

We learned two weeks ago, from vv1-14, that Paul was determined to arrive at Jerusalem (even though he was warned by the prophet Agabus what would happen to him if he did). And so after the disciples tried to persuade him not to go, we learn from v14, that they resigned themselves to the sovereign will of God.

Thus, v15 recounts Paul's (and the other disciples) return to Jerusalem. If you remember, this is the conclusion to his third and final missionary journey. According to v16, when they had come to Jerusalem, "the brethren received us gladly." And then, "On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present" (v18). He then reports to them "those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry" (v19). V20—"And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord." This leads us to the words of the Jerusalem elders in v20b and following (a passage I want to consider under three headings).

I. A Question (vv15-22)

II. A Solution (vv23-25)

III. A Reaction (vv26-36)

I. A Question (vv15-22)

1. Verses 20-21—"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; 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.'"
2. These are the words of James and the Jerusalem elders (James being a leader in the church in Jerusalem and the brother of Jesus).
3. Having rejoiced at the news of the Gentiles, they also reported that many of the Jews also believed (that is, the gospel).
4. (1) Who they are—they are simply referred to as "believing Jews" who were "all zealous for the law."
5. I take this to mean, while they were true believers, they nevertheless remained obedient to the OC ceremonial laws.
6. We have to remember how radical this change was—for generations they religiously kept these laws.
7. And so while they were commanded under the OC, as they were fulfilled in Christ, they were no longer binding.
8. It was for this reason, many (if not most) of the Jews, had a difficulty time transitioning from the Old to the NC.
9. (2) What they heard—simply put, they had heard that Paul taught the Jews to forsake Moses, "saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs."
10. By "customs" is meant all of the ceremonial laws of the OC, which could be summarized by diet and days.
11. By "diet" is meant all of the dietary restrictions and by "days" is meant all of the OC Sabbath festivals (weekly, monthly, and yearly).
12. The Jews were very zealous for these laws (including circumcision) as they separated them from the Gentiles.

13. And these Jews had heard rumors that Paul was teaching Jews to forsake Moses (that they, no longer were bound by these ceremonial laws.
14. Is what they heard true? Did Paul teach the Jews to forsake Moses? Well, yes and no—in one sense yes, he taught them to forsake Moses as a means of justification.
15. But he never spoke evil of Moses, and he also made allowance for Jews whose conscience was weak.
16. So in one sense what these Jews heard was true—Paul did teach believing Jews that they no longer had to obey the ceremonial law.
17. But he also gave allowance for those who were weak, providing they did not believe these laws made them more holy.

## II. A Solution (vv23-25)

1. Verses 23-25 recount a suggested solution given by James and the elders with respect to the situation.
2. It basically concerned two things—it first concerned the Jews (vv23-24) and the second the Gentiles (v25).
3. (1) The Jews, v23—"Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow"—that is, four men who were apart of the Jerusalem church.
4. These man had taken a Nazarite vow as found back in Numbers 6:1-8—they were refrain from wine and shaving their head.
5. The point of this vow was to separate yourself from such basic needs, while fasting and seeking the face of God.
6. V24—"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 yourselves also walk orderly and keep the law."
7. After seven days, those who made a vow were washed with water, offered sacrifices, and cut their hair.
8. Notice how Paul is exhorted to assist them in these things—he was to pay the expenses of the sacrifices.
9. V24b—"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."
10. In other words, this way the other Jews would get the word that Paul was not an enemy to the law of Moses.
11. Now, it's important to keep in mind, we are not here talking about keeping the law as a means of justification.
12. Put very simply, the apostles were not against certain Jews continuing in a some of the OC ceremonial laws.
13. Providing two things were true—first, these things were not to be kept for our justification with God (these things did not bring them closer to God); second, this allowance was temporary and transitional.
14. 1Cor.9:19-23—"For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; 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; 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; to the weak I became as weak, that I might twin the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some."

15. Dennis Johnson—"Many Jews had received misinformation about Paul's teaching and conduct among the Jewish Dispersion. Enemies of the gospel reported that Paul was urging Jews who trusted Jesus to abandon the Mosaic distinctives that had set Israel apart from the nations, particularly the circumcision of their children and customs such as the kosher dietary restrictions. Paul's epistles show that, while he insisted that circumcision not be imposed on Gentiles, he never demanded that Jewish believers abandon it. Its presence or absence was irrelevant to a person's relationship to God. In fact, for the sake of winning more Gentiles and Jews to Christ, in the liberty he enjoyed under Christ's law Paul himself was prepared either to live outside the Mosaic ceremonial regulations or to abide by them. In Corinth Paul had fulfilled a Nazirite vow (18:18), and his hurry to reach Jerusalem for Pentecost showed that he still valued Israel's calendar of festivals (20:6; 16)."
16. (2) The Gentiles, v25—"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."
17. Here James (and the other elders) basically repeat what was stated back in chapter 15, when they drafted a letter for believing Gentiles.
18. All the things mentioned, things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality, all have to do with pagan worship.
19. In short, the believing Jews were permitted to keep the ceremonial law providing they did not do so for their justification.
20. And the believing Gentiles, who had never kept these laws, are merely exhorted to stay clear of their former ways.

### III. A Reaction (vv26-36)

1. V26—"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."
2. Because Paul intended to assist these four men, he too had to undergo a week-long purification with them.
3. Thus Paul entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, and to purchase sacrifices to be offered (he was making preparation for when the week-long purification ended).
4. (1) The reaction of the Jews (vv27-30), v27—"Now when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him."
5. It's evident these are different Jews than those mentioned in v20—those were believers these are unbelievers.
6. As they were from Asia Minor, they were likely in Jerusalem in order to celebrate the Day of Pentecost.
7. Having ceased Paul, they cried out, v28—"Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore, he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place."
8. They claimed that Paul spoke against (blasphemed) all that was holy (the Jews, the law, and the temple).

9. Furthermore, they claimed he also brought Greeks (Gentiles) into the temple and has defiled this holy place (v28).
10. You might remember that the temple had an inner and outer court—the inner court was for Jews and the outer for Gentiles.
11. We learn from v29, that the Jews were also wrong in this accusation, as Paul merely had a Greek friend who accompanied him in the city.
12. V30—"And all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut."
13. That is, the priests closed the doors of the temple, in fear that blood would be shed (which would defile the temple).
14. (2) The reaction of the Gentiles (vv31-36), v31—"Now as they were seeking to kill him, news came to the commander of the garrison that all Jerusalem was in an uproar."
15. Within vv32-33 we learn that the Roman soldiers assumed custody of Paul and sought to question who he was and what he had done (v33).
16. V34—"And some among the multitude cried one thing and some another. So when he could not ascertain the truth because of the tumult, he commanded him to be taken in to the barracks."
17. The multitude was worked up into a frenzy—everyone shouting and speaking over each other at the same time.
18. In fact, it's very likely that most people failed to even understand what precisely Paul was being charged with.
19. Verses 35-36—"When he reached the stairs, he had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob. For the multitude of the people followed after, crying out, 'Away with him!'"
20. That is, the mob was desirous of killing Paul, and would have, if they would have gotten a hold of him.
21. Jn.19:15—"But they cried out, 'Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!' Pilate said to them, 'Shall I crucify your King?' The chief priests answered, 'We have no king but Caesar!'"
22. And so, we leave the apostle Paul in Roman custody, a place he will remain throughout the rest of the book.

#### IV. Lessons

1. Here I want to briefly summarize this passage with three broad lessons that are both theological and practical.
2. But before I do that, I want to say something about these two words theological and practical—these are not enemies.
3. The Bible is filled with theology and it's filled with practice—these must be wed together as husband and wife.
4. (1) A picture of a NT church—here I want to point out that within this passage we have an illustration of healthy church life.
5. As I've said before, while there are unique things within this book (as it's the acts of the apostles), it nevertheless provides us with much instruction on how NT churches function.
6. (a) They are led by their own elders—that is, each church is to be overseen or ruled by their own elders.
7. Now, it's true that the church in Jerusalem also had an apostle, but this wasn't true of every NT church (in fact, it's likely that at this point, James is one of the few apostles alive).

8. (b) They are comprised of different people—the Jerusalem church had Jewish as well as Gentile members.
9. (c) They rejoice in other churches—if you remember, Paul's home or sending church was in Antioch.
10. In each three of his missionary journeys, Paul left from the church at Antioch, and with regards to the first, he reported back to Antioch.
11. Now, it's very possible, and I would argue even likely, that had Paul not been arrested he would have returned to Antioch.
12. If you recall, there were two basic reasons for Paul to come to Jerusalem—to preach to the masses who came for the Day of Pentecost, and to bring the donation received from the other churches, for the Jerusalem church (24;17).
13. But here's my point—even though Jerusalem wasn't his home church, they received him gladly, and rejoiced in his success (church in Donora, PA).
14. (2) A reminder of Christian liberty—here I want to discuss a topic that's often overlooked and/or misunderstood.
15. The Scriptures portray our Savior as a liberator who liberates or delivers His people from various things.
16. Jn.8:36—"Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed"—but what are they free from?
17. Well—we are free from the penalty and mastery of sin; free from Satan as a master; and free from this world as an object of our supreme love.
18. But all Christians are also delivered from the law as a broken covenant and a means of gaining acceptance.
19. This is what Paul meant when he said—"for you are not under law but under grace"—you are no longer condemned by the law as a broken covenant, and who've been liberated from it as a means of acceptance.
20. But there are other aspects of our liberty unique to us as NT Christians—there are unique liberties of the NC.
21. 2LBC (21:1 – Of Christian Liberty)—"The liberty which Christ has purchased for believers under the Gospel, consists in their freedom from the guilt of sin, the condemning wrath of God, the rigor and curse of the law, and in their being delivered from this present evil world, bondage to Satan, and dominion of sin, from the evil of afflictions, the fear and sting of death, the victory of the grace, and everlasting damnation."
22. 2LBC (21:1)—"All which were common also to believers under the law for the substance of them; but under the NT the liberty of Christians is further enlarged, in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish church was subjected."
23. Notice, our confession rightly says, the previous liberties "were also common to believers under the OT."
24. And yet, "under the NT the liberty of Christians is further enlarged, in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law."
25. This refers to circumcision and the customs (v21)—dietary restrictions, OT festivals, and grooming limitations.
26. True believers under the OT were under this yoke—these were laws they had to obey from the heart.
27. (a) Let us understand it—by this I mean, let us understand how we as NT believers have unique liberty.

28. The ceremonial law had a specific and limited purpose—it distinguished the Jews from all other people.
29. Only the Jews were circumcised—only the Jews had dietary and grooming restrictions so that it was easy to distinguish them.
30. But here's what we must remember—these were temporary and intended to point to spiritual realities.
31. All of these foretold something—they pointed to a moral and ethical change that would distinguish Christians from the world.
32. Ultimately speaking, it was never about circumcision, deity or grooming restrictions, but it was about moral distinctions (Christians should look, speak, and act different).
33. (b) Let us protect it—by this I mean, let us protect this liberty from every doctrine that would threaten it.
34. And by this I do not merely mean literal circumcision, dietary and grooming restrictions—few people today are tempted to keep these.
35. But I mean anything—don't let any man-made doctrine or tradition, be forced upon you as necessary.
36. We must allow nothing to bind our consciences except for the moral law of God as summarized in the TC and brought to us from the hand of Christ.
37. (c) Let us not flaunt it—by this I mean, let us be careful not to use our liberty as an offense to other Christians.
38. Paul is a wonderful example of a Christian, who was willing to forgo his liberties for the good of others.
39. On one hand, a Christian is Christ's free man, free from all men and only bound to Christ alone; and yet, there is another sense in which, a Christian is one who willingly submits himself to all men for the good of all men.
40. In 1520 (3yrs after he posted his 95 theses, ML wrote 3 treatises wherein he addressed the errors of the RC church) (The Freedom of a Christian – 'A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all').
41. (3) An illustration of religious persecution—we find within this passage a theme that's familiar to the book of Acts (all throughout we've seen the church suffering at the hands of wicked and unbelieving Jews and Gentiles).
42. (a) It was predicted—if you remember, Paul himself was warned on a number of occasions to expect nothing else in Jerusalem.
43. And yet, Paul enters Jerusalem anyways—he had to get to Jerusalem to finish the task given him by Christ (and so too, Christ knew full well what awaited Him in Jerusalem because He expressly told the disciples – Matt.20:18 – 'Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death').
44. (b) It was universal—by this I mean, there is a sense in which in the Jews and Gentiles, he was hated by the entire world (he was hated by the Jews (his own people), the very ones he came to Jerusalem to save ('away with Him')).
45. (c) It was baseless—by this of course I mean, the accusations leveled against him were untrue and groundless (and so too, our Savior said – 'They hated Me without a cause' Jn.15:25).
46. (d) It was brutal—they beat him and would have killed him had they been given the opportunity to do so (this of course is where the two accounts differ – as our beloved Savior was crucified on a cross).