

PAUL

A MAN OF GRACE AND GRIT

STUDY SEVENTEEN

Thinking as Paul Thought

Selections from Acts 21–23

The apostle Paul is able to gather up what he truly believes, and, before audiences who were either hostile or ignorant, to set forth the truth in plain, straight thinking.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

JULY 16, 1999, proved a fateful day for the tragedy-stricken Kennedy family.

Decades after the assassinations of his father, John F. Kennedy, and his uncle Robert F. Kennedy, pilot John F. Kennedy Jr., along with his wife and sister-in-law, died in a Piper Saratoga plane crash off the coast of Martha's Vineyard. The official investigation determined that the probable cause of the crash was pilot error, specifically spatial disorientation.

The reduced visibility of a hazy night sky, with Kennedy likely depending upon his sight for orientation and direction, proved deadly. Had Kennedy been qualified to fly his Piper by “instrumentation only,” he would have flown by the failsafe authority of a navigational system and would have safely landed in Martha's Vineyard.

In the spiritual realm, we need the objective “navigational authority” of God's Word to find our way through the haze of cultural opinions and false religions. We can't always depend on our subjective experience to keep us on the right course.

The apostle Paul was a straight thinker. He relied on and reasoned solely from the Scriptures. That method served him well when his enemies attacked him and the gospel. In this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study, we consider Paul's able thinking as he defended himself and proclaimed Christ in the face of sham charges and kangaroo courts.



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Paul mastered and modeled straight thinking—the ability to thoroughly reason from the Scriptures. As you prepare to engage God’s Word today, ask the Lord to help you think “about things that are excellent and worthy of praise” (Philippians 4:8) by “renewing your mind” (Romans 12:2 NASB). Here’s space to write your prayer.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

We join Paul after his tearful goodbye to the elders of the church at Ephesus and “hurrying to get to Jerusalem . . . in time for the Festival of Pentecost” (Acts 20:16). He and his team had completed their third missionary journey, founding churches throughout Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia. To refresh your learning, revisit these areas in your Bible map or the online map, “*Paul’s Missionary Journeys*” at insight.org.

Upon returning to Jerusalem, Luke, who traveled with Paul, recorded that Paul was warmly welcomed by James, the elders, and the Jerusalem church. They praised God when they heard about gentiles coming to Christ through Paul’s ministry. “Many thousands of Jews have also believed,” they told Paul (21:20). But they warned Paul about malicious rumors that he was teaching all Jews to forsake the law of Moses. What instructions did the Jerusalem elders give Paul to counter the false accusations, according to [Acts 21:23–24](#)?

Paul’s peaceful visit to the temple turned tumultuous, however, and would end with Paul in chains once again. Let’s see what happened.



Observation and Interpretation: Paul . . . A Ready Apologist

Use your observation and interpretation skills in the charts below.¹ For interpretation, use your Bible-study resources like *Constable’s Notes* (netbible.org), *IVP New Testament Commentary on Acts* (biblegateway.com), *Bible maps* (insight.org/maps) and the *Holman Bible Dictionary* (studylight.org). Also, in case you don’t have a copy in your library, be sure to grab Pastor Chuck’s commentary *Insights on Acts* at insight.org/store.

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A Temple Beating, Arrest, and Mistaken Identity

Acts 21:27–40

In the temple, Paul encountered danger, beating, arrest, and a case of mistaken identity.



Observation

Read Acts 21:27–32. What do you observe about the mob mentality and its actions?

Read 21:33–38. Record your observations about the commander's investigative procedure. What assumptions did he make?

Read 21:39–40. Given what Paul just experienced, what do you note about his composure?



Interpretation

In Acts 21:27–32, with a lack of clear thinking and speculation rampant, what could have happened had someone not intervened? Of what would they have been guilty?

In 21:36, the crowd shouting for Paul's death is reminiscent of what incident from the gospels? What parallel can you draw?

In 21:39–40, how did Paul demonstrate clarity, courage, and compassion?

These are not just people who disagree with him intellectually or on a few points of theology. These are people who have murder on their mind.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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Paul's Defense Before the Temple Mob . . . And a Roman Reminder

Acts 22:1–29

Paul presented a courageous defense and reminded his captors of an important truth.



Observation

In Acts 22:1–20, what was Paul's approach for connecting with his Jewish audience and presenting Jesus as Savior?

Read 22:24–29. What assumption did the Roman commander make about Paul's innocence or guilt?

What did Paul remind the commander?



Interpretation


In Acts 22:21–23, as the Jewish crowd listened intently to Paul, what provoked them to rage? Why was that provocation inflammatory?

In 22:24–29, through both his timing and his words, how did Paul demonstrate clear thinking?

This man is now messing around with gentiles. We don't talk to gentiles. We don't relate to gentiles. We don't live among gentiles. And now he's trying to reach the gentiles. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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Selections from Acts 21–23

Paul's Defense Before the Sanhedrin <i>Acts 22:30–23:10</i> Paul presented a clever defense before rival groups of the Sanhedrin.	
 Observation	 Interpretation
<p>In Acts 23:1–5, what was Paul's approach and retort before the Sanhedrin, and how did it backfire?</p> <p>In 23:6–10, Paul cleverly changed his approach. Describe his tactic. What ensued?</p>	<p>How did Paul's apology in Acts 23:5 demonstrate quick thinking and theological insight?</p> <p>With wit, in 23:6–10, Paul turned the trial into a theological debate between two rival groups, the <i>Sadducees</i> and the <i>Pharisees</i>. Read about the differences between these groups in the free, online <i>Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology</i> at studylight.org.</p> <p>In a few sentences, what did each sect believe?</p> <p>How did Paul's move force an end to his trial?</p>

Paul just let them battle it out. The Roman commander, who wasn't allowed to come inside, was waiting outside and heard the uproar. He went to get Paul, and he brought him out. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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The Plot to Kill Paul . . . And an Unlikely Hero <i>Acts 23:11–18, 22–24, 31–33</i> A Jewish mob plotted to kill Paul, but God intervened and delivered him safely to Caesarea.	
 Observation	 Interpretation
Read Acts 23:11–18. Record your observations about the murder plot and how it was foiled.	How does the promise in 23:11 convey the central theme of Acts and God’s sovereignty?
Read 23:22–24, 31–33. What did the commander do?	Where else in this passage do you find God’s sovereign hand of protection and deliverance, and how does that fulfill the promise of 23:11?

The Lord is in charge of this man’s life. You wouldn’t know it if you just looked around for the evidence. But Paul knows it. He knows he has the Lord’s word to count on. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Always Be Ready

In [1 Peter 3:15](#), the apostle Peter succinctly penned what Paul aptly displayed. Read this verse in both the NLT and the NASB.

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Peter used the Greek word *apologia*, meaning “to have or to make a defense.” This is quite different from the common English language usage of the word *apology*, meaning “to admit or to confess a wrong.” Try writing your own paraphrase of 1 Peter 3:15, noting what it means to defend “the hope that is in you” (NASB).

Paul’s hope was rooted in the resurrection of Christ—which guarantees our resurrection. Paul consistently talked about the resurrection when he defended his faith (*Acts 23:6; 24:15; 26:8, 23*). How is your hope tied to Christ’s resurrection? What would you say to someone who asks about your hope as a believer?

When it looks like the bottom has dropped out and there is no way we’re going to make it, the Lord intervenes, and we realize we’re exactly where He wants us.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Thinking and Trusting like Paul

Paul ably prepared himself with gospel truth—then entrusted himself fully to the Lord. God promised Paul He would use him in Rome, so He put a shield around Paul to get him there. In the end, God always wins. Because we’re in His family, no matter how dire our situation, we win too. Clear thinking anticipates that He will deliver us.

Reflect on Paul’s responses from our study: his outreach to the Jewish mob, his defense before the Roman commander, and his defense before the Sanhedrin. Which response most encourages you? Why? What did you learn that you can apply in trials or difficult situations?

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How prepared are you to apply the words of 1 Peter 3:15 NASB, “to make a defense” of the faith? What are your strengths? What needs shoring up?

You are never out of God’s hand as God’s child. You feel alone. You are mistreated. You are misunderstood. Your life is disrupted. The Lord is in our midst. He has a plan. He is working it out. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, I need the kind of straight-thinking confidence and faith that rests in the promises of Your Word. I pray that I will return to them often and confidently and rely on You to get me through the tough times. Deepen my confidence in You, dear Lord, and my trust, even when I cannot see where You are leading me. I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page, “[How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?](#)”

For the 2025 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Marshall F. Davis in collaboration with Aaron Massey, senior vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, and Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll’s messages. Copyright © 2001, 2025 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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