commitment to the assembly and the Lord's Supper. For them, gathering to break bread was central, not optional. How do we regard it?

Invite honest reflection. Is the weekly gathering of the saints a priority and a delight for me, or has it become a routine I go through, or an option I take or leave depending on my schedule, mood, or convenience? The way we treat the assembly reveals much about our hearts toward Christ and His people.

The New Testament treats the gathering as essential, not optional. We are not to neglect meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but to encourage one another, all the more as we see the Day drawing near (Hebrews 10:24-25). The assembly is where we worship, remember Christ in the Supper, encourage one another, and are built up. To neglect it is to forsake something vital.

Encourage students to recover a love for the gathering. The Lord's Supper especially is a precious appointment with the crucified and risen Lord, not a ritual to endure. Consider how you might come to the assembly with greater anticipation, engagement, and devotion, treasuring the weekly opportunity to worship with the saints and remember the Lord, rather than treating it as routine or optional.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The weekly assembly as a priority, not an option
- Not neglecting to meet together (Hebrews 10:24-25)
- The Lord's Supper as a precious appointment with Christ
- The assembly as a place of worship, remembrance, and encouragement

Discussion Prompts

- How do you regard the weekly gathering and the Lord's Supper?
- Has it become a delight, a routine, or an option for you?
- How could you come to the assembly with greater devotion?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul told the Ephesian elders that he did not shrink from declaring to them the whole counsel of God (v. 20:27). What does it mean to declare the whole counsel of God, and why is it important not to leave out the hard or unpopular parts of His word?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul could say with a clear conscience that he had not shrunk from declaring the whole counsel of God. He had not picked and chosen, preaching only the comfortable or popular parts while avoiding the rest. He had faithfully taught everything God revealed, including the hard truths.

To declare the whole counsel of God means to teach the full message of Scripture, not a selective, edited version. It includes the comforting truths of grace and love, and also the confronting truths of sin, judgment, repentance, holiness, and the cost of discipleship. It includes the parts people love to hear and the parts they resist.

Why is this so important? Because people need all of God's truth, not just the palatable portions. A partial gospel produces a distorted faith. To leave out the hard parts, judgment, the

call to repentance, the demands of discipleship, the warnings against sin, is to deceive people and to fail in our responsibility before God. Paul declared himself innocent of the blood of all because he held nothing back (Acts 20:26-27).

Help students value this both in those who teach and in themselves as hearers. Faithful teaching declares the whole counsel of God, even when it is unpopular. And faithful hearing receives the whole counsel of God, welcoming the convicting and demanding truths alongside the comforting ones. A church and a believer grounded in the whole counsel of God are protected and built up; those fed a selective, comfortable message are left vulnerable and immature.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Declaring the whole counsel of God, not a selective message (v. 20:27)
- Including the confronting truths alongside the comforting ones
- A partial gospel producing a distorted faith
- Faithful teaching holding nothing back (Acts 20:26)
- Faithful hearing welcoming the whole word

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to declare the whole counsel of God?
- Why is it important not to leave out the hard parts of His word?
- What does a partial or selective gospel produce in people?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul faithfully taught all of God's word, including the parts people did not want to hear (v. 20:27). Do you welcome the whole counsel of God, including the convicting and demanding parts, or do you tend to embrace the comfortable truths and avoid the rest? Where is God's word challenging you right now?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Just as teachers can be selective in what they preach, hearers can be selective in what they receive. We are tempted to embrace the parts of God's word that comfort and affirm us while quietly avoiding the parts that convict and demand change.

Invite honest reflection. Do I welcome the whole counsel of God, or do I have a canon within the canon, the truths I gladly receive and the ones I sidestep? Do I love the promises of grace but avoid the calls to repentance, holiness, sacrifice, and obedience? A selective hearing leaves us comfortable but unchanged.

The whole counsel of God is for our good, including the hard parts. The truths that convict and demand are not God's harshness but His love, calling us to repentance, holiness, and life. To

avoid them is to refuse the very medicine that would heal us. The mature believer welcomes the convicting word as well as the comforting one.

Encourage students to identify where God's word is currently challenging them. Where is a truth I have been avoiding because it convicts or demands too much? The faithful response is not to sidestep it but to receive it, submit to it, and let it do its work. To welcome the whole counsel of God, including its hard edges, is to be shaped fully by the One who gave it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Selective hearing that avoids convicting truths
- The whole counsel of God given for our good
- Convicting truths as God's love, not harshness
- Mature faith welcoming the demanding word

Discussion Prompts

- Do you welcome the whole counsel of God or embrace only the comfortable parts?
- What truth have you been avoiding because it convicts or demands too much?
- Where is God's word challenging you right now?

Question 5

Student Question:

Though warned repeatedly of suffering ahead, Paul pressed on, and the believers finally said, the will of the Lord be done (vv. 21:11-14). What does this teach about surrendering our will to God's, even when His will may involve suffering?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

As Paul journeyed toward Jerusalem, warning after warning came that suffering awaited him. The believers, out of love, begged him not to go. But Paul was resolved, ready even to die for the name of the Lord Jesus, and when they could not dissuade him, they surrendered: the will of the Lord be done.

This teaches profound submission to God's will, even when that will involves suffering. Both Paul and the believers came to the same place of surrender. Paul did not seek suffering, but he would not avoid God's will to escape it. The believers did not want Paul to suffer, but they yielded their desire to God's purpose.

These words echo the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane: not my will, but yours, be done (Luke 22:42). True surrender means wanting God's will more than our own comfort or safety, and trusting that His will is good even when it leads through suffering. This is the heart of discipleship, following a Lord who Himself surrendered to the Father's will at the cross.

Help students see that such surrender is costly and mature. It is easy to pray the will of the Lord be done when His will aligns with ours; it is hard when His will may bring suffering or loss. Yet this is the surrender to which we are called, trusting that the God whose will we yield to is wise, good, and loving, and that His purposes are worth whatever they cost.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Surrender to God's will even when it involves suffering (vv. 21:13-14)
- Wanting God's will above our comfort or safety
- Echoing Jesus' surrender in Gethsemane (Luke 22:42)
- Trusting that God's will is good even through suffering

Discussion Prompts

- What does this teach about surrendering our will to God's?
- Why is it harder to pray the will of the Lord be done when it may cost us?
- How does Jesus' own surrender shape our willingness to yield?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul held his own safety loosely, ready to suffer or die for the name of the Lord Jesus (v. 21:13). What would it look like for you to hold your safety, comfort, or plans more loosely for Christ? Where is God calling you to pray, sincerely, the will of the Lord be done?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul's readiness to suffer or die for Christ confronts our instinct to protect ourselves above all. We naturally cling to our safety, comfort, and plans, and we resist anything that threatens them. Paul held these loosely because something, Someone, mattered more.

Invite honest reflection. What am I gripping tightly, my safety, my comfort, my plans, my control over my future? Where does my desire to protect these keep me from fully surrendering to God's will? We all have areas where the prayer the will of the Lord be done sticks in our throats.

Holding these things loosely does not mean being reckless or indifferent to wisdom, but refusing to let self-protection override obedience to God. It means a settled willingness to follow Christ wherever He leads, even into difficulty, trusting that He is worth it and that His will is good.

Encourage students to identify a specific area and to pray the will of the Lord be done over it, sincerely. Perhaps it is a fear about the future, a plan they are clutching, a comfort they are unwilling to risk, a safety they are reluctant to surrender. Where is God calling you to loosen your grip and entrust yourself to His good will, as Paul did?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Holding safety, comfort, and plans loosely for Christ
- Refusing to let self-protection override obedience
- Settled willingness to follow Christ wherever He leads
- Sincere surrender to God's good will

Discussion Prompts

- What are you gripping tightly that God may be calling you to hold loosely?
- Where does self-protection keep you from fully surrendering?
- Where is God calling you to pray, sincerely, the will of the Lord be done?

Question 7

Student Question:

Before the Sanhedrin Paul declared, it is with respect to the hope and resurrection of the dead that I am on trial (v. 23:6), and the Lord then stood by him, promising he would testify in Rome (v. 23:11). What does this teach about the centrality of the resurrection hope and about God's sustaining presence with His servants?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul identified the heart of the matter: it is with respect to the hope and resurrection of the dead that I am on trial. Again and again in his defenses, Paul returns to the resurrection as the central issue (Acts 23:6; 24:15, 21; 26:6-8). The Christian faith stands or falls on the resurrection, of Christ and, through Him, of all His people.

This teaches the centrality of the resurrection hope. The gospel is not merely about forgiveness for this life but about the conquest of death and the hope of eternal life. Because Christ is risen, those who belong to Him will be raised; this hope is the anchor of the soul. Paul was willing to suffer and die precisely because he believed in the resurrection; the hope of being raised made him fearless.

It also teaches God's sustaining presence with His servants. That night, after a chaotic and dangerous day, the Lord stood by Paul and said, take courage, for as you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome. God did not remove the danger, but He assured Paul of His presence and His purpose. Paul would reach Rome; his work was not finished.

Help students draw both truths together. The resurrection hope makes us courageous, for death is not the end and our future is secure in Christ. And God's sustaining presence steadies us, for He is with us and will accomplish His purposes through us. Paul faced mobs, plots, and trials anchored by the resurrection hope and the presence of the Lord, and the same hope and presence are ours.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The resurrection as the central Christian hope (v. 23:6; 24:15)
- The faith standing or falling on the resurrection
- The resurrection hope producing courage in the face of death
- God's sustaining presence with His servants (v. 23:11)
- God assuring His purpose even amid danger

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul make the resurrection the central issue of his defense?
- How does the resurrection hope produce courage?
- How did God sustain Paul, and how does He sustain His servants today?

Question 8

Student Question:

The Lord stood by Paul in danger and assured him of His purpose, and even a murderous plot could not stop God's plan (vv. 23:11-22). When you face danger, uncertainty, or opposition, how do you draw courage from God's presence and purpose? Where do you need that courage now?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul faced real danger, a violent mob, a fractured trial, and forty men sworn to kill him, yet he was steadied by the Lord's presence and purpose. And God's providence foiled the plot through the unlikely means of Paul's young nephew. God was sovereignly bringing Paul to Rome, and nothing could stop it.

We face our own dangers, uncertainties, and oppositions, though usually less dramatic. In them, we are tempted to fear, to despair, or to feel that everything is out of control. Paul's example shows a better way: to draw courage from God's presence with us and His purpose for us.

Invite reflection. When I face danger, uncertainty, or opposition, where do I turn? Do I draw courage from God's presence and purpose, or am I ruled by fear? Remembering that the Lord stands by us, that He has purposes for us yet to fulfill, and that no plot or power can finally thwart His plan can steady us in the hardest moments.

Encourage students to bring a current situation to this truth. Where do I need courage right now, in a danger, an uncertainty, an opposition? The same Lord who stood by Paul stands by His people, works His purposes through and around every obstacle, and can be trusted to bring us safely through to the end He intends. Take courage; He is with you.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Drawing courage from God's presence and purpose

- God's providence overruling even murderous plots (vv. 23:12-22)
- No power able to thwart God's plan for His servants
- Courage in danger grounded in the sovereign, present God

Discussion Prompts

- How do you draw courage from God's presence and purpose in danger?
- Where are you tempted to be ruled by fear instead?
- Where do you need that courage right now?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul charged the Ephesian elders to care for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood, and to guard it against fierce wolves (vv. 20:28-31). What does this teach about the preciousness of the church, the work of elders, and the duty to protect the flock from false teaching?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it is one of the most precious passages in the New Testament concerning the church and its shepherds. Paul charges the Ephesian elders, and through them us, with truths about what the church is, who its shepherds are, and how the flock must be guarded.

First, the preciousness of the church. Paul calls it the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. The church is not a human institution or a mere voluntary society; it is God's own, purchased at the infinite cost of the blood of Christ. There is nothing more valuable on earth, for the church was bought with the very life of the Son of God. This shapes how we regard the church: not casually or consumeristically, but with reverence and love, as the blood-bought people of God. To despise or neglect the church is to despise what Christ died to obtain.

Second, the work of elders. Paul addresses the elders (presbyteroi) and says the Holy Spirit made them overseers (episkopoi, bishops), to care for (literally, to shepherd, poimaino, the work of a pastor) the church. Notice that elders, overseers, and shepherds (pastors) are three terms for the same office and men. There is no separate clergy class above them; the New Testament knows one office of mature, qualified men who shepherd each congregation. Their work is to feed, lead, protect, and care for the flock, watching over souls as those who will give an account (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-4). And it is the Holy Spirit who, through the qualifications and process He revealed, makes them overseers; the office is God's design, not a human invention.

Third, the duty to guard the flock. Paul warns that fierce wolves will come, not sparing the flock, and that even from among the elders themselves men will arise speaking twisted things to draw

away disciples. This is sobering. False teaching is a real and deadly danger, and a chief duty of elders is to guard the flock against it, by holding fast the word, refuting error, and protecting the sheep. The church must be vigilant, for the danger comes both from outside and, tragically, sometimes from within. Paul's remedy is to commend them to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build them up (v. 32). The word of God is the great safeguard against the wolves.

Help students take this to heart in several ways. Treasure the church as the blood-bought people of God, and never treat it lightly. Honor, support, and pray for the elders God has given to shepherd the flock, and submit to their godly oversight. Be alert to false teaching, testing all things by the word, and value sound doctrine as protection for your soul. And whether or not one ever serves as an elder, share in the duty to guard the truth and care for one another, so that the church Christ bought with His blood is kept faithful and safe. There is no higher trust than the care of the flock of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The church as God's own, obtained with His own blood (v. 20:28)
- The infinite preciousness of the blood-bought church
- Elders, overseers, and shepherds (pastors) as one office and men
- The Holy Spirit making elders overseers; the office God's design
- Elders shepherding, feeding, leading, and guarding the flock (1 Peter 5:1-4; Hebrews 13:17)
- The danger of false teachers (wolves) from without and within (vv. 29-30)
- The word of God's grace as the safeguard that builds up (v. 32)

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that the church was obtained with God's own blood?
- How does this passage describe the office and work of elders?
- Why is guarding the flock against false teaching so vital, and how is it done?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back over this whole passage, the gathered worship, the whole counsel of God, the surrender to God's will, and the blood-bought church, name one specific way the Lord is calling you to grow, in devotion to His church, surrender to His will, or courage in His purpose, and what is one step you will take this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone draws the lesson to a personal response. Acts 20-23 calls us to treasure the gathered worship and the Lord's Supper, to welcome the whole counsel of God, to surrender

our will to His even unto suffering, to anchor our hope in the resurrection, and to love and guard the church Christ bought with His blood.

Invite each person to name one concrete step. Perhaps it is to recommit to the weekly assembly, to receive a hard truth they have been avoiding, to pray the will of the Lord be done over a costly area, to draw courage from God's presence, or to love and support the church and its shepherds more fully. Paul also reminds us it is more blessed to give than to receive (v. 20:35); perhaps the step is a fresh act of generosity.

Keep the focus on the blood-bought church and the surrendered life. Paul poured out his life for the church and for Christ's purposes, holding nothing back. Transformation looks like that same surrender and love.

Close by reminding students that the same Lord who stood by Paul, shepherds His blood-bought church, and accomplishes His purposes through every danger is at work in them, calling them to surrendered, courageous, church-loving lives.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal response to worship, the word, surrender, and the church
- Devotion to the blood-bought church and its shepherds
- Surrender to God's will and courage in His purpose
- The blessedness of giving (v. 20:35)

Discussion Prompts

- What most challenged or moved you in this passage?
- What specific step toward devotion, surrender, or courage will you take?
- How can this group encourage and pray for you?