

Wednesday Evening Bible Study

November 15, 2023

Series - The Life and Writings of the Apostle Paul

The Conclusion to the Third Journey – The Journey Back to Jerusalem

Text – Acts 21:17 - 40

Introduction

Third Journey



Introduction

When we last left the apostle, he had just arrived at Jerusalem:

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

You will note that the "brethren" mentioned here were no doubt friends of the apostle, but not necessarily part of the official group of elders from the church, whom Paul will meet with on the following day.

Paul's arrival in Jerusalem marks the conclusion to the third missionary journey. Here, Paul will be falsely accused and arrested while in Jerusalem and will ultimately be transported in bonds to Rome to present his case before Caesar. In this passage, we will see striking similarities to the uproar that was caused by Demetrius in Ephesus, and the riot that accompanied the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus.

I. Paul Reports to James and the Elders (vs. 18 – 22)

"And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present. And when he had saluted them, he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry." (Acts 21:18-19)

Paul's primary purposes for travelling to Jerusalem were threefold. First, he wanted to preach the gospel to his people:

*"Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved."
(Romans 10:1)*

"For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh:" (Romans 9:3)

We discussed in the last section the belief that Paul was wrong to insist upon travelling to Jerusalem against the warnings of the Holy Ghost through the saints at Tyre, and through Agabus. However, Paul was determined to go to Jerusalem and present Christ before his people.

His second reason for going was to present an offering to the poor saints at Jerusalem that had been collected in various cities in Macedonia, Greece, and in Asia. Representatives of these churches had also accompanied Paul to present this gift. It is interesting that there is absolutely no mention of the gift at all in his discussions with James.

The third underlying reason for Paul's return to Jerusalem was not apparent until we read the narrative of his discussions with James. Paul desires to mend relations with the Jewish believers who seemed to misunderstand his ministry.

As we have already seen in Acts 15, James is now the leader of the church at Jerusalem. He was not one of the twelve, but he was the Lord's brother (Galatians 1:19); and the writer of the Epistle of James.

As in Acts 15, Paul explains to James the wonderful work of conversion among the Gentiles. The elders at Jerusalem were happy to hear about all that God was doing with the Gentiles. However, they are very concerned that Paul is encouraging the Jewish believers to abandon their adherence to the customs of the Jewish faith:

"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: 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. What is it therefore? the multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that thou art come." (Acts 21:20-22)

Paul will deal extensively with this issue in his letter to the Hebrews, but for now he goes out of his way to ensure the brethren that these charges were false. It is no wonder that the Epistle to the Hebrews was anonymous as Paul certainly had many among the Jewish believers that had a problem with him.

II. James Requests for Paul to Participate in a Jewish Ritual (vs. 23 – 26)

James suggests a solution to the problem:

"Do therefore this that we say to thee: We have four men which have a vow on them; 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." (Acts 21:23-24)

You will notice in v 25 that James is very careful to explain that nothing like this was expected of the Gentile believers, as they had already established back at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15:

"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." (Acts 21:25)

The vow referred to here was the vow of a Nazarite. Paul had participated in this vow earlier at the end of the second journey. (Acts 18:18)

According to Manners and Customs of the Bible:

This institution was a symbol of a life devoted to God and separated from all sin—a holy life (Numbers 6:2–21). The vow of a Nazarite involved these three things.

1. Abstinence from wine and strong drink.
2. Refraining from cutting their hair during the whole period of the continuance of the vow.
3. Avoidance of contact with the dead.

When the period of the continuance of the vow came to an end, the Nazarite had to present himself at the door of the sanctuary with three things.

1. A male lamb of the first year for a burnt offering.
2. A ewe lamb of the first year for a sin-offering.
3. A ram for a peace-offering.

After these sacrifices were offered by the priest, the Nazarite cut off his hair at the door and threw it into the fire under the peace-offering.

For some reason, probably during his work at Corinth, Paul himself took on the Nazarite vow. This could only be terminated by his going up to Jerusalem to offer up his hair, which until then was to be left uncut. But it seems to have been allowable for persons at a distance to cut their hair, which was to be brought up to Jerusalem, where the ceremony was completed. This Paul did at Cenchrea just before setting out on his voyage into Syria (Acts 18:18).

In our text-verse, Paul took on the Nazarite vow again at the Feast of Pentecost. One commentator writes: "The ceremonies involved took a longer time than Paul had at his disposal, but the law permitted a man to share the vow if he could find companions who had gone through the prescribed ceremonies, and who permitted him to join their company. This permission was commonly granted if the newcomer paid all the fees required from the whole company (fees to the Levites for cutting the hair and fees for sacrifices) and finished the vow along with the others. Four Jewish Christians were performing the vow, and would admit Paul to their company, provided he paid their expenses.

Paul consented, paid the charges, and when the last seven days of the vow began, he went with them to live in the temple, giving the usual notice to the priests that he had joined in regular fashion, was a sharer with the four men, and that his vow would end with theirs. Nazarites retired to the temple during the last period of seven days, because they could be secure there against any accidental defilement."

As to the duration of a Nazarite's vow, everyone was left at liberty to fix his own time. There is mention made in the Scriptures of only three who were Nazarites for life, Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptist (Judges 13:4, 5; 1 Samuel 1:11, Luke 1:15). In its ordinary form, however, the Nazarite's vow lasted only thirty and, at most, one hundred, days.¹

Again, we are faced with the question: should Paul have participated in this? I am not opposed to Paul's participating in a voluntary time of consecration as a declaration of his devotion to

¹ Freeman, J. M., & Chadwick, H. J. (1998). *Manners & customs of the Bible* (pp. 533–535). North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers.

the Lord, but I do have trouble with the fact that animal sacrifices were made to signify the end of the vow. Though Paul was in no way equating these sacrifices with his salvation, they were a part of the Jewish custom that was done away with when the Lord was crucified on the Cross of Calvary. I am sure that to Paul, they were merely memorials, but I wonder if he might have gone too far to mend relations with the Jewish believers. Paul was completely under grace. He didn't have to do this, or not do it; but he wanted to help heal the division that had already existed between these Jewish believers and him.

"For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. 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; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you." (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)

Paul decides that participating in this vow with these four men was the right thing to do:

"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." (Acts 21:26)

Paul did warn the Gentiles not to get involved in the old Jewish religion (Gal. 4:1–11); but he nowhere told the Jews that it was wrong for them to practice their customs, *so long as they did not trust in ceremony or make their customs a test of fellowship* (Rom. 14:1–15:7). There was freedom to observe special days and diets, and believers were not to judge or condemn one another. The same grace that gave the Gentiles freedom to abstain also gave the Jews freedom to observe. All God asked was that they receive one another and not create problems or divisions.²

Traditional Jewish worship was practiced by believers up until the destruction of the temple in 70 AD.

² Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Ac 21:18). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Practical Principle

You will most likely at one point in your life be asked to do something that will seem questionable. You may be thinking that you are compromising your faith by acquiescing to whatever it is. Two things that you need to consider:

1. Do you have the right motive?
2. Are you sending the right message? (See Romans 14)

III. Paul is Roughed Up by the Religious Leaders (vs. 27 – 30)

"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, 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. (For they had seen before with him in the city Trophimus an Ephesian, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.) And all the city was moved, and the people ran together: and they took Paul, and drew him out of the temple: and forthwith the doors were shut." (Acts 21:27-30)

Somebody, probably a Jew (not a Christian Jew) from Ephesus, spotted Paul earlier in the week with Trophimus in the city of Jerusalem, and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple with him. These charges were false, but it is hard to convince a mob of the truth.

In the temple, separating the court of the Gentiles from the other courts, stood a wall beyond which no Gentile was allowed to go (note Ephesians 2:14). On the wall was this solemn inscription: "No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the sanctuary and enclosure. Anyone who is caught so doing will have himself to blame for his ensuing death." The Romans had granted the Jewish religious leaders' authority to deal with anybody who broke this law, and this included the right of execution. This law plays an important role in what happened to Paul a week after he and the four Nazarites began their purification ceremonies.³

As we have already mentioned, this mob will act much the same way that the mob acted when Jesus was before Pilate (v. 36 "Away with him"), or as the religious leaders did with Stephen, or as the Ephesians acted when they thought Paul was attacking their precious Diana.

³ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Ac 21:27). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Practical Principle

Be careful that you do not get carried away with the mob mentality. Listening and making decisions and judgments based on unsubstantiated rumors is not wise.

IV. Paul is Rescued By the Chief Captain (vs. 31 – 40)

As Paul was being beaten to death, word got to the chief captain, Claudius Lysius, that there was a great uproar in the temple area, he came with two centurions, and perhaps two hundred soldiers to settle the crowd. They took Paul away from the Jews who were killing him. Claudius could not ascertain the root of the problem, so he opted to remove Paul, not only for his protection, but also so he could be interrogated. Somehow Claudius received information that Paul was a troublemaking Egyptian (v. 38). When Claudius finds out that he could speak Greek, he permits Paul to speak with the Jews, no doubt, so that he could also find out what was going on.

In chapter 22, we will learn what Paul has to say to his people.