

ACTS 21: 16-26

Last week we saw how Paul refused to be persuaded to by pass Jerusalem and simply head off to Rome. So many prophesies were given regarding the dangers that awaited him there!

While things ARE going to get very difficult, very fast, this week's teaching focuses on another type of danger. But instead of stating it outright, I'd like to present it in terms of a question: Was Paul forced to compromise his beliefs to appease the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem.

Keep in mind that Paul has completed 3 missionary journeys and has written letters to the Thessalonians, to those in Galatia, to the church in Corinth and to those in Rome. And while those churches were predominately Christian Gentiles, there were many Christian Jews in those congregations.

Father, this morning's lesson has been difficult to put together. But, I confess, any confusion I have had while wrestling with the text is from my own mind and not from You – For You are not the author of confusion, but of peace. Even as I teach this morning, I pray for peace to descend like a dove on me, that I can declare Your grace and perfections without any hesitation – to You alone be the Glory!
AMEN

(Acts 21:16 NKJV) Also some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us and brought with them a certain Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we were to lodge.

Some believe that Mnason was an old disciple and perhaps one of the 70 chosen by Jesus. And while he was from Cyprus, he owned a home in Jerusalem and was most willing to lodge Paul and his companions there.

(Acts 21:17 NKJV) And when we had come to Jerusalem, the **brethren** received us gladly.

Paul and his friends were received warmly by the Christian Jews living in Jerusalem.

(Acts 21:18 NKJV) On the following *day* Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.

One would assume that at this time, the gift from the Gentiles was given to James. But no mention is given to this. Am I making something out of how Luke wrote this? That is, Paul went in with us rather than we went in with Paul? Probably my own attention to irrelevant details.

(Acts 21:19 NKJV) When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

Paul once again gives a detailed account of his missionary journeys and the response of the Gentiles to the gospel message. While he may have mentioned the Jews who came to Messiah, the focus was on his direct calling by Jesus when He told Saul thru Ananias, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. (Acts 9:15 NKJV)

(Acts 21:20 NKJV) And when they heard *it*, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law;

Their response was to Glorify God!

But their next immediate response was to tell Paul of the ‘myriads’ of Jews who believed and **“they were all zealous for the law”**.

They knew of the grace given to the gentiles to believe. They all heard Paul describe his ministry to the Gentiles now and when he and Barnabas came to Jerusalem before to discuss the issue of grace vs law (Acts 15). Paul writes of this in his letter to the Galatians:

Galatians 2:1-10 NKJV Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with *me*. (2) And I went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain. (3) Yet not even Titus who *was* with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. (4) And *this occurred* because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), (5) to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you. (6) But from those who seemed to be something—whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favoritism to no man—for those who seemed *to be something* added nothing to me. (7) But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as *the gospel* for the circumcised *was* to Peter (8) (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles), (9) and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we *should go* to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. (10) They desired only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do.

But, had the Letter to the Galatians, or the Letter to the Romans even been read by those in Jerusalem? Perhaps not. And, what did they mean by the Jews being **“zealous for the Law”**. It almost sounded like bragging. So, what’s the point? In follows next:

(Acts 21:21 NKJV) but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise *their* children nor to walk according to the customs.

Once again, rumors fly faster than Paul’s letters. Paul is accused of teaching the Christian Jews to ‘forsake Moses’ and that they ought not circumcise their children and not to walk according to their customs. Is this true? Yes and No. Paul only taught that these things (the law, circumcision, customs and the traditions) were useless when it comes to salvation! They involve works not faith. And you can’t earn salvation!

And, it works both ways: You can’t do law and tradition to get saved and you can’t do law and tradition to keep your salvation.

Galatians 3:1-3 NKJV O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified? (2) This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?— (3) Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?

But neither this preclude any Jew from obeying Moses; not to gain anything from God, but rather to honor and worship Him. You must understand, to the Jew, the LAW was their life and their life was the LAW. It became their very identity; It was and still is very difficult to separate the two.

(Acts 21:22 NKJV) What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come.

What this assembly is, is not defined. It may be a church council or the entire church. The Greek implies a “multitude” so it may be the entire city! **It could be read “the multitude of peoples will certainly come together when they hear that you are in town”.**

(Acts 21:23 NKJV) Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. (24 NKJV) Take them and **be purified with them**, and pay their expenses so that they may shave *their* heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, **but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law.**

The elders did NOT want a riot on their hands. Paul was a traitor to the Jews and to the Christian Jews, there was still much suspicion!

So, Paul, we need you to demonstrate to the Jews both traditional and Christian, that all these rumors are not true.

They had 4 Christian Jews who took a Nazirite Vow. We talked about this when we read of Paul shaving his head. This time I want to read the passage in Numbers 6 that describes this vow:

Numbers 6:1-21 NLT Then the LORD said to Moses,

(2) “Give the following instructions to the people of Israel. “If any of the people, either men or women, take the special vow of a Nazirite, setting themselves apart to the LORD in a special way,

(3) they must give up wine and other alcoholic drinks. (5) “They must never cut their hair throughout the time of their vow,

(6) And they must not go near a dead body during the entire period of their vow to the LORD.

(13) “This is the ritual law for Nazirites. At the conclusion of their time of separation as Nazirites, they must each go to the entrance of the Tabernacle (14) and offer their sacrifices to the LORD: a one-year-old male lamb without defect for **a burnt offering**, a one-year-old female lamb without defect for **a sin offering**, a ram without defect **for a peace offering**, (15) a basket of bread made without yeast—cakes of choice flour mixed with olive oil and wafers spread with olive oil—along with their prescribed **grain offerings and liquid offerings.**

(18) **“Then the Nazirites will shave their heads at the entrance of the Tabernacle. They will take the hair that had been dedicated and place it on the fire beneath the peace-offering sacrifice.**

The **burnt offering** was made to demonstrate complete submission to God’s will and dependence upon God. It also expressed the person’s desire to commune with God – so in that sense with was a sin offering as well – you can’t commune with God while entangled with sin! It was completely burnt up on the altar.

The **sin offering** was to atone for one’s sin so that God and the sinner could be reconciled.

The **peace offering** expressed thanks or gratitude to God for His provisions and mercy; Rabbi’s believed that in the ‘age of Messiah’, this will be the only sacrifice that will be brought to the temple because in that time, there will be no more sin.

“be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave *their* heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, **but *that* you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law.”**

So, Paul is told to pay for the sacrifices that these men had to bring to the Ttemple. This was not an uncommon request made to people to help those who needed the funds for the sacrifices.

Did Paul have to do this? Why did he not protest? Perhaps he felt compelled to prove to those who were **weak in faith** that the rumors were not true and that he walked in an orderly manner (piously) and that he kept the law!

WOW! This is Mr. Grace! This is Mr. Faith. This is Mr. Walk in the Spirit! What will he do? But before those can be answered, I have another one:

Why wouldn’t the Elders simply ask if these were true? Paul would NOT lie! And, was there another ‘gospel’ being preached in Jerusalem to Christian Jews? God Forbid!

(Acts 21:25 NKJV) But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written *and* decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from *things* offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality."

This was spoken to those in Paul’s company that were NOT Jewish. They wouldn’t be allowed to anyway because the Law prohibited any gentile from taking a vow OR fulfilling it in the temple!

Were the elders keeping Jews and Gentiles separated?

BTW: After the destruction of the Temple in 70AD, a person could take a vow, but it would be binding on him/her FOREVER! And, they would have to move to Israel because the Rabbi’s said so.

(Acts 21:26 NKJV) Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an **offering** should be made for each one of them.

Paul agrees to their request; He, like them, enters the ritual baths (mikvah's) to ceremonially cleanse himself. They all enter the Temple and announce the end of their Vow to the priests. The offerings, provided by Paul, were then made on their behalf.

I don't believe the offerings were made for Paul because he was not ending any vow.

In Acts 18 we read:

Acts 18:18-23 NKJV So Paul still remained a good while. Then he took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila *were* with him. **He had his hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow. (19)** And he came to Ephesus, and left them there; but he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. (20) When they asked *him* to stay a longer time with them, he did not consent, (21) but took leave of them, saying, "I must by all means **keep this coming feast in Jerusalem**; but I will return again to you, God willing." And he sailed from Ephesus. (22) **And when he had landed at Caesarea, and gone up and greeted the church, he went down to Antioch.** (23) After he had spent some time *there*, he departed and went over the region of Galatia and Phrygia in order, strengthening all the disciples.

Luke is reporting what was told to him either by Paul or one of his traveling companions. Verse 22 is really important:

1. He lands in Caesarea
2. He goes up to Jerusalem where He greeted the church
 - a. No mention of the fulfillment of the vow; to offer sacrifices plus the burning of his hair on the fire of the altar!
3. Goes down to Antioch where he begins his 3rd missionary journey!

So, what can we conclude? Did Paul go to the Temple to finish the Nazirite Vow?

1. If it was, did he offer the prescribed sacrifices?
2. If yes, why so little was written about the fulfillment of the vow?

Why would Paul pay for sacrifices that he believed to be fulfilled by Messiah?

All I can say to all of this is "OY YEY"!

Opinion is obviously divided. Some will take what happened next (as we will read next week about the riot that occurred), as proof that Paul was guilty of not speaking up about the Gospel he proclaimed.

Some will excuse Paul based on what he wrote to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 9:19-22 NKJV (19) For though I am free from all *men*, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; (20) **and to the Jews I became as a Jew**, that I might win Jews; **to those who are under the law, as under the law**, that I might win those *who are* under the law; (21) to those *who are* without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those *who are* without law; (22) to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. **I have become all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some.**

Some read Galatians 2 and get quite upset with Paul:

Galatians 2:1-10 NKJV Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and also took Titus with *me*. (2) And I went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to those who were of reputation, lest by any means I might run, or had run, in vain. (3) Yet not even Titus who *was* with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. (4) And *this occurred* because of false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage), (5) to whom we did not yield submission even for an hour, that the truth of the gospel might continue with you. (6) But from those who seemed to be something—whatever they were, it makes no difference to me; God shows personal favoritism to no man—for those who seemed *to be something* added nothing to me. (7) But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as *the gospel* for the circumcised *was* to Peter (8) (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles), (9) and when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that had been given to me, they gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we *should go* to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. (10) They desired only that we should remember the poor, the very thing which I also was eager to do.

So, what can we, this morning, conclude?

Let me offer some thoughts:

1. Paul, the greatest of the Apostles, was still just a man; Paul struggled with the flesh as much as we do. And sometimes, Paul makes decisions based on what He thinks is right but just don't turn out so well.
2. Paul's entire life from the time of his re-birth, was focused on convincing Gentiles and Jews of their need for a Messiah AND that Jesus was the Messiah who removed their sin so that they could have a relationship with God, or, have the relationship restored to those who, like dead natural branches, were re-grafted back into the Root which is Jesus the True Vine.
3. You cannot judge the man based on your own pre-conceived notions of right and wrong AND based on other circumstances that appear to be consequences of his actions (or inactions).
4. The Scriptures contain ALL TRUTH but are sometimes lacking in details such as what the inner motivations are of those we read about, or other details of actions taken that the Holy Spirit decided were irrelevant to the TRUTH.
5. What's TRUE is that we all worship and serve a great and wonderful Savior; His purposes are not always revealed but His Character is; God is Love, God is Light; His grace, mercy and judgments are pure and inexhaustible; His plans and purposes are perfect;

6. We are called to surrender to Him who I just described in an inadequate way, so that He will mold us into the image of His Son, Christ Jesus!