

Acts Chapter 21

The End of Paul's Third Missionary Journey and Paul's Arrival in Jerusalem

Introduction

Acts chapter 21 tells of Paul's visit to Jerusalem, the birthplace of the Church. He brought with him a generous offering of money to support the starving Jewish believers who were in great need. With him came a delegation of seven Gentile converts from various churches in Galatia, Asia and Macedonia. What a magnificent presentation they all made to the leaders of the church of Jerusalem, including James, the half-brother of Jesus Christ the Lord. James was in agony over the tensions that were growing day by day in Jerusalem between the Hebrew Christians and the vast majority of Jews, who to one degree or another hated these Christians and everything they stood for. They rejected the Messiah whom these Jerusalem Christians claimed was Jesus of Nazareth. The whole situation was almost ready to explode.

The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem were very zealous for the law of Moses and they had concerns about Paul and his teaching on the law, which they either misunderstood or misrepresented.

Eventually, certain Jews from Asia stirred up the Jerusalem Jews and accused Paul of being against the Jewish people, against the law of Moses, and against the temple (accusations similar to those once made against Stephen). The Jewish mob ended up capturing Paul and were intending to beat him to death. Paul was rescued just in time by a Roman commander, taken into custody, and at Paul's request he was given permission to speak to the hostile crowd.

Acts 21:1

It was difficult for Paul and his companions to leave the elders of Ephesus: "After we had **torn ourselves away from them**" (Amplified). "So great was the Ephesian elders' love for him that Paul literally had to tear himself away from his sorrowing friends."¹

Paul and his companions were traveling from place to place as Luke recorded their journey with great detail and accuracy. We know Luke was with them, as indicated by the first person plural pronoun "we." "Coos" (KJV) or Cos was an island not far from Miletus, from where they launched. Cos was the home of Hippocrates (born around 460 B.C.) who has been called the "Father of Medicine." He is famous for the Hippocratic Oath which doctors still take to this day.

Rhodes was a larger island along their route. Rhodes was also the name of the chief city on the island of Rhodes. The mention of Rhodes in this verse refers to the city, not to the island. Rhodes was once the home of Colossus, a huge statue in the harbor, standing 108 feet tall. It was a stupendous image

¹John MacArthur Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary—Acts 13-28*, p. 235.

made of bronze. It straddled the entrance to the harbor and large ships in full sail could pass between its legs. It was destroyed by an earthquake two centuries before Paul arrived there, and was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Patara was a town on the coastline of southern Asia (Turkey). The ultimate destination of Paul and his companions was Jerusalem.

Acts 21:2

Their ship was heading to Phoenicia, the narrow coastland stretching along the northeast Mediterranean. They would come to Tyre which was one of the chief cities of Phoenicia.

Acts 21:3

They took a four-hundred-mile shortcut from Asia directly to Phoenicia on the East Mediterranean coast. Along their way they passed the large island of Cyprus on their left, the homeland of Barnabas. Their first stop was in Tyre, a very famous Phoenician city. The Phoenicians had colonies all across the Mediterranean, including the northern part of Africa. These people were Canaanites. Our Lord spoke to a Canaanite woman on one occasion. She was very desperate to get at least crumbs from the table of the Master, and she was therefore blessed by Jesus because of her amazing faith (Matt. 15:21-28). This woman was from this same region of Tyre.

Paul's desire was to be in Jerusalem in time for Pentecost (Acts 20:16). Luke does not specifically state that he arrived before Pentecost, but it seems likely that he did. There were Jews from Asia who had come to Jerusalem (Acts 21:27), and they had probably come for this feast.

Acts 21:4

Here at Tyre they found disciples and they stayed with them for seven days. The verb "find" means to discover by searching. Paul and his team made a diligent search in order to find believers. By application, when we come to a different town or city due to a vacation or business, do we seek out believers and try to meet with them? We can be an encouragement to them and they to us. Since they were there seven days, they were able to break bread with the disciples on the first day of the week (compare Acts 20:6-7).

How did disciples first come to Tyre? In Acts 11 we learned that, due to the martyrdom of Stephen, Hellenistic Jews were expelled from Jerusalem and were scattered abroad all the way across Phoenicia and Cyprus and even up to Antioch. Believers were first called Christians at Antioch (Acts 11:19-21). This whole region up and down the Mediterranean coast had been evangelized by those who were scattered abroad due to the persecution that centered around Stephen. Only the Apostles were allowed to stay in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). One might think that the Apostles would be the first ones forced to move out of Jerusalem, but remarkably they were able to stay. Later, the Apostles did move away from Jerusalem, in God's time. When Paul's delegation of seven representatives of the Gentile churches arrived in Jerusalem with their very generous gifts for the poor, starving, Hebrew Christians, they did not find any Apostles left in Jerusalem. They had all left the city previously. Peter may have gone to Babylon, where he was especially commissioned by the Lord to reach the thousands of Jews who were still residing in that area. The Babylonian Talmud was written from Babylon, and Peter sent greetings from there as he wrote his first epistle (1 Pet.

When Paul and his companions came down to these coastal cities, they found disciples in each city. The disciples in Tyre “said to Paul **through the Spirit**, that he should not go up to Jerusalem.” This was a case where God the Holy Spirit communicated supernaturally to these believers. Some of the believers in this church at Tyre apparently had the gift of prophecy and were able to tell Paul supernaturally what he would face in Jerusalem. Later, another prophet told Paul what would happen to him in Jerusalem (Acts 21:11). None of these warnings persuaded Paul to choose another destination (Acts 21:13-14). Just as our Lord steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem in spite of all that would befall Him there (Luke 9:51), so Paul steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem, in spite of warnings that terrible things would happen to him there. The difference was that our Lord died in Jerusalem; Paul did not, although he was ready to die if need be (Acts 21:13).

The statement in verse 4 that Paul should not go up to Jerusalem is difficult because the Spirit of God was the one communicating to Paul through these prophets. Perhaps the idea is, “Paul, you should not go up to Jerusalem *unless you are ready to be bound and beaten and captured*.” “The meaning evidently is that they said by inspiration of the Spirit that he should not go unless he was willing to encounter danger.”³ Paul indeed was ready (Acts 21:13). Another possibility is that the Spirit through these men made it clear that Paul would face severe difficulties in Jerusalem, and in light of this the believers in Tyre tried to dissuade Paul from going. As Charles Ryrie wrote, “Those who later tried to dissuade him (21:4) did so because they knew through the Spirit what was ahead for him.”⁴ Likewise, George E. Ladd wrote, “We are to understand the several prophetic forecasts not as prohibitions from the Holy Spirit but as forewarnings of what lay ahead.”⁵ These forewarnings would prepare Paul spiritually for the difficulties he would soon encounter.

We should observe that it does not say, “The Spirit said...” but “they said by (or through) the Spirit.” The disciples told Paul that he should not set foot in Jerusalem, not through the flesh or as animated by the flesh, but through the Spirit, in spiritual concern and affection for him and his welfare. Furthermore, they said this as a result of what the Spirit had clearly predicted concerning what lay ahead for Paul (Acts 20:23; 21:11).

As we seek to understand this difficult verse, there are several things to keep in mind. Paul made the decision to go to Jerusalem as we learn from Acts 19:21– “Paul purposed in the spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, After I have been there, I must also see Rome.” His travel plans were clear: first Jerusalem and then Rome. In Acts 20:16 we see

²Some Bible scholars believe that Peter’s reference to “Babylon” in 1 Peter 5:13 should not be taken literally, but should be understood as a symbolic reference to the city of Rome (for example, see Charles Ryrie’s Study Bible note under that passage). However, there is no evidence that Peter was ever in Rome. Indeed, when Paul wrote to the church in Rome, he made absolutely no reference to Peter when he gave his long list of salutations (Chapter 16, the longest list of salutations found in Paul’s writings). When Paul wrote 2 Timothy, he noted that only Luke was with him, and Peter is not mentioned (2 Tim. 4:11).

³Albert Barnes, *Acts*, note under Acts 21:4 (page 302 in my edition).

⁴Charles Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible*, note under Acts 20:22.

⁵George E. Ladd, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*; see comment under Acts 21:14.

that Paul wanted to be in Jerusalem at the feast of Pentecost. In Acts 20:22 Paul's purpose was unchanged: "And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me." He understood that his time in Jerusalem would be extremely difficult and would involve bonds (imprisonment) and afflictions (Acts 20:23). It should also be noted that Paul and others had spent considerable time collecting monetary gifts for the believing Jews in Jerusalem, and Paul felt an obligation to deliver these funds.

Since Paul was a spiritual man, it is unthinkable that he would have pursued a path to Jerusalem if he knew that God had strictly forbidden him from going there. He would not violate the clearly revealed will of God. "It hardly seems possible that Paul's decision to go to Jerusalem was a case of stubborn, deliberate, and willful defiance of the Holy Spirit."⁶

Paul lived a life sensitive to the Spirit's leading. When forbidden by the Spirit to preach in certain regions, Paul did not disobey (Acts 16:6-7). When led by the Spirit to minister in Macedonia, Paul immediately obeyed (Acts 16:9-10). That long-term pattern of obedience makes it unlikely that he was disobedient in this matter.⁷

The Paul we know from Scripture would rather die than violate the known will of God. Thus, the statement given by the believers in Tyre through the Spirit must not be understood as God forbidding Paul to go. Paul was ready to die at Jerusalem if necessary (Acts 21:13), but from everything we know about the Apostle Paul, he was not ready to disobey the will of God. We should also note that God subsequently never rebuked Paul for rebelling against His will by going to Jerusalem, nor did Paul ever acknowledge that he acted wrongly. Furthermore, Paul never repented of his actions. There was nothing to repent of.

Acts 21:5-6

The ship was unloading its cargo and they had to wait for the ship's captain to tell them when to get on board so that they could continue their journey southward. Tyre was a peninsula sticking out into the ocean. At one time Tyre had been an island. In Old Testament times it had been a great and prosperous commercial center. In fact, it was so prosperous and powerful that Ezekiel compared the King of Tyre with Satan himself (Ezekiel chapter 28). Thousands of tons of dirt had been poured into the ocean in an attempt to connect Tyre to the mainland in order to conquer the island. This was first done by Nebuchadnezzar, although he never fully completed the task, and later by Alexander the Great, who finished the job. What was once an island became a peninsula.

Paul was brought to the seashore where the believers could pray and bid him farewell. It is a touching account of these believers from Tyre showing their love to Paul by giving him a proper farewell, even allowing the women and children to experience Paul's departure. What a wonderful prayer meeting took place on the shore of this commercial city, and what a touching farewell was offered to Paul and his companions (one similar to Acts 20:36-21:1).

Acts 21:7

⁶John Philips, *Exploring Acts*, p. 412.

⁷John MacArthur Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary—Acts 13-28*, p. 237.

They next came to Ptolemais, another coastal town south of Tyre. It was named after one of the kings of Egypt. Once again they encountered believers and stayed with them one day. It is so fascinating that Paul found believers in all these locations, and it was a priority to visit and fellowship with them. “Paul never passed up an opportunity to meet with the Lord’s people, to minister to them, to enlarge their missionary vision, and to keep them informed of God’s work in the world.”⁸ Believers are to continually exhort and encourage one another (Heb. 10:25).

Acts 21:8

The next stop was Caesarea, the capital city of the Roman province of Judea, a city ruled by various governors similar to Pontius Pilate, and under the jurisdiction of Rome. In fact, this city was greatly enlarged, fortified and beautified by Herod the Great who named the city in honor of the Caesars. They were now getting very close to Jerusalem. Thomas offers a fascinating summary of significant events that took place in this Caesarea:

Its Christian associations, however, possess an imperishable interest. It was the abode of the centurion Cornelius, the first Gentile believer in the new faith. Here the angel smote Herod because he gave not God the glory. Here Peter unlocked the gates of the kingdom, and flung them open for the Gentile world. Here, as we shall see, Paul made Felix tremble, and Agrippa almost a Christian; and here, for two long years, he was held a prisoner, and from thence sent in bonds through storms and shipwreck to Rome.⁹

The group was welcomed by Philip the evangelist. The term “evangelist” (preacher of the gospel) is found only in two other places: Ephesians 4:11 and 2 Timothy 4:5. Twenty years had passed since we last heard about Philip. He was one of the original seven “servants” or deacons in the early church (Acts 6). Both he and Stephen were great preachers and boldly proclaimed the gospel. Philip led the Ethiopian eunuch to the Lord and at the end of Acts chapter 8 we learn that he ended up in Caesarea (Acts 8:40). Do not confuse this Philip with one of the twelve disciples by that same name. Notice that Luke was among the company of those who entered Philip’s home, as we see from the use of the plural pronoun “we.”

Acts 21:9

Apparently Philip married a woman in Caesarea and subsequently had four daughters. It is curious that no mention is made of his wife. Perhaps he was a widower at this time. All four daughters were virgins. Even though they were of marrying age, they were not married, and yet they had kept themselves chaste and undefiled. They were examples of sexual purity. Each of the four daughters of Philip had the gift of prophecy. Thus there were four women prophetesses, all siblings from the same family.¹⁰ Women with the gift of prophecy was not unusual because there were at least four

⁸John Philip, *Exploring Acts*, p. 413.

⁹David Thomas, *Acts of the Apostles—A Homiletic Commentary*, p. 360.

¹⁰The historian Eusebius gives additional information about these four daughters of Philip. See *Ecclesiastical History*, Book III, Chapter 39.

women prophetesses mentioned elsewhere in the Bible prior to the Church age: Miriam, the older sister of Moses (Exodus 15:20), Deborah in the book of Judges (Judges 4:4), Huldah in the days of Jeremiah and King Josiah (2 Kings 22:14), and venerable Anna in the days when the Lord Jesus was born (Luke 2:36).

We are not told what these four daughters of Philip prophesied, but we know that they had direct revelation from God and they spoke forth God's Word. They would speak forth God's truth in various situations and opportunities, as led by God's Holy Spirit. Philip's influence upon his daughters is evident: "Philip, who had so thrillingly witnessed to an Ethiopian in the desert, had not neglected to testify to his own family."¹¹

In Acts chapter 2 we are told that there is coming a future day when both men **and women** will prophesy: "And it shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of My Spirit upon **all flesh**: and your sons and your daughters **shall prophesy**, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams: And on My servants and on My handmaidens I will pour out in those days of My Spirit; and they shall prophesy" (Acts 2:17-18).

In 1 Corinthians 11:5 we are told by the Apostle Paul that the local church in Corinth was to be very careful about how public worship was to be performed for the glory and honor of the Lord. Paul laid down some careful instructions. For example, if a woman prayed or prophesied, she was to have her head covered as a symbol of submission to male leadership in the assembly (1 Cor. 11:5-6). Every member of the local assembly, whether male or female, was to respect the leaders of the assembly, and the leaders of the assembly were to respect the Lord Jesus Christ, the assembly's Head. Neither the men nor the women were to be out of order in the assembly "because of the angels" (1 Cor. 11:10). Such a statement is compelling. "Be careful how you act in a public worship service," to paraphrase what Paul said, "because of the angels." The angels are fascinated and are watching with great interest when the Lord Jesus, their Creator-God, is publicly worshiped on earth. We assume Paul was referring to righteous angels. It is possible that demon-angels are also watching in order to find an opportunity to divide, split and destroy the Church. We admit that we do not know a great deal about what is going on in the invisible angelic realm when public worship services on earth are taking place.

Paul gives certain restrictions for women in public worship services. They are told not to speak publicly, but to remain silent, and not to teach or usurp authority over the men (1 Cor. 14:34-35; 1 Tim. 2:12). If they need additional spiritual help, they are to ask their husbands when they get to their home. They are to be submissive to God's order in the assembly. Women are able to teach the Bible according to Titus 2:4, where the older women are told to teach the younger women. This passage implies also that women may have a role in teaching children. God is not opposed to women being teachers, but they should teach only in proper contexts, in harmony with God's instructions, and in keeping with God's order. Thus all is to be done decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40). God is infinitely concerned that His attributes, His glory, His priorities, His purposes, and His goals be reflected in the way a local church functions, including the proper roles of both the men and the women.

God allowed for women, at times, to prophesy, as seen by the four daughters of Philip. This was to be done under certain conditions and situations. The "prophesying" ministry of Philip's seven virgin/unmarried daughters took place in a nonpublic or private manner and setting, under the

¹¹Charles Woodbridge, *Standing on the Promises*, p. 144.

headship of their father Philip. As with the exercise of the gift of teaching, the exercise of the gift of prophesying on the part of female saints was generally restricted either to a group of other women (and children) or, more rarely, toward an individual man in an even more private, one-on-one setting. Such would be done under the headship of her father or husband, similar to the case of Priscilla and Aquila who jointly took Apollos aside and instructed him (Acts 18:26).

Also, the form in which this “prophesying” ministry was exercised is never said to have involved the setting forth of new revelation, but was likely limited to that aspect of prophesying that entailed speaking in “edification, and encouragement, and consolation” (1 Cor. 14:3). In fact, the case is strengthened by the fact that it took the male prophet Agabus to come along in the very next verses (Acts 21:10-11) to give new revelation as to what lay ahead for the Apostle Paul. If these four daughters of Philip could set forth new revelation, why was Agabus needed at all here?

Tradition tells us, for whatever that is worth, that Philip and his family later moved up to Asia, perhaps to Ephesus. The Apostle John also went to Ephesus. When Paul left Ephesus, Timothy took over. When Timothy left, apparently John arrived as the last surviving Apostle.

Philip’s family was famous in the early Church and Dr. Luke was impressed and likely took advantage of this wonderful time in the home of Philip. Dr. Luke may have asked questions as he was gathering information for the book he would write, namely the book of Acts. “Philip, tell me about that early church in Jerusalem when you were a deacon along with Stephen and five other men. What were things like back then? Did you witness Stephen’s death? If so, tell me about that. Also, please tell me about your encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch.”

Later in the book of Acts we will learn that Paul was imprisoned in this same city of Caesarea for two whole years (Acts chapters 23-24).

Acts 21:10

The prophet Agabus “came down” from Judah. Everything at the coastline is “down” from Jerusalem which is up in the mountains, 2470 feet above sea level. These are descriptions based on elevation. We have heard about Agabus previously in Acts 11. Fifteen years earlier he had announced that there would be a great famine in the land during the days of Claudius Caesar (Acts 11:28). This famine was the motivation for Paul and Barnabas to come down from Antioch to see if they could be of help during that difficult time.

Acts 21:11

The prophet Agabus performed a dramatic object lesson. Agabus took hold of Paul’s girdle (a wide sash or belt put around the waist area designed to keep the loose outer garment tied together). He bound his own hands and feet with this girdle and then delivered his prophecy. He foretold that the man owning this girdle would be likewise bound by the Jews at Jerusalem and they would deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles. This is the only time in the New Testament where a symbolic prophecy took place. The prophecy was not just made up of words, but there was a symbolic act accompanying the words. This was common among the Old Testament prophets, but rare in the New Testament. One clear Old Testament example was the prophecy of Ahijah who took the garment of Jeroboam and tore it in two, predicting that Israel’s kingdom would be rent in two (1

Kings 11:29-31). Also in Isaiah 20, the prophet Isaiah was to walk around unclothed and barefoot to symbolize how the armies of Assyria would conquer nations and deport them as prisoners. In Ezekiel chapter 4, the prophet would fall on the ground and build a little fortress as he would attack, symbolically, the city of Jerusalem and destroy it. Such symbolic acts were vivid object lessons to illustrate what God was saying.

The message of Agabus was directed at Paul, who for many months had determined to go to Jerusalem. “When you get there you are going to be seriously afflicted.” Yet, in the previous chapter Paul stated that before being bound by the Jews in Jerusalem, **he was bound in the spirit**, determined to make his journey there, knowing that bonds and afflictions awaited him (Acts 20:22-23). Yet none of these things moved him (Acts 20:24). This prophecy had the merciful and divinely intended effect of preparing, strengthening and grounding Paul even further as to what lay ahead for him.

Please note that the prophecy delivered by Agabus did not forbid Paul from going to Jerusalem. It merely foretold what would happen to Paul at Jerusalem. This prophecy was literally fulfilled, and it was not fulfilled according to the will of man. The will of the Jews was to kill Paul (Acts 21:31). This did not happen, but God’s will was that Paul would be handed over to the Gentiles (the Romans).

Acts 21:12-13

Those who heard these things, including Luke (“we”), urged Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. They were deeply concerned about what might happen to him. They were earnestly pleading with him and weeping. Yet, Paul’s answer was significant. He was ready to be bound and persecuted and he was also ready to die for the name of the Lord Jesus, if necessary.

Paul’s brave response in the face of danger was similar to the response of Luther nearly 1500 years later. When Luther’s friend Spalatin, along with others, warned him not to enter Worms, his reply was, “Though there were as many devils in Worms as there are tiles on the house-tops, yet will I go thither.”¹²

Today it is a common expression to speak of having one’s heart broken, and here we find Paul using this same expression so long ago. “The phrase ‘breaking my heart’ means to soften the will. Paul told those who urged him to avoid Jerusalem that they were really trying to soften his will or weaken his determination to get on with his duty.”¹³

Acts 21:14

They finally ceased trying to persuade Paul, because Paul was not going to be persuaded. They knew that trying to change the Apostle’s mind was a losing battle. It’s interesting what they said. They did not say, “Paul, you are very stubborn and out of the will of God” (as some commentators believe). Instead they said, “The will of the Lord be done.”

¹²David Thomas, *Acts of the Apostles—Homiletic Commentary*, p. 363.

¹³Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, p. 439.

Even when we believe we have the Lord's mind on a matter, none of us are infallible. We cannot compel others when there is a disagreement or a different judgment on a matter, where nothing fundamental is at stake. We must leave the matter with the Lord, with no further action on our part, so long as there is no clear disobedience or departure from God's revealed will.

Was Paul in or out of the will of God in going to Jerusalem? He was warned repeatedly that if he should go he would suffer and be imprisoned. He was told that it would be a terrible experience. God was preparing Paul so that when he did go, he would be prepared for what would happen to him. Let us remember what our Lord Jesus said to each of us: "In the world **ye shall have tribulation**" (John 16:33). Trials and difficulties await us, even fiery trials (1 Pet. 4:12). Yet, we can be of good cheer because our Saviour has overcome the world!

Paul received the message which Agabus delivered. He understood it. He realized the difficulties and dangers which lay ahead. Yet, he was determined in his spirit to go anyway, no doubt believing it was God's will. Knowing the level of Paul's spiritual maturity, it is unthinkable to suggest that Paul would knowingly and deliberately proceed on a course of action which was opposed to the will of God.

Paul was no stranger to persecution, hardships and suffering. The list of his sufferings which he gave in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 is mind-boggling. Five times he was beaten to the very limits of his physical endurance, with 39 stripes on each occasion. Three times he was beaten with rods. Once he was stoned at Lystra. He suffered a shipwreck experience three times, and a night and a day he was in the water. No one could ever accuse Paul of living an easy Christian life. So when Paul said, "I am willing to die for Jesus" (Acts 20:24; 21:13), he really meant those words. "Lord, I'm willing to do what You want me to do, even if that means going to Jerusalem to die!" Paul was ready to offer his own life if that should be God's plan for him.

Was Paul's decision to go to Jerusalem a rash decision, acting on his own wishes apart from any divine guidance? After Paul went to Jerusalem and was nearly killed, he reported to the Sanhedrin and said, "Men and brethren, **I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day**" (Acts 23:1). Paul looked back on his decisions and on his journey to Jerusalem and he was able to tell people openly and honestly that he had lived before God in all good conscience. That is, he knew that he did not do anything out of God's will when he went to Jerusalem.

Furthermore, we have our Lord's testimony about Paul's ministry in Jerusalem found in Acts 23:11—"Be of good cheer Paul, for **as thou hast testified of Me in Jerusalem**, so must thou bear witness also at Rome." The Lord did not rebuke him for going to Jerusalem. Instead, the Lord commended his testimony in Jerusalem and encouraged him to do the same in Rome.

Thus, Luke and the delegation of seven, along with the congregation at Caesarea including Philip the evangelist and perhaps his four daughters, all agreed and said, "The will of the Lord be done." In giving their farewell to Paul they probably imagined that they would never see him again. Paul hated his life for Jesus' sake (Luke 14:26). Do we have the same commitment to the One who loved us and gave Himself for us?

Acts 21:15

Paul and his companions packed up their things and prepared for their final trip. They made their

final, concrete preparations for their journey—gathering belongings, arranging provisions, putting everything in order so that travel could begin without delay. From Caesarea to Jerusalem was a journey overland of more than fifty miles. They deliberately organized their affairs before taking the decisive step toward Jerusalem. There is a spiritual lessons here: Plan thoroughly and yet at the same time trust God completely.

Paul and his companions finally made it to Jerusalem, the “Holy City.” Was Jerusalem full of saints? There were certainly dear believers in this city, Jews who had been saved by the grace of God. Yet, the vast majority of the inhabitants of this city were unbelieving Jews who were very hostile to the gospel. It was extremely dangerous for Paul to enter this city. Paul had a reputation and was known among the Jews. The one who had previously persecuted believers was now on their side, championing the cause of Christ.

Paul’s arrival in Jerusalem marked the end of his missionary journeys. From this point forward, the book of Acts will chronicle Paul’s journey to Rome, bound as a prisoner.

Acts 21:16

Some of the believers from Caesarea had accompanied Paul to Jerusalem. Paul and his companions were to lodge with a disciple by the name of Mnason, a man who had been a disciple since the beginning, from the earliest days. He may have been one of the founding members of the Jerusalem church, perhaps among the original 120 disciples mentioned in Acts 1:15. Luke may have consulted with him to learn about the beginnings of the Jerusalem church.

Mnason was from Cyprus, the same island which was the home of Barnabas. Perhaps he was a Hellenistic Jew who could understand and appreciate Paul’s perspectives somewhat better than the native Jews of Judea.

Acts 21:17

Paul finally arrived in Jerusalem. According to Ronald Merryman, this was Paul’s fifth visit to Jerusalem since his conversion:

- 1) Acts 9:26-30, the same visit as described in Gal. 1:18-19;
- 2) Acts 11:30; compare 11:25;
- 3) Gal. 2:1-10, a special visit not recorded in Acts; it most likely occurred before the Counsel of Jerusalem (some commentators see this as the Acts 15 visit);
- 4) Acts 15:1-30; and
- 5) Acts 21:17ff.¹⁴

Paul’s group was received gladly by the Jerusalem brethren. This is just what Paul had prayed for when he wrote his letter to the Romans from Corinth a few weeks earlier: “That I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judea; and that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints” (Rom. 15:31). Paul knew that the vast majority of Jews in Judea were unbelieving and could be very hostile. That was why Paul, as a new believer, had to leave Judea and

¹⁴Ronald C. Merryman, *Verse By Verse Through Acts*, Vol. 3, p. 91 in the footnote.

stay in his home country of Cilicia (now southern Turkey), where he spent a dozen years in isolation from the Jerusalem Jews who hated him (Acts 9:30). They considered him a traitor to the cause of the Pharisees. They hated him because he had changed his allegiance to Jesus of Nazareth. Paul had prayed that the Jerusalem saints would accept the generous gift that he was bringing for them to support the starving Jews of this city. Paul's prayer was answered because the Jerusalem saints received him gladly. Luke does not specifically mention the generous gift from Paul's delegation, but we have every reason to believe it was delivered.

It was in Jerusalem that Paul (Saul) had originally been trained by Gamaliel, a Pharisee and a brilliant teacher of the law (Acts 5:34; 22:3).

Acts 21:18

Paul went in with us, that is with Luke and the seven brethren who had come with him. They paid a visit to James, one of the elders and apparently a leader of the Jerusalem assembly. This was James, the half-brother of Jesus, who had spent 30 years in Nazareth with the incarnate Son of God!¹⁵ Furthermore, James did not believe in Jesus until after the resurrection (John 7:5; 1 Cor. 15:7). He had been with Jesus for nearly a third of a century as an unbeliever in Nazareth. Now James was prominent among the leaders of the Jerusalem church. Luke probably wanted to sit down to interview James and take very careful notes! Remember, Luke described the early years of Jesus in his gospel, perhaps getting some of his information from James. There is no mention of any of the twelve Apostles being present in Jerusalem at this time.

Acts 21:19

After greeting them, Paul gave a full report about what God had been doing among the Gentiles through his ministry. Gentile believers should be interested in what God is doing among the Jews and Jewish believers should be interested in what God is doing among the Gentiles. The term "particularly" (KJV) means "one by one," indicating that Paul went into great detail as he gave his report. Paul properly gave all glory to God in conveying that it was God who did the work, not himself.

Acts 21:20

When they heard Paul's report, they glorified the Lord. They were pleased at what God had been doing among the Gentiles. Yet, they had concerns. "Paul, we have a problem that we would like to share with you. We are torn apart over this. We are under intense stress over the issue of the law. Please help us with this, Paul. Thousands of Jews are believing in Christ, and they are all very zealous concerning the law, desiring to faithfully keep the law." In the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 it was decided that Gentile believers did not have to be circumcised or obey the law of Moses. Yet, the Jews in the Jerusalem church were still struggling with some of these issues. What is a Jewish believer's relationship to the law? What is a Gentile believer's relationship to the law? Paul had been teaching the Gentiles two main truths: 1) The law does not justify (Gal. 2:16); 2) The law

¹⁵When the name "James" is mentioned in the N.T. without any further identification, it refers to James, the half-brother of Jesus and the leader of the Jerusalem assembly.

does not sanctify (Gal. 3:1-3). He also taught that the believer is no longer under the law (Gal. 3:25; cf. Rom. 6:14). And Galatians 3:25 specifically refers to “we” Jews being “no longer” under the law—the Gentiles, in fact, were never under the law to begin with. And Rom. 6–7 addresses the believer, whether Jew or Gentile, as being not only “not under law” (Rom. 6:14-15) but, further, “dead” to it (Rom. 7:4, 6)!

This verse, among many in the Book of Acts, shows the sole condition of salvation is faith, for it speaks of those among the Jews who had simply “believed.” Though they were “zealous of the law,” yet they were saved by believing, not by keeping the law.

These Jews are characterized as being “zealous of the law,” rather than being zealous of their new heavenly calling and position in Christ. As we read the epistles of James, one of the earliest epistles, we find many wonderful truths, yet we do not find a clear exposition of our heavenly calling and position in Christ. Such truths were progressively revealed. Paul had not yet written his epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians wherein many of these truths would be revealed.

Acts 21:21

Certain Jews were informing the Jerusalem church that Paul was teaching them 1) to forsake Moses; 2) not to circumcise their children; and 3) not to follow Jewish customs. This wasn’t the first such accusation against Paul (see Acts 18:13). Paul clearly taught that circumcision was not necessary to be saved, and the Jerusalem council agreed with Paul’s teaching on this (Acts 15:1). Yet, this does not mean that Paul taught that Jewish people should not get circumcised. Circumcision was a sign of the Abrahamic covenant, a covenant made with the Jewish people even before the law of Moses was given. We have already seen that it was important to Paul that Timothy be circumcised (Acts 16:3). Paul did not want Timothy to offend the Jews, since Timothy was half-Jew and half-Gentile. Yet, Paul refused to circumcise Titus, a Gentile, because it was wrong to force Gentiles to follow Jewish laws. Paul was struggling to keep the proper balance. He knew that “in Christ” there is neither Jew nor Gentile (Gal. 3:28; 1 Cor. 10:32). Yet, socially there were valid distinctives that Paul recognized up to a point.

What Paul was accused of teaching the Jews was a false rumor. Paul was not repudiating his Jewish background. The book of Acts and all the rest of the New Testament make it clear that such accusations were false. Remember, as Paul was leaving Corinth on a previous trip to Ephesus, he himself observed a Nazarite vow (Acts 18:18). Paul was implementing what he said in 1 Corinthians 9:20—“And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law.” When he was with Gentiles, he became as a Gentile that he might win them to Christ (1 Cor. 9:21). “I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). Wherever he went, he did not want to be a stumbling block to any.

Of course, we understand that there are limits to this approach. We must remain within Biblical guidelines and not violate the truth. Yet in the early Church, before Jerusalem was destroyed in A.D. 70, Judaism was considered, by the Apostle Paul, to be a valid God-ordained, God-established system of worship. Paul had no idea that there would be another 2000 plus years before the nation Israel would be reestablished on this earth with a temple and temple sacrifices in Jerusalem. He did know that Jerusalem would be destroyed because the Lord Jesus said so. Yet, he had no clue as to God’s timetable for all these things. Paul even believed that he might be among those raptured (1

Thess. 4:17 and 1 Cor. 15:51-52, and note the pronouns “we”).

Paul was seeking to officially and openly pay respect to God’s original system of worship on this planet, as established through Moses and as stipulated in the law of God. Replacement Theology today says that God is totally through with anything Jewish. Yet Paul had tremendous respect for the history and the distinctive teachings of Israel, including the future plan God will have for this nation, as outlined in Romans chapter 11.

Acts 21:22

The Jewish congregation would be assembling together, and they desired clarification. Paul needed to address these issues. The believing Jews had difficulties understanding Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles and they wanted help.

Acts 21:23

This vow was the Nazarite Vow described in Numbers chapter 6. The Nazarite Vow was a significant outward expression of dedication to God. As far as we know, there were only two people in history who were lifetime Nazarites: Samson and John the Baptist. They both had long hair, could not drink wine, could not touch dead people, etc. This vow was an outward sign of total, lifelong dedication to God in a special, visual, unique form. In Jerusalem, at the time of Paul’s visit, there were four men who had taken this vow. The leaders of the Jerusalem church wanted Paul to personally identify with this custom found in the law of Moses, to show that he did not walk contrary to what Moses taught.

Ronald Merryman summarizes the Nazarite Vow as follows:

THE NAZIRITE (Nazarite) VOW

A Nazirite Vow, recorded in Numbers 6:1-21, included:

- * The consciousness that this vow separated its adherent totally to God.
- * The adherent took the vow for a specific period of time.
- * He/she could drink no fruit of the vine during that time.
- * Males could not shave or cut their hair.
- * Adherents could not go near a dead person.

These requirements were outward signs or a public testimony of the person’s total dedication to God. When the temporary vow ended, the person had to offer peace, grain, drink, sin, and burnt offerings—each and all at the Tabernacle, or at the Temple once it replaced the Tabernacle.¹⁶

Acts 21:24

The Nazarite Vow usually lasted for thirty days. The mention of a seven-day period (v. 27) seems

¹⁶Ronald C. Merryman, *Verse-by-Verse Through Acts*, Vol. 3, p. 95.

to indicate that they were in a condition of ceremonial uncleanness having incurred some defilement. These men had to pay for very expensive sacrifices to finish and fulfill their vow, and they wanted Paul to pay the expenses for these four men. The ritual involved cutting off their long hair and offering it to God. They urged Paul to join these four men in this ceremony because then everyone would know that Paul was not a traitor to Jewish customs. Jewish believers in Jerusalem would be aware of Paul's actions in this matter. They wanted everyone to see that Paul was a faithful Jew and not disrespectful of the law.

As we have seen, Paul made it clear in Romans and Galatians that the law could not justify a person, nor could the law sanctify a person. There is a delicate distinction here between observing the law religiously and appreciating and following the law socially. There is a very fragile balance here which Paul was seeking to maintain.

Acts 21:25

They all agreed on the matters that were settled in Acts 15, namely that no Gentile needs to become a Jew and placed under the law. Yet, the Gentiles were not to offend the Jews in certain highly sensitive areas such as eating things offered to idols, partaking of blood, eating things strangled and engaging in fornication. Such things would be offensive to Jewish believers. Gentiles believers needed to be very sensitive to the concerns and convictions that Jewish people had. See our discussions of these matters in Acts chapter 15.

Acts 21:26

Paul willingly purified himself with these four men, publicly showing his respect for the Mosaic law. "Historically this was still a period of transition, and thus we find the Jewish segment of the church still following temple worship and feasts (18:21; 20:16; 24:11). As long as it was voluntary and not imposed upon Gentiles, Paul nowhere teaches that such activity was wrong for Jews."¹⁷ It is totally remarkable that Paul, a thoroughly emancipated man (spiritually and theologically by the grace of God) **was not in bondage to his own emancipation!** Paul was not in bondage to the law. He was free; yet he was not in bondage to his freedom either. He could become a Jew if necessary, for temporary purposes for the long-term glory of God in His ministry. Paul went to his limit to be a Jew among Jews in order to break down any prejudice and fears that he was repudiating Judaism. Paul realized that Judaism was a program that God had established 1400 years earlier through Moses, based upon an unconditional covenant made with Abraham 400 years before that. Even though the Jews in Paul's day were mostly unbelievers, in the future God would graft back the Jews into the tree of blessing to be God's unique, exclusive means for worshiping God on planet earth during the last 1000 years of world history.

What a delicate balance we find here! Commentators struggle with this very thing. Was Paul compromising? No, because in Acts 23:1 Paul said that his conscience was clear! And we have the Lord's testimony to Paul's faithfulness in Acts 23:11 where He said, "You have testified of Me in Jerusalem." Paul's witness in Jerusalem was a faithful witness. God did not have an issue with the way Paul handled himself in Jerusalem. God approved of Paul's testimony in Jerusalem and from

¹⁷Homer A. Kent, Jr., *Jerusalem to Rome*, p. 162.

there He was going to send him to Rome. How could Paul have been a compromiser if God approved of what he had done?

Remember, today we do not live in the period prior to A.D. 70 as Paul did. He died before the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70. Judaism in Paul's day was still a very powerful system which God had established, even though it had now been officially and theologically bypassed by the creation of the Church. The book of Acts is a transitional book which is a reason why some of these passages are difficult to understand from our perspective. Even Peter had difficulty understanding these things as seen in Galatians chapter 2. Paul was enjoying table fellowship with certain Gentile believers; then some strict Judaizers showed up and Peter dropped his "ham sandwich" and went over to the kosher group! Paul had to blast him to his face for setting a bad example by reestablishing a barrier between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Even Peter had to be rebuked for not walking uprightly in light of gospel truths.

Paul had courageously gone to Jerusalem knowing that he might be killed, but he wanted to serve the Lord. He did the right thing in the right way, in the midst of very complex situations and controversies faced by true believers in the early church prior to A.D. 70.

Acts 21:27

The Jews of Asia were especially hateful of everything Paul stood for. They had come from Ephesus to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost. Here they found the Apostle Paul and they made plans to capture him. They could not get him in Ephesus, so they went after him in Jerusalem. They seized Paul with the intent to kill him (verse 31).

Due to this "citizen's arrest," Paul was not able to complete the Nazarite vow, including the required offerings. He was seized before the requirements of the vow could be completed.

Acts 21:28

What were their accusations against Paul?

1) He taught all men against the people of Israel and against the law of Moses and against "this place," referring to the temple. This is similar to the accusations made years earlier against Stephen (Acts 6:13-14).

2) He brought Greeks (Gentiles) into the temple, thereby polluting the holy temple.

You can almost hear the hiss of the serpent behind these shouts of hatred. Nothing could have been more absurd! The Apostle Paul would never bring a Gentile into the court of Israel. Of course, Gentiles were welcomed into the court of Gentiles, that is, in the outer fringes of the temple area which Herod the Great had built years earlier. Yet, there was a special wall around the temple to warn anyone about stepping into the court of Israel. A Gentile entering this area could be put to death.

The Roman government was so impressed by Judaism and the temple system that they actually allowed the Jews to put up barricades around that part of the temple (the inner part) with warning

plaques all around which said this: “No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death.”¹⁸ The Roman government even allowed the Jews to kill Roman citizens who had transgressed that barrier.

How foolish to think that the Apostle Paul would deliberately bring a Gentile into this forbidden area which could lead to the person’s death! Total absurdity! There was no evidence that Paul ever did this.

What happened next was the inevitable result of years of growing tensions which had reached an explosive point.

Acts 21:29

Trophimus was a Gentile believer who had come with Paul, along with six others who brought gifts for the Jerusalem saints. Note the wording: “They *supposed* that Paul had brought [him] into the temple.” What they thought Paul had done was nothing but fake news. The Lord Jesus himself was falsely accused and here Paul experienced the same. The Lord warned His followers that men would “say all manner of evil against you **falsely**” (Matt. 5:11).

Acts 21:30

The result was that all the city was moved and stirred up. The people ran together to take Paul and remove him from the temple and then they shut the doors. They did not want to murder Paul in the temple area because that would have defiled the temple; yet they felt justified in killing Paul based on a false and reckless assumption that he had brought a Gentile into the temple.

The Near East, both in Paul’s day and today, is no stranger to mob action and mob violence. The Apostle Paul dedicated his entire life and ministry to this proposition: ***The middle wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles has been destroyed (Eph. 2:14-15)***. That wall of partition in the temple symbolized in his mind a division which had existed for centuries. Jews were not to intermarry with Gentiles. Gentiles had to be identified, to some extent, with Judaism in order to be saved. For example, Ruth the Moabite had to become a proselyte to Judaism. Yet Paul, in Ephesians chapter 2, taught that when the Church was created, the middle wall of partition was broken down. The mystery concerning the Church, previously hidden but now revealed, brings this distinctive message: Jews and Gentiles have equal standing before God in the realm of salvation, based on the merits and the blood of Jesus (Ephesians 3). To most Jews, that truth was absolutely unthinkable. Even Jewish believers, under the leadership of James, struggled to recognize that Gentile Christians should be viewed and accepted on an equal basis with Jewish Christians in Christ, where there is neither Jew nor Gentile (Gal. 3:28).

¹⁸These warning signs were written in Greek and in Latin, and two of them have been discovered (both in Greek) by archaeologists.

Acts 21:31

The Jews intended to kill Paul and had already started beating him, but news of this uproar reached the chief captain of the band. This word “*chiliarch*,” refers to the commander of a cohort, made up of 1000 Roman soldiers. Their headquarters was the great Fortress of Antonia, in the northwest corner of the temple. If Rome had not intervened, Paul would have been killed. This commander is later identified as Claudius Lysias (Acts 23:26).

Acts 21:32

A centurion was in charge of 100 Roman soldiers. Since the plural (“centurions”) was used, there must have been at least 200 soldiers. When the Jews saw these Roman soldiers rushing towards them, they stopped beating Paul. Paul knew that bonds and afflictions would confront him in Jerusalem (Acts 20:22), yet he would not swerve from what he believed was the will of God.

How many times was Paul beaten in his Christian life? It took place multiple times. According to 2 Corinthians 11:24-25 he received 39 stripes on five separate occasions and three times he was beaten with rods. This is remarkable because 2 Corinthians was written early in his ministry, and there were probably other beatings that took place later. Once he was even stoned (2 Cor. 11:25). Hence, in Galatians 6:12 Paul said, “From henceforth let no man trouble me; **for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.**” He was beaten and tortured again and again for the sake of Christ.

Acts 21:33

The commander (commanding officer) bound Paul with two chains. The two chains may indicate that he was chained to a soldier on either side. Certain Jews bound Paul, beat Paul, but then were forced to hand him over to the Gentiles, even though they wanted to kill him.

The second part of the prophecy of Agabus was fulfilled (Acts 21:11; see 21:27 for the first part). We are not expressly told that the Jews bound Paul, but it makes sense that they would have done this prior to attempting to kill him. They did hand Paul over to the Gentiles as the prophecy had said, yet they handed him over because they were forced to, not willingly.

This captivity ensured Paul’s safety from further harm and from death at the hands of the Jews. We see God’s sovereign hand at work so that Paul could complete His purpose for him. This included producing, in his first Roman imprisonment, the inspired prison epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon and some believe Hebrews).

The captain basically asked the crowd, “Who is this man and what has he done?”

Acts 21:34

The murderous Jewish mob gave conflicting stories about Paul and his supposed crimes. Since the captain could not get a straight answer from the crowd, he brought Paul into the “castle” (KJV), referring to the Fortress of Antonio or the Romans barracks located at the northwest corner of the temple area.

Acts 21:35

We can imagine these Jews reaching up violently, trying to grab Paul out of the hands of the Roman soldiers in order to kill him. They were full of demonic hatred for God's servant. The soldiers had to carry him off to safety, away from the violent mob. The Fortress of Antonia was connected to the northern end of the temple area by two flights of steps. The steps led to a tower which overlooked the temple area.

Acts 21:36

"Away with him." These were the precise words used when Jesus was rejected by Israel. At that time the crowd said, "**Away with this man**, and release unto us Barabbas" (Luke 23:18). Compare Acts 22:22– "**Away with such a fellow from the earth**: for it is not fit that he should live." Thus Paul was treated the same way they treated the Lord Jesus. Both were wickedly rejected by the unbelieving Jews.

Acts 21:37

When Paul asked permission of the commander to speak, the commander asked whether he spoke Greek. Paul spoke eloquently, fluently and graciously to this Roman official. Paul spoke fluent Greek and, of course, wrote all his epistles in the Greek language.

Acts 21:38

The commander misidentified Paul. He had thought he might be a violent, dagger-bearing insurrectionist. The term "murderers" (KJV) or "assassins" (NKJV) is defined by Thayer as "an assassin, i. e. one who carries a dagger or short sword under his clothing, that he may kill secretly and treacherously anyone he wishes to (a cutthroat)."

The commander mistook Paul for an Egyptian Jew who was an insurrectionist. It was just three years earlier, according to Josephus the historian, that this event had occurred. This was just one of many efforts on the part of Jewish radicals to overthrow the Roman government. They carried curved daggers under their cloaks. They would stab to death anyone who looked like a Roman or a Roman sympathizer in Jerusalem or anywhere else in the Holy Land. They would perform their murderous deed and then disappear into the crowd. The Roman authorities killed thousands of these Jewish rebels.

The Egyptian spoken of here had led 4000 followers up to the top of the Mount of Olives three years earlier (A.D. 54) but his movement was crushed and destroyed by Felix the governor, and hundreds were killed by the Romans. This Egyptian leader had managed somehow to escape and the commander wrongly thought that Paul might have been this notorious man.

Even one of the Twelve Apostles had been on the side of those who violently opposed Roman rule: Simon the Zealot. The Lord Jesus transformed this man. How amazing that among the Lord's disciples were a Roman tax collector (Matthew) and a zealot (Simon), both having become disciples of our Lord. Simon the Zealot would have had a fierce hatred for Matthew apart from the

transforming power of Jesus Christ.

Acts 21:39

Paul very graciously responded to the captain and told him who he really was. He was a Jew (not an Egyptian) from the city of Tarsus (a significant city in Cilicia), and a Romans citizen (see Acts 23:27). Paul asked if he could address the crowd. The Roman commander must have been amazed. Paul certainly did not appear to be some kind of dagger-bearing fanatic.

Acts 21:40

The commander gave Paul permission to speak. He may have thought, “What can I lose? It’s worth a try. I may as well let this man speak. Nothing could be worse than what the situation is now. Let’s do anything possible to calm down this crowd. We do not want this situation to get out of control.”

Paul beckoned with his hand unto the people, encouraging the crowd to be silent. Perhaps there was something about Paul’s appearance and his dignity that silenced the crowd. Since he was addressing a Jewish audience, Paul spoke in the Hebrew tongue. The “Hebrew tongue” refers to Aramaic which was the language that Jesus and the Jews spoke. It had similarities to the Hebrew language. The Jews, for the most part, had stopped using the pure Hebrew language due to their time spent in Babylon during the captivity. They spoke Aramaic. Even the entire Old Testament was translated into Aramaic to help the Jews who were not fluent in Hebrew. Paul was perfectly fluent in Greek and in Aramaic, and he could probably speak genuine Hebrew as well, having sat at the feet of Gamaliel.

Paul’s remarkable speech given to the hostile and unbelieving Jewish crowd is found in Acts 22:1-21, and will be considered in our next chapter.

Appendix

Was Paul Wrong to Take the Nazirite Vow in Acts 21? Was Paul a Compromiser By Doing This?

Note to Reader: Contrary to what has been set forth in this commentary, there are good Bible students who strongly believe that Paul acted wrongly in taking the Nazirite Vow in Acts 21. The following article which presents this point of view was written by James Ventilato.

Paul's Nazirite Vow and Intended Temple Sacrifices in Acts 21:17-30, and the Misuse of 1 Corinthians 9:19-22 by Some to Justify Paul's Course

This appendix contends that Paul's course in Acts 21:17–30, however noble his motive, was a real compromise that 1 Cor. 9:19-22 cannot justify, and one from which God mercifully spared him before it was fully consummated.

I. Apostolic Conduct Is Not the Same as Inspired Scripture

We must avoid making Paul, the greatest saint and apostle of the Lord Jesus, incapable of any sin or failure, concerning which he would be the first to deny himself. And we have other apostles who have in fact failed big time, more than once, with Peter as exhibit A. No apostle was personally infallible; it is only when they spoke and wrote by supernatural inspiration that infallibility was there.

The conduct of the apostles (including Peter and Paul) was not infallible; only their inspired writings were infallible without the least error in every respect. For the apostle Paul (and James too), we can see his fallibility in Acts 21:17-30.

II. The Setting: Jewish Believers “Zealous for the Law” (Acts 21:20)

The Jewish believers in Jerusalem are characterized by James and the elders as all being “zealous of the law” — not zealous of their new heavenly calling and position. And note that they were all “zealous of the law” as such, ALL of it, not merely parts of it! (What this reveals about God's patience with early Messianic Judaism is taken up more fully in Section IV and V below.)

And Galatians 3:25 specifically refers to “we” Jews being “no longer” under the law—the Gentiles, in fact, were never under the law to begin with. And Romans 6–7 addresses the believer, whether Jew or Gentile, as being “not under law” (Rom. 6:14-15) but, also, “dead” to it (Rom. 7:4, 6)!

III. The Misuse of 1 Corinthians 9:19-22 (Acts 21:21)

Note that the principle set forth in 1 Cor. 9:19-22 speaks of how Paul adapted himself (and specifically in relation to the lost, not to believers) in how he communicates or reaches others with the truth—it in no way speaks of compromising the truth! This is precisely why Paul had to condemn Peter in Gal. 2:11 ff. We must follow 1 Cor. 9:19-22 without ever compromising scriptural principles, scriptural truth. When Paul said he became all things to all men, he was speaking of things that are indifferent (as in adapting one's mode of gospel communication, e.g., using the OT scriptures in evangelizing the Jews, avoiding certain foods in evangelizing those observing the requirements of the Law, using creation or nature in evangelizing pagans), but in no way of compromising matters of essential truth or ethics of heavenly Christianity.

He did not, e.g., become pagan in order to win pagans, or become a prostitute in order to win prostitutes, or become Pelagian or Semi-Pelagian in order to win those steeped in ideas of the goodness and sovereignty of man. Rather, Paul sought to avoid certain things that would unnecessarily stumble or offend others while seeking to reach them with the Gospel, not that the end justifies the means and that he was free to thus compromise the truth of God into which he was brought in order to win the lost. Paul did not in this way become pagan in order to win pagans; else should he have accepted the sacrifices in deifying him and Barnabas in Acts 14, in order to win the pagans?! “Being made all things to all men” signifies by no means the giving up of moral principles (such would be to become lawless or a law unto oneself), but sacrificing one's own comfort and natural preferences in order to enter into the circumstances of others—without entering into their falsehoods or sin or defilements.

Rather, a practical example of the true principle at hand would be not serving pork to an observant Jew or Muslim whom you have invited to dinner in an effort to share the Gospel with them. We might also note that the fallacious use of 1 Cor. 9:19-22 to excuse or justify Paul's intended course in Acts 21:23-26, as recommended to him by James and the elders, would, in fact, also necessarily excuse or justify Peter's course that Paul condemned in Gal. 2:11 ff! And with such a misuse and abuse of 1 Cor. 9:19-22, what would prevent a heavenly saint of Jewish ethnicity from participating in animal sacrifices to reach their poor lost brethren according to flesh, if the temple was now rebuilt?! “Jesus says to her, Woman, believe me, the hour is coming [anticipating heavenly Christianity] when ye shall neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem [in connection with the temple of the Jews] worship the Father . . . But the hour is coming and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth [in heavenly association]; for also the Father seeks such as his worshippers. God is spirit; and they who worship him must worship him in spirit and truth.” (John 4:21, 23-24)

IV. The Distortions Behind the Accusations Against Paul (Acts 21:21)

“And they have been informed concerning thee, that thou teachest all the Jews among the nations apostasy from Moses, saying that they should not circumcise their children, nor walk in the customs.” There was great twisting and distortion in the accusations leveled at the apostle Paul here.

This was clearly a misrepresentation of what he taught: 1) Paul did NOT teach “all the Jews among the nations” (i.e., all Jews, as Jews, outside the land of Israel) to abandon Moses. He did teach that BELIEVERS were dead to the law, dead to the law as a legal system and ground of approach to God, in their identification with Christ in His death, but he did not teach that as to all Jews as Jews, i.e., unbelieving Jews. 2) Paul also did not teach ANYONE to abandon “Moses” in the sense of the Pentateuch, the five God-breathed books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy! Paul did not deny, e.g., the prophecies of the coming Messiah embedded in the writings of “Moses,” or the promised and covenanted Land blessings to Israel and their glorious earthly kingdom under the coming Messiah as set forth in “Moses,” or all of the rich typological teachings for the benefit of Christians! (cf. Rom. 9:1-5, and Rom. 9-11 as a whole, and 1 Cor. 10, etc.)

Paul no doubt did teach the unbelieving Jews as Jews, as his Lord did concerning “Moses” and their testimony to His Person and Messiahship: “Ye search **the scriptures**, for ye think that in them ye have life eternal, and they it is **which bear witness concerning me**; and ye will not come to me that ye might have life. I do not receive glory from men, but I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you. I am come in my Father’s name, and ye receive me not; if another come in his own name, him ye will receive. How can ye believe, who receive glory one of another, and seek not the glory which comes from God alone? Think not that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one who accuses you, Moses, on whom ye trust; **for if ye had believed Moses, ye would have believed me, for he wrote of me. But if ye do not believe his writings, how shall ye believe my words?**” (John 5:39-47)

Regarding “circumcision” in particular, what the apostle Paul taught against was doing circumcision as a condition of salvation as well doing so for any spiritual reason or distinction before God. But he was certainly not going about teaching “all the Jews among the nations” to refrain from having their children circumcised, nor that they cease to “walk in the customs” (which is not even identical to the Law).

Paul did not call on the Jews as Jews to do anything other than repent and believe on their crucified and risen Messiah in the Person of the Lord Jesus, of whom Moses wrote and who is the personal fulfilment of the writings of “Moses” in both His first and second comings. Indeed, as the Lord Himself said:

“Think not that I am come to make void the law or the prophets; **I am not come to make void, but to fulfil**. For verily I say unto you, Until the heaven and the earth pass away, **one iota or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law till all come to pass**.” (Matt. 5:17-18)

“**And having begun from Moses** and from all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures **the things concerning himself**.” (Luke 24:27)

“And he said to them, These are the words which I spoke to you while I was yet with you, that **all that is written concerning me in the law of Moses** and prophets and psalms must be fulfilled.” (Luke 24:44)

Now what we have here in Acts 21 with the Jewish believers in Jerusalem being “zealous of the law,” rather than, being grounded in and zealous of their new heavenly calling and position, is an

exhibition of God's patience with those who were yet clinging to an earthly system that was once owned of God but now set aside. A patience which God did not have toward Gentile believers who were never under the law (the Epistle to the Galatians being exhibit A). Patience which was soon coming to an end in connection with the Jewish believers, the going forth of the Epistle to the Hebrews, and the final nail in the coffin in the 70 AD destruction of the temple.

It has been well said that *the Cross was the death of the Mosaic System and the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD was its grave.*

“But now in Christ Jesus ye [Gentiles] who once were afar off are become nigh by the blood of the Christ. For he is our peace, who has made both [Jew and Gentile in Christ] one, and has broken down the middle wall of enclosure, having annulled the enmity in his flesh, the law of commandments in ordinances, that he might form the two in himself into one new man, making peace; and might reconcile both in one body to God by the cross, having by it slain the enmity.” (Eph. 2:13-16)

V. God's Patience with Early Messianic Judaism

The following is taken from Roy A. Huebner's *Elements of Dispensational Truth, Vol 3: The Christian's Altar, Worship, Assembly, Sanctuary, and Circumcision, With Notice of Two Forms of Messianic Judaism*, pages 11-15:

The Change Regarding God's Patience with Early Messianic Judaism

During the interval of Christ's absence the work of God is predominantly among the Gentiles, forming a people for His name (Acts 15:14). While James stated the truth concerning that fact, there were aspects to that work concerning which he likely was unaware at the time he so spoke. The work of the Spirit was the formation of the body of Christ at Pentecost and then the on-going incorporation of believing Jew and Gentile in that body (once-for-all formed at Pentecost), being members one of another, and united to the Head in heaven. The Gentile Christian was not elevated to the level of a Jew, saved or unsaved, nor made an Israelite, nor made a spiritual Jew. No, both Jew and Gentile were lifted up to “sit down together in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:16). God formed the two, in Christ, into “one new man” (Eph. 2:15). It was new, for it never existed before. Indeed, silence had been maintained regarding such things (Rom. 16:25, 26; Col. 1:26; Eph. 3). Though not recognized by so many Christians, or by many Messianic Jews, God is doing a heavenly work now, forming a heavenly people (1 Cor. 15:48), who, as strangers and pilgrims here (1 Pet. 2:11), have a heavenly calling (Heb. 3:1). Covenants are for the earth; this present work of God [this unique, heavenly work of God] is outside of the covenants of promise – which covenants belong to Paul's kinsmen according to flesh (Rom. 9:3-5), i.e., to ethnic Jews, not Gentiles. We know from such Scriptures as Rom.

11:26ff, that eventually God will have a saved nation of Israel composed of ethnic Jews to whom He will make good the covenants of promise (Abrahamic, to Phineas (priesthood), Davidic (kingship), and the New Covenant).

Regarding the present ways of God in the display of sovereign grace in forming the heavenly company, there is an election of grace (Rom. 11:5) among the Jews, who had been part of a system once owned of God (in contrast to paganism which never had such a place), though a system given of God as part of the trial of the first, fallen man to show that he was not recoverable from the fall. In the earlier apostolic period, great patience was shown by God with those Jews who had (by sovereign grace) accepted the Lord Jesus as the predicted Messiah, who had come and died on the cross for them. We see evidence of this patience in Acts. We see in Rom. 14 patience with the weak brother, the reference being clearly to Christian Jews who did not really grasp their liberty in Christ. **This epoch of God's patience with Messianic Judaism was brought to an end, as marked in Acts 28, through the apostle Paul** . . .

In the epoch of this patience with the Messianic Jews concerning adhering to so much Judaism, Christ was rejected by Israel at Jerusalem, where the gospel first went out, especially by Peter, to the Jews first. Subsequently, Peter was first used to bring the gospel to Gentiles. This followed the order of "to the Jew first and also to the Greek" . . .

So Israel at Jerusalem rejected the Gospel, and likewise at Antioch (as well as in between). And when Paul arrived a prisoner at Rome, the Jewish leaders there did the same thing. The fact that there was an election of grace among the Jews at various places does not negate the fact that Israel, as a nation, rejected the gospel as they had rejected the Lord Jesus.

. . . Hebrews was written [by Paul] from prison (c. 60-62 AD). There seems to be some amount of agreement that during that first Roman imprisonment period he wrote Colossians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon (with disagreement concerning the order of writing). Let us keep in mind that this imprisonment involved Paul's final word to the Jews (and through them, to the nation) in Acts 28, "Paul having spoken one word" (Acts 28:25). That was the final word before the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. **This also marked the end of God's patience with the early Messianic Judaism – which the epistle to the Hebrews addressed. Hebrews is one of these prison epistles.**

VI. The Nazirite Vow Itself (Acts 21:23)

I would just note that Paul's earlier compromise in Acts 18:18 (out of a noble motivation, deepest love for his kinsmen according to flesh, but withal misled by it) ultimately lead to the even worse compromise now as far as what he was intending to carry out (though never consummated, by God's

sovereign and mercifully overruling hand). There is a lesson for us in this, even from the failure of the greatest apostle and greatest Christian man ever.

VII. “Walkest Orderly, Keeping the Law” (Acts 21:24)

Note what the text actually states: “and all will know that of those things of which they have been informed about thee nothing is true; but that thou thyself also *walkest orderly, keeping the law.*” **The intent is not to avoid offense (as with the principle of 1 Cor. 9:19-23) but to intentionally convince others that he “walkest orderly, keeping the law.”** And it’s the law as such, the whole law, not (illegitimately taking up) parts of it. As far as Paul himself was concerned—who knew far better—such would be conveying a false impression, as he would be taking false ground. Trying to apply the principle of 1 Cor. 9:19-23 here is to make complete misuse of it. 1 Cor. 9 in no way endorses the idea that “the end justifies the means” (such as being lawless or a law unto oneself for a good or noble purpose).

VIII. Two Problematic Aspects of Paul’s Course (Acts 21:26)

There are at least two very problematic aspects to the apostle Paul’s actions here (need we be reminded that his actions--unlike the scriptures produced through him—were not inspired?):

A) “Then Paul, taking the men, on the next day, having been purified, entered with them into the temple”; that is, he entered into a place where he would not be allowed to bring his fellow Gentile Christians with him (which is precisely what he was falsely charged in verse 28 with doing). Such is the false ground that the apostle Paul took, regardless of his good motivation, and regardless of the false charge leveled against him in verse 28. (No doubt his self-sacrificial love for the Jews, believing and unbelieving Jews, led him to compromise in that self-sacrificial love.) The implication of Paul’s action was divisive of the body of Christ and of our position in Him wherein there is no Jew or Gentile as to spiritual distinction. This was indeed the time of God’s patience, not only with the Jewish believers generally, but also with Paul himself. (What would we think of a believer today, even an apostle, who entered a restaurant that was designed to exclude certain ethnicities? Would there not be much shame in order, if I went into the restaurant while leaving my excluded brother on the outside?) The apostle Paul rightly condemned the apostle Peter’s actions as recorded in Gal. 2:11 ff (the fact that the motivation behind Peter’s actions was different than the apostle Paul’s does not alter the nature of the action as being at odds with heavenly Christianity). “For if the things I have thrown down, these I build again, I constitute myself a transgressor. For I, through law, have died to law, that I may live to God. I am crucified with Christ, and no longer live, I, but Christ lives in me; but in that I now live in flesh, I live by faith, the faith of the Son of God, who has loved me and given himself for me.” (Gal. 2:18-20)

B) “Until the offering was offered for every one of them”; how contrary this is to the Epistle to the Hebrews and the heavenly calling set forth therein, as the time of God’s patience was coming to an end with professing Jewish believers still clinging to an earthly system no longer owned of God. We

need only consider portions of Hebrews 10 and 13:

“For the law, having a shadow of the coming good things, not the image itself of the things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually yearly, perfect those who approach. Since, would they not indeed have ceased being offered, on account of the worshippers once purged having no longer any conscience of sins? But in these there is a calling to mind of sins yearly . . . Having therefore, brethren, boldness for entering into the [holy of] holies by the blood of Jesus, the new and living way which he has dedicated for us through the veil, that is, his flesh, and having a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, sprinkled as to our hearts from a wicked conscience, and washed as to our body with pure water.” (Heb. 10:1-3, 19-22)

“Be not carried away with various and strange doctrines; for it is good that the heart be confirmed with grace, not meats; those who have walked in which have not been profited by them. **We have an altar of which they have no right to eat who serve the tabernacle;** for of those beasts whose blood is carried as sacrifices for sin into the holy of holies by the high priest, of these the bodies are burned outside the camp. Wherefore also Jesus, that he might sanctify the people by his own blood, suffered without the gate: **therefore let us go forth to him without the camp, bearing his reproach.**” (Heb. 13:9-13)

We would do well to take this to heart: *being in the wrong place almost inevitably compels or boxes you into compromise with wrong actions or behavior.*

But thanks be to God that the apostle Paul was divinely and mercifully spared from consummating the Nazarite vow with the offering of the sacrifice in the temple, as we see in the following verses. This was much like when the LORD spared David, despite himself, from going forth with the Philistines to fight against his own people (1 Sam. 29).

And let us call to mind the words of the Lord Jesus in the Gospel of John when He spoke **anticipatively of heavenly Christianity**: “Jesus says to her, Woman, believe me, **the hour is coming when ye shall neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem** [in connection with the temple of the Jews] **worship the Father** . . . But the hour is coming and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth [in heavenly association]; for also the Father seeks such as his worshippers. God is spirit; and they who worship him must worship him in spirit and truth.” (John 4:21, 23-24) **This is not reconcilable with Paul’s course in Acts 21**, who absolutely knew far better than this course to which he acquiesced (which course Paul explains in Acts 24:11—in refutation of the false charges of the Jews that he was moving sedition or insurrection and attempting to profane the temple—involved, rather, him simply and peacefully going up to “*worship at Jerusalem.*”)

God indeed was long-suffering with Jewish saints before burying the dead, earthly Mosaic system in the 70 AD destruction of Jerusalem!

We would also note that Acts 23:11 in no way means that the Lord approved of Paul’s course and actions under consideration here in Acts 21, as being entirely faithful to Himself. The passage states: “But the following night the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good courage; for **as thou hast**

testified the things concerning me at Jerusalem, so thou must bear witness at Rome also.” The Lord here focuses purely on his preaching or verbal testimony; He speaks not of his actions in earthly ritualism in fulfilling the Nazarite vow and participation in the temple, which (apart from His merciful and sovereign intervention) was going to be consummated with his offering of animal sacrifices—all of which put him in a compromised position. Rather, the Lord graciously provides Paul with needed encouragement and consolation, along with assurance that all was not over for him but that He still has much more for Paul to accomplish in his earthly career for His glory.

We might also add that Paul’s defense of himself before Governor Felix in Acts 24, in explaining the Acts 21 incident that took place no more than 12 days earlier, was simply a matter of demonstrating that he had not violated the law of Jews and was not ritualistically impure while in their temple as was alleged, and thus he was not in any way guilty of exciting the mob action amongst the Jews or guilty of incurring the death penalty at their hands. As such, Governor Felix had no basis to condemn him either. This was no place for Paul to address his inconsistent course with the heavenly calling, which had no bearing on the defense he was making as to the false charges of the Jews.

IX. The Arrest as Divine Rescue (Acts 21:27-30)

Do we not see the sovereign and merciful hand of God in this? As noted, this was much like when the LORD sovereignly and mercifully spared David, despite himself, from going forth with the Philistines to fight against his own people (1 Sam. 29). God thus spared the apostle Paul from such a compromise, and despite himself, was thus preserved from consummating the requirements of the Nazarite vow with animal sacrifices, which have no place in heavenly Christianity, which Paul well knew, though God was patient with the believing Jews in the meantime.

The Lord used this mob action to sovereignly accomplish His own will to “drag” Paul out of the temple where he should not be, to keep this apostle of the heavenly calling from offering animal sacrifices, and to “immediately shut the doors” behind him—thereby permanently shutting the doors for Paul from ever again falling into such comprise (albeit out of love for his kinsman according to flesh) with Judaism again!

Paul will thus be in bonds the rest of the Book of Acts. And so much for the “sage” (non-inspired) counsel of James and the elders given to Paul!

This captivity ironically ensured Paul’s safety from further harm and from death at the hands of the Jews—evidencing again the Lord’s sovereign hand at work so that Paul could complete His purpose for him. Part of which included producing, in his first Roman imprisonment, the five inspired prison Epistles, including the Epistle to the Hebrews.

One other closing observation: James and the elders were not likewise attacked as the apostle Paul was, for they had not yet apprehended their heavenly calling and position—not fully entering into the one Body, the one new man, the new creation in Christ Jesus, wherein is no spiritual distinction of any sort before God between Jew and Gentile—and thus they still took regular part in the earthly

Mosaic system that was once owned of God (which came to an end at the cross, though not formally put into the grave until 70AD), and in that compromised state with which our God was still patient with them, they avoided the kind of persecution the apostle Paul was subjected to.

Note: Brother Ventilato also had a section in his paper containing lengthy quotations from Plymouth Brethren writers who held this same position. These included Roy A. Heubner, William Kelly, John Nelson Darby, C. H. Mackintosh, Andrew Miller, and F. B. Hole.

James Ventilato, September 2026