

Acts Chapter 21 Continued

Acts 21:17 "And when we were come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly."

“Were come to Jerusalem”: Presumably in time to celebrate Pentecost, as Paul had planned (20:16).

“The brethren received us gladly”: This was because of the much-needed offering they brought. Also, and more importantly, the Jerusalem believers rejoiced because the Gentile converts with Paul provided visible evidence of God’s work of salvation in the Roman world. This initial, unofficial reception may have taken place at Mnason’s house.

The third missionary journey ends here. To imagine that the rest of the book is an appendix is to miss Luke’s purpose. The worldwide spread of the gospel is continuing. Rome has not yet become part of the narrative; Paul’s commission has not been realized. He must bear witness both in “Jerusalem” and Rome (see 23:11).

This (verse 17), shows the love that all the early church had for each other.

Acts 21:18 "And the [day] following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present."

“James”: The brother of Jesus and head of the Jerusalem church (see note on 12:17), not James, the brother of John, who had been executed by Herod (12:2).

“All the elders”: The mention of elders indicates that the apostle, often away on evangelistic work, had turned over rule of the Jerusalem church to them.

Some have speculated that there were 70 elders, paralleling the Sanhedrin. Given the large size of the Jerusalem church, there probably were at least that many. God had decreed that after the apostles were gone, the church was to be ruled by elders (14:23; 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1, 5).

We also see the great position that James (the half-brother of Jesus), had in the church at Jerusalem. If there ever was a doubt that James is the head of that church, this Scripture settles it. Paul shows great respect to James here.

Acts 21:19 "And when he had saluted them, he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry."

“He declared particularly”: Paul’s official report of his missionary work did not involve meaningless generalities; he related specific incidents from his journeys (11:4). As always (14:27; 15:4, 12), Paul gave all credit and glory for his accomplishments to God.

Saluted means greeted them with respect. This was as if he were reporting to James and the elders, the accomplishments the Lord had made through him in all the churches he had established.

Acts 21:20 "And when they heard [it], they glorified the Lord, and said unto him, Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law:"

“Zealous of the law”: Some Jewish believers continued to observe the ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law. Unlike the Judaizers (see note on 15:10), they did not view the law as a means of salvation.

We see here, a group of people claiming to believe that Jesus is Messiah, but they undoubtedly did not accept his crucifixion as being total payment for all sins for everyone. If they are still keeping the Law of Moses and still sacrificing, then they did not understand Jesus was the perfect Lamb sacrifice of God.

They are hanging on to Judaism with one hand and claiming to be Christians on the other hand. They cannot have both. Those zealous of the law are under the law and not grace, because that is where they have placed their trust. This problem could be due to not enough extensive teaching of the Truth.

Acts 21:21 "And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise [their] children, neither to walk after the customs."

“To forsake Moses”: The Judaizers were spreading false reports that Paul was teaching Jewish believers to forsake their heritage. That Paul had not abandoned Jewish customs is evident from his circumcision of Timothy (16:1-3), and his own taking of a Nazirite vow (18:18).

We see that they are accusing Paul of teaching not to circumcise the men and not to keep the Law of Moses. This truly is what he has been teaching and what he should have been teaching. The circumcision of a believer is in his heart. The Mosaic laws and customs are not for believers either. For the believer, God has written His law on their heart.

These two schools of thought prevailed then and now as well. There was the group who believed in grace and there was the group looking to the law. They are like oil and water, they don't mix. These Jewish converts to Christianity are not willing to give up their old customs. They are angry with Paul for telling the truth.

In Matthew 5:17, we see that the law was not done away with, but fulfilled by Jesus.

Verses 21:23-25: Paul's principle of life among Jews was one of accommodation. Among the Jews he became as a Jew as long as the principle of grace was not at stake (1 Cor. 9:19-22). So,

when the Jewish brethren suggested that Paul defuse the situation by joining “four men” who had taken a “vow,” he consented.

He would pay their temple fee and “purify” himself “with them.” By this he could demonstrate that he was not hostile toward the Mosaic “law” or toward the Jews who observed it.

Acts 21:22-23 "What is it therefore? the multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that thou art come." "Do therefore this that we say to thee: We have four men which have a vow on them;"

“Have a vow on them”: A Nazirite vow, symbolizing total devotion to God (see notes on 18:18; Num. 6:1-21).

Paul's message from the beginning had been salvation through the free gift of Jesus Christ, not of works. Now all these (Christians), have decided you must circumcise and live up to the law.

Had Paul taken a stand right here, and said we are not under the law, he possibly could have made a case in favor of grace, but as you see in the next few verses, he conforms somewhat to the law himself. We can read about the Nazirite vow (in Numbers chapter 6). Christians fast, Jews take a Nazirite vow.

Acts 21:24 "Them take, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave [their] heads: and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but [that] thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law."

“Purify thyself”: Having just returned from an extended stay in Gentile lands, Paul was considered ceremonially unclean. He therefore needed to undergo ritual purification before participating (as their sponsor), in the ceremony marking the end of the 4 men’s vows.

“Be at charges with them”: For the temple ceremony in which the 4 would shave their heads and the sacrifices associated with the Nazirite vow. Paying those expenses for another was considered an act of piety, and by so doing, Paul would give further proof that he had not forsaken his Jewish heritage.

“Shave their heads”: A practice commonly associated with a Nazirite vow (Num. 6:18).

Since they are forming the conduct of the church for centuries to come, it is very important what kind of stand they take here. I truly believe the question is (is the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ sufficient to take care of the obligations of the church), or should we all go back to the practice of sacrifices?

I believe this would have been the moment for Paul to make a declaration on what is correct to do. We were not there, so we could not say this for sure (only speculate).

Acts 21:25 "As touching the Gentiles which believe, we have written [and] concluded that they observe no such thing, save only that they keep themselves from [things] offered to idols, and from blood, and from strangled, and from fornication."

(See notes on 15:19-20). James made it clear that what he was asking Paul to do by no means changed the decision of the Jerusalem Council regarding Gentiles. Since Paul was Jewish, that decision did not apply to him.

The obligations to be a Christian should be the same for all mankind. If Gentile believers are required to refrain from things offered to idols, from blood, from strangled, and from fornication, then that should be the requirements for the Jewish believers, as well.

The church in Jerusalem and Peter had sent a letter to all the new Gentile churches that these few things were the only requirement. It appears to me, that they still have the wall of partition up between Jew and Gentile, even though the curtain in the temple was torn from the top to the bottom when Jesus was crucified.

God had torn down the wall, and now these Jews are putting it back up: all the while proclaiming to be followers of Christ who tore it down.

Acts 21:26 "Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself with them entered into the temple, to signify the accomplishment of the days of purification, until that an offering should be offered for every one of them."

“Purifying himself” (see note on verse 24).

Paul knows that he has been made pure by the blood of Jesus Christ. This has to be just a show for these Jews to be accepted of them. We Christians, when we receive Christ, put on his righteousness and we are pure.

Acts 21:27 "And when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews which were of Asia, when they saw him in the temple, stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him,"

“Seven days”: The length of the purification process (see note on verse 24). Paul had to appear at the temple on the third and seventh days. The incident that follows took place on the seventh day, when the process was almost completed.

“Jews which were of Asia”: Probably from Ephesus, since they recognized Trophimus as a Gentile (verse 29). They were in Jerusalem celebrating the Feast of Pentecost.

The temple in Jerusalem was a symbol of the law. Religion is whatever you do habitually. These Jews had never truly understood the meaning of the law. They were just repetitiously carrying out these rituals. This is not a religion of the heart or spirit, but a religion of flesh and custom. They looked on the outward man, while God was interested in the inner man.

These Jews of Asia had been a problem all along. They really wanted to kill Paul, but God had kept them from it. Now they have followed Paul to Jerusalem and stirred up the people.

Acts 21:28 "Crying out, Men of Israel, help: This is the man, that teacheth all [men] every where against the people, and the law, and this place: and further brought Greeks also into the temple, and hath polluted this holy place."

“The people, and the law, and this place”: Paul’s enemies leveled 3 false charges against him. They claimed that he taught Jews to forsake their heritage, the same lie told by the Judaizers (see note on verse 21).

The second charge, that Paul opposed the law, was a very dangerous one, albeit false, in this setting. Originally, Pentecost was a celebration of the firstfruits of the harvest. But by this time, it had become a celebration of Moses’ receiving the law on Mt. Sinai. Thus, the Jewish people were especially zealous for the law during this feast.

The third charge, of blaspheming or defiling the temple, had helped bring about the deaths of Jesus (Mark 14:57-58), and Stephen (6:13). All 3 charges were, of course, totally false.

“Brought Greeks also into the temple”: The Asian Jews accused Paul of having brought Trophimus past the Court of the Gentiles into the part of the temple where Gentiles were forbidden.

Such a charge was absurd, for it would have entailed Paul’s risking his friend’s life (the Romans had granted the Jews permission to execute any Gentile who so defiled the temple).

Acts 21:29 "(For they had seen before with him in the city Trophimus an Ephesian, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.)"

You can easily see, from these verses above, why it would be an impossibility to mix Christianity and Judaism. Christianity teaches that God is the Father of all who will accept Him; Judaism teaches God is Father of just a very small select group.

Jesus taught that we are not to be a respecter of persons, Judaism taught that the Jew alone was worthy to come into the temple. Judaism taught keeping of the law, Christianity teaches love and grace.

Jesus had rightly called them stiff-necked and whited walls. Everything these Jews were associated with in the temple had to do with cleaning up the outside of man. Jesus Christ taught the cleaning up of the heart of man by washing in the blood of the Lamb. There was no way these two could be meshed together into a compatible religion.

Acts Chapter 21 Continued Questions

1. How were Paul and his companions received by the leaders in Jerusalem?

2. Which leader did Paul go to see in Jerusalem?
3. What is meant by Paul saluting them?
4. What good news did Paul bring them?
5. How many Jews did they say believed?
6. What was peculiar about their belief?
7. In verse 21, what did they reprimand Paul for teaching the Jews?
8. How many men were involved in a Nazarite vow?
9. In verse 24, these Jews told Paul to do what?
10. Why had they taken the vow?
11. Why is it so important for Paul to take a stand for Christianity right here?
12. What does the author believe is the true question here?
13. What had they (the church in Jerusalem), written to the Gentiles?
14. Is there a difference between the obligation of a Jew and Gentile?
15. Who had torn the wall of partition down between Jew and Gentile?
16. Who built the wall back up, even though it was torn down by God when Jesus was crucified?
17. What did Paul do in verse 26 that signified he was pure?
18. How is a Christian purified?
19. Why did Paul do this in verse 26?
20. What Jews came and stirred up the people against Paul?
21. What was the temple in Jerusalem a symbol of?
22. What is religion?
23. What three things did these Jews from Asia say Paul taught against?
24. In verse 27, what did they do to Paul after the seven days?

25. How did they say Paul had polluted the temple?

26. Give several reasons why it is impossible to mix Christianity and Judaism?