



# Central Peninsula Church

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Acts 21:1-14

Justin Buzzard

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## Identity Crisis

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

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**“And when we had parted from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos, and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. When we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload its cargo. And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home. When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, ‘Thus says the Holy Spirit, “This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.”’ When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, ‘What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.’ And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, ‘Let the will of the Lord be done’” (Acts 21:1-14).**

We’re in the book of Acts this morning and what we’ve been trying to keep in mind throughout this sermon series is that the book of Acts is history that’s written for a purpose, history that’s meant to make a difference in our lives. Often you and I approach the

subject of history—many of us began doing this in 5th grade when we got our first history textbook—only to memorize a few very old facts and dates and names in order to get a passing grade on a test. Most of us didn’t memorize the Gettysburg Address and then find ourselves living changed lives. But Luke, the author of the book of Acts, has given us a history book that’s designed to change our lives.

If you’ve been paying attention to this 10-year-long sermon series in Acts (in London, Martyn Lloyd Jones, one of greatest preachers of all time, spent 12 years preaching through the book of Romans), one thing in particular should’ve jumped out at you in the text that Tammy read for us. In today’s 14 verses I think Luke meant for one verse in particular to grab us and make a difference in our lives.

There’s a number of things going on here in Acts 21. Many different details and names and places show up in this story as the apostle Paul brings his third missionary journey to a close and travels back to Jerusalem. If you were taking a pop quiz after my lecture today, you’d want to know the basic facts of this historical episode, that Paul makes three brief stops: Cos, Rhodes, and Patara; he makes three extended stops where he visits with believers in Tyre, Ptolemais, and Caesarea; and along the way Paul receives two warnings about his trip to Jerusalem: first from the believers in Tyre who actually tell Paul not to go to Jerusalem, and then a second, more dramatic warning from a prophet in Caesarea who simply tells Paul what will happen to him when he does go to Jerusalem.

But I think the main piece of history that Luke wants to have grip us and change us is the one verse in today’s passage where Paul speaks. Paul doesn’t say a word in this whole passage until verse 13 where he gives us a speech. This speech is only two sentences long. It’s much shorter than Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. It’s delivered to a far smaller crowd. But I think Luke recorded this ancient, two-sentence speech in order to change us. Here’s the speech: “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (v.13).

What should stand out to us about this speech is the fact that Paul’s the one giving it! This is the man who

we first met back in Acts 7, and there Luke gave us a very different, very negative first impression of Paul. As you read through Acts what you first learn about Paul, about who he is, about his identity, is that he's a dangerous man who persecutes, imprisons, who even kills people who are associated with the name of the Lord Jesus. When we first met Paul he was giving speeches against the name of the Lord Jesus, not speeches for his name. Paul's the bad guy in the book of Acts! Paul's like the shadowy character you meet a few chapters into the novel, a few scenes into the movie, the antagonist, the bad guy—the guy you want to steer clear of.

But that was 20 years ago. Paul's changed. The bad guy has become a good guy. He's got a whole new identity. Now, Paul's got not just a new identity, now he's got this firm, unshakable identity that holds together under stressful circumstances (hearing that intense suffering is coming his way) and difficult relationship dynamics (saying goodbye to dear friends and having some of his closest friends discourage him from doing what he believes he's supposed to do with his life).

Somewhere between Acts 7 and this speech in Acts 21, this man got a new, unshakable identity. Somewhere between, probably, his twenties and his forties, Paul went through an identity crisis and came out the other side with an unshakable identity. Read Acts 7-21 in one sitting and you'll see what a radical transformation Paul went through.

What did this do to Paul? Well, he tells us in his speech. The name of the Lord Jesus did this to him. It was the name of the Lord Jesus that first disrupted, and then transformed, the core of Paul's identity—his sense of self, his whole sense of who he was and what he was living for. We see this over and over again in the Scriptures, that to truly encounter the name of the Lord is to have your whole sense of self threatened—to experience an identity crisis. Abraham and Moses and Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman at the well, Paul, and countless others, they all went through this.

For them and for us, to encounter the name of the Lord, to truly encounter Jesus, is to be slammed by a tornado of questions that throw into crisis the very core of our identity:

Who am I?

What am I doing with my life?

What's special and unique about me?

What am I living for?

Today, most of us don't need Jesus in order to have an identity crisis. Let me just state the obvious: whether or not you've ever had an encounter with Jesus, this morning most of you are already going through

your own private little identity crisis. You were born with an identity crisis! We live in an age of identity crisis; everybody's having an identity crisis. Philosophers, psychologists, and social commentators agree, *the* question of our age is, "Who am I?" These days it seems that nobody really knows who they are. Thirty years ago, this is how sociologist Peter Berger described college. He called American universities "vast identity workshops," places where "for four years or less students sit under the trees with their shoes off and engage in the not so arduous task of finding out who they really are." Most of us already spent four years with our shoes off in college, some of you spent five or six years in college, and most of us still don't know who we really are. The identity crisis continues.

Do you know who you are? Who are you? Where do you get your identity from? Do you have an unshakable identity like Paul? Even though today, in our insecure American culture, we don't need Jesus to initiate an identity crisis for us, what we see in this text is that we need an encounter with the name of the Lord Jesus if we're ever going to resolve our identity crisis. If you want an answer to the great "Who am I?" question, you need to come to terms with the name of the Lord Jesus. The name of Jesus is the only name that's big enough to solve your identity crisis. Today's text is about the name of the Lord Jesus and what it does to our identity. Today's text tells us what the name of the Lord Jesus gives us. It gives us three things: a new name, a new passion, and a new security.

### **I. A New Name**

First, this passage shows us that the name of the Lord Jesus gives us a new name. Paul, this man with the unshakable identity, is a man with a new name. When we first met Paul back in Acts 7, he went by a different name: Saul, Saul of Tarsus, Saul the Persecutor of Christians. When people saw this man named Saul in the town square, when villagers thought about or talked about or gossiped about this man named Saul, they thought of a persecutor, a man whose whole identity was bound up with persecuting Christians. You hear the name "Osama Bin Laden" and you immediately think "terrorist." In the 1st century, if you lived near Jerusalem, you heard the name "Saul of Tarsus" and you immediately thought "terrorist of Christians," "Persecutor."

But because of an encounter with the name of the Lord Jesus, Saul got a new name. Saul became Paul. Saul the Persecutor became Paul the Preacher. Saul is now named Paul—Paul, the man

who gives this emotional public speech about his devotion to Jesus.

Well, so what? What's the big deal about a name change? What does a new name have to do with identity? Saul, Paul, it's all the same? In the midst of trying to figure out our identity in college, didn't Shakespeare teach us that a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet?

That's not how the authors of Scripture understood the significance of a name. Names are extremely important in the Bible. Throughout Scripture we see that a name wasn't just an arbitrary collection of syllables. A name expressed the very essence of a person. To know somebody's name was to know something about the fundamental nature and traits of that person. This is why throughout the Bible, people were given new names when they experienced a significant change in their identity or circumstances. Abram (exalted father) became Abraham (father of a multitude) when the time came near for God to give him his promised son, Isaac. After spending years living in a distant land, when Jacob finally returned home, God gave him the new name, Israel. Jesus gave Simon the new name Peter (Rock) when he made him his disciple.

The giving and receiving of a name was a big deal in the cultures the Bible was originally addressed to. In the garden of Eden, Adam's job was to name, to give a unique identity to all the animals. One of the 10 commandments stresses the importance of honoring and not misusing a name. God told his people Israel, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain," because just to speak God's name was to address and access the very identity and character of God.

Now, you're thinking: this was just the ancient, superstitious cultures of the Bible, names meant something then, they don't mean anything now. Really?

Names still carry great power in our culture. Today's the Super Bowl. Today, thousands of Americans will chant the *name* of their favorite team and they'll chant the *names* of their favorite players. You can't chant an identity, you can only chant a name that encapsulates an identity. The great new crime of the 21st century is, what? Identity Theft. If you can steal someone's name and some of their important numbers, you can take away their identity. It's an election year and in two days it's Super Tuesday. What *name* are you going to vote for on Tuesday?

And it's still true in our culture that if you're going to re-invent yourself, if you want to adopt a new identity, you need a new name. Some people spend thousands of dollars to do this. This is why:

Norma Jean Mortenson became Marilyn Monroe. It's difficult to be famous with a name like Norma

Jean Mortenson.

Lawrence Harvey Zeigler became Larry King. You'll watch "Larry King Live," but you wouldn't watch "Lawrence Zeigler Live."

Demetria Guyness became Demi Moore.

Gordon Matthew Sumner became Sting. You'll go to a Sting concert, but not a Gordon Sumner concert.

Marian Michael Morrison became John Wayne. You can't be a cowboy and be named "Marian."

Names still have power today. Names still cut to the core of our identity, just like in the 1st century, when a man named Saul became a man named Paul. It's only because Paul's got this new name, this new identity, that Paul can face the guilt and shame of his past. That's what verses 8 & 9 show us.

One of the most important things to keep in mind when reading biblical narrative—that's what today's passage is, a historical narrative, a story—is to realize that the biblical writers, both those who wrote Hebrew narrative in the Old Testament and Greek narrative in the New Testament, is that they wrote in a very economical style. They didn't use a lot of extra words like many writers do today. The biblical writers wrote in a concise fashion where every detail that does show up in the story carries importance.

So, at first glance, verses 8 & 9 seem a little out of place. We haven't been given the names of any of the other believers Paul's been spending time with, but now the text tells us that Paul "entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him." Who's Philip? And why does the text tell us that Paul entered Philip's house and stayed with him?

We first heard about Philip in Acts 6. He was one of the original seven who was set aside with Stephen and the others to be a deacon in the church. The next chapter, chapter 7, is the story of where Stephen becomes the first Christian martyr. He's dragged out by the religious leaders and he's stoned and the apostle Paul (he's Saul back then) is presiding over this execution. Paul is sitting there watching Stephen get stoned. Philip is probably there, too, watching that scene. Paul leads a persecution in Jerusalem and he forces Christians to become refugees and to have to flee Jerusalem. Philip had to leave his home. The last we heard of him in Acts 8 he was headed up to Caesarea. Now, 20 years later, Philip has settled in Caesarea and has a family of four unmarried daughters who prophesy. In verses 8 & 9 we see that Paul now faces

his past. He comes face to face with the man whose life he'd torn apart 20 years earlier. Most scholars think that it's from this visit that Luke got his account of what had happened 20 years earlier.

Imagine the guilt and shame Paul felt! Guilt and shame wreak havoc on your identity. Scholar Dick Keyes writes: "Shame shrinks your identity. Recall a time when you felt intense shame. Your whole being seems to be reduced to that one shameful act. Nothing else you have done matters. Only the shameful act sums you up. *That* is who you are."

It's this shameful past of his that Paul had in mind when he wrote in 1 Corinthians 15, "For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. *But* by the grace of God, I am what I am..." The only reason Paul could face Philip was because, by the grace of God, he had a new sense of "I am," a new identity. He wasn't the same man. He wasn't Saul anymore. God had given him a new name.

You have guilt and shame from your past. But you're never going to be able to look your past in the eye like Paul looked Philip in the eye—you're never going to be able to honestly face the guilt and shame in your life and be okay—until you get this new name from Jesus.

What's your name? What do people call you? What do you call yourself? Have you let God name you? Now, I don't think God's going to change your name from Saul to Paul or from Marian Michael Morrison to John Wayne. Maybe he will, but in Scripture, most people didn't receive that kind of a new name. The new name I'm talking about is different.

In Revelation 2:17, Jesus says, "To the one who conquers I will...give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it." What's that mean? I don't know. It means what it says—it means that when you meet Jesus on the other side of death, he's going to give you a new name that makes full sense out of who you are. You'll be fully integrated. The "who am I" questions will come to an end.

If you're a Christian, if you're someone who has repented of your sin and placed your faith in the name of the Lord Jesus, that new name is already yours! You don't know exactly what that white stone is going to say, but you can trust that when God looks at you, when he sees Justin Buzzard or Mike McCollum or Sandy Hughes, or whatever your name is, he knows you completely, he knows your guilt and your shame and your dark past, he knows everything about you, and yet he accepts you. An unshakable identity is found in the reality that God accepts you, that God knows your name, that God has a new name waiting for you.

## II. A New Passion

The second way the name of the Lord Jesus solves

your identity crisis, the second thing the name of the Lord Jesus gives you, is a new passion.

What's a passion? We throw this term around a lot, we tend to admire passionate people, we say "he's so passionate about his career," or "she's so passionate about that new charity she's been working with," or "he's got a passion for surfing, or singing, or acting, or whatever." Everyone of us here has some sort of passion in life—something that you're excited about, some kind of cause or activity that engages your heart, that you're living for.

What are you passionate about?

The apostle Paul used to be a man who had a passion for persecuting people who were associated with the name of Jesus. Now we see from his speech that Paul's got a new passion, a passion for the name of Jesus. Specifically, Paul's got this passion to now serve people who are associated with the name of Jesus.

Let's remember the movement of this whole passage. Paul makes a lot of stops and visits in this passage, but the whole direction of this passage is moving southeast. Where's Paul headed? Jerusalem. Why's Paul headed for Jerusalem? Paul's headed for Jerusalem in order to serve the Christians who live in that city. For quite a while now Paul has been traveling throughout Europe and Asia taking up a collection of money to help serve the poor Christians living in the city of Jerusalem. Paul's doing social justice! Paul's got this passion to now go and serve Christians in the same city where 20 years earlier he had caused tremendous damage.

This new passion gets to the very core of Paul's heart. Listen to what he says in the first line of his speech to his friends who are trying to discourage him from going to Jerusalem: "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart?" Paul's heart is broken. This is the only time in the whole Bible that this word "breaking" appears. The Greek word literally means, "breaking into tiny pieces." Paul's heart is being broken into tiny little pieces over the fact that his friends want to keep him from his God-given passion to serve Jesus and his people.

Paul's actually prepared to suffer, to even die, for this passion. He says, "I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." A passion isn't just something you live for. It's more than that. A real passion is something you're willing to die for. The very word "passion" is tied to suffering and death. We call the last week of Christ's life on earth, "The Passion Week," because it was a week of suffering that led to death.

What are you living for? Do you have a passion that's

worth dying for? Is your passion big enough? Do you have a passion that will keep your identity in tact even when you fail?

Maybe your passion is your career. What happens when you fail in your career, when you mess up, when you fall short, or when your career fails you? Does your identity remain unshaken? Maybe your passion is your beauty, your good looks. What happens when you get old and ugly? When your physical beauty fades, when you can't keep up with that passion anymore? Are you still you? Maybe your passion is bound up in a human relationship: a boyfriend, a girlfriend, a spouse, your kids. What happens when there's conflict in that relationship? What happens when that person hurts you or fails you, what happens when you hurt or fail that person? Does your identity remain secure? Maybe your passion is to be the next American Idol. What happens when Simon tells you that you can't sing? Will you have a breakdown? Most people do.

A passion for the name of the Lord Jesus is the only passion in life that won't fail you when you fail it. Paul's got this great new passion to live for Jesus. And what this specifically looked like in his life is that Paul poured his heart into preaching the gospel and serving God's people, even in a dangerous city like Jerusalem. As you take hold of and begin, deep in your heart, to be driven by a passion for the name of the Lord Jesus, who knows exactly what that might look like. Maybe this passion for Jesus leads you to go about your career differently, to bring a whole new standard of honesty, integrity, and selfless service to the work that you do. Maybe this passion for Jesus leads you to a newfound drive to serve this church or serve your community. However this new passion for the name of Jesus takes specific shape in your life, at times, you're going to fail. Whatever your passion in life, you're going to experience failure.

But when your passion is bound up with the name of Jesus, you can handle failure. Jesus is the only passion, the only person, the only Lord you can live for, who, no matter how badly or how often you fail him, won't fail you: you're still loved and accepted and safe. If you fail Simon Cowell, if you miss a note, he'll make fun of you, you'll be humiliated—your heart will be broken into tiny little pieces for a long time. But if you fail Jesus, if you miss a note, if you sing off-key, he'll keep loving you and you'll be okay. That's the only reason I can preach this sermon. I have a passion for the name of the Lord Jesus. I want to live my life for Jesus. What does that look like for me? I'm a pastor and I have a passion to preach and pray and hang out with people. But what if I fail, what if this sermon bombs? What if I preach this sermon and you decide this wasn't a very

good sermon? I don't like Justin very much. You decide not to give me any compliments after this sermon. What if that happens? That's not very fun. I'll go home and my wife will need to hold me for a little bit! But I'll be ok. When your passion is bound up in the name of Jesus you know he's already lived and died for you. He's already paid for all your sins and weaknesses and failures. His love for us doesn't dip down when our performance dips down. Paul, because he had come to terms with the name of the Lord Jesus, had a passion that was big enough to handle whatever difficulty or failure came his way in Jerusalem. Can your passion do this for you? Do you have a big enough passion? If you don't, you need to do business with the name of the Lord Jesus.

### III. A New Security

The third way the name of the Lord Jesus resolves our identity crisis is he gives us a new security. We're a generation that talks a lot about security, insecurity, and self esteem. Fifteen-year-olds and fifty-year-olds worry about why they're insecure, whether or not they have enough self esteem, where they can get more self esteem and security. We're a generation that does constant self-monitoring. How are you feeling this morning—secure, insecure?

In our text, under great stress and in the midst of a whole series of difficult relationship dynamics, Paul demonstrates the kind of security most of us wish we had. If you remember the sermon from last week, Paul's having this emotional goodbye with his friends in Miletus who he believes he'll never see again because of the sufferings that await him in Jerusalem. And then today's text begins in verse 1 where Paul "parts" from these believers. The Greek literally means, he "tore away" from these friends. He has one of those heart wrenching farewell scenes from the movies.

Then Paul spends seven days with the believers in the city of Tyre. And, verse 4, "through the Spirit" these believers tell Paul, they keep telling Paul, to not go to Jerusalem. A small handful of scholars think this means that Paul actually disobeyed God's will by going to Jerusalem. But most scholars see here that these believers in Tyre simply misapplied a sense they were getting from the Holy Spirit about the fate that awaited Paul in Jerusalem, because in Acts 19:21 Paul had already "resolved *in the Spirit* to...go to Jerusalem." And in Acts 20:22-23, Paul had already said, "behold, I am going to Jerusalem, *constrained by the Spirit*, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the *Holy Spirit* testifies to me in every city that

imprisonment and afflictions await me.”

Paul had this clear direction from the Spirit to go to Jerusalem, and now he's faced with a group of people who are telling him that God has told them he shouldn't go. What does Paul do? He remains secure in the identity and call that God has placed on his life. Remember, it was right in the middle of Paul's identity crisis that God said this about Paul in Acts 9: “he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry *my name* before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer *for the sake of my name*”. Knowing who he was, knowing that his identity was bound up with the name of Jesus, Paul was able to listen to the conflicting counsel of the believers in Tyre, yet remain unfazed and continue towards Jerusalem.

But on his way to Jerusalem another warning comes his way in verses 10 & 11. This prophet named Agabus pays Paul a visit in Caesarea. Agabus is a pretty dramatic, eccentric guy; he's kind of freaky actually. Agabus is kind of like Bushman up in San Francisco; he just startles you. Agabus walks up to Paul, takes off Paul's belt (if it were me, that conversation would've been over right there), binds his own feet and hands with this belt, and says that the Holy Spirit says this is what's going to happen to Paul when Paul goes to Jerusalem. Agabus doesn't tell Paul that he shouldn't go to Jerusalem, he just tells him what will happen to him when he goes to Jerusalem.

Up until this point Paul's closest friends, his traveling companions, Luke and the rest of the guys, have supported Paul's Holy Spirit-inspired plan to go to Jerusalem. But after this whole scene with Agabus, after this strange man took Paul's belt off and tied himself up with it, that pushes these guys over the edge and they start in verse 12 telling Paul to back out of it and not go to Jerusalem.

What would you do? Have you ever been in a situation like this before, where there's a clear call of God on your life, where the Spirit has clearly spoken to you and directed you not contradictory to Scripture? I've had people in my counseling office say that “the Spirit told me to move in with my girlfriend”. The Spirit didn't tell you that; you told yourself that. I'm talking about something that's clearly in line with Scripture and that you've processed with the Lord and others for a long time. You've got this secure sense of who God has called you to be and what he's called you to do, and then some of the people closest to you begin telling you something different, they begin telling you to change course. In a situation like this, most of us turn inward, insecurity floods our veins, our minds race with doubts, all of a sudden we don't know who we are or what we're supposed to do.

But Paul doesn't turn inward. Paul's heart is

broken in pieces, he's torn up inside over all of this, but he remains secure and focused on this call to go to Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. In the midst of this momentary identity crisis, as he's standing on the street corner with Agabus and all his friends who are telling him to not do what God had called him to do, Paul doesn't look inward, he looks outward. He looks at Jesus.

By going to Jerusalem Paul's just following in the footsteps of Jesus. Just a few decades earlier Jesus himself had set his face to go to Jerusalem, except Jesus went to Jerusalem under different circumstances. Jesus set a course for Jerusalem, not under the possibility that death might await him, but for the explicit purpose of going through tremendous suffering, laying down his life, being crucified, to pay for the sins of people like Paul, and his friends, and Agabus, and you, and me.

Along the way, Jesus' friends had also tried to persuade him not to go. Remember? Right after Jesus had revealed his identity to his friend Peter, right after explaining to Peter that he was the Christ, the Son of God, and that he was headed to Jerusalem in order to die, Peter tried to stop Jesus because Peter had his own idea of what the identity of the Son of God ought to look like.

Satan also tried to stop Jesus from going to Jerusalem by attacking his identity. Remember how Satan approached Jesus during his temptation in the wilderness? Satan began two of his three temptations by saying, “if you *really* are the Son of God...”

But Jesus passed the identity test. Jesus' identity remained unshakable despite how his closest friends and his greatest enemy challenged his identity. It's because of the unshakable identity of a man named Jesus who traveled to Jerusalem to die on a cross for a world in identity crisis that Paul had the security to continue his course to Jerusalem and that you can have the security to continue the course before you.

So, how do you get it? How do you access the name of Jesus and get this new security, this new passion, this new name—this unshakable identity? Two ways.