

## Scripture Reading:

**Acts 21:15** “And after those days we packed and went up to Jerusalem. **16** 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. **17** And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. **18** On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. **19** When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. **20** 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; **21** 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. **22** What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come. **23** Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. **24** 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. **25** 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.” **26** 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 is Purified for His People'

➤ Well, it is finally time for us to address Paul’s stay in Jerusalem!

Last week we spent a great deal of time in the Epistle to the Romans, a letter that was written by Paul just before making this important journey. We did so to help us understand the special place that the Jewish people had in Paul’s heart and his passion for sharing the Gospel with them. I trust it will help us to better understand the various events in our text today. When Paul and those who traveled with him arrived in Jerusalem, they received a warm welcome, most likely at the home of Mnason:

**17** “And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly.”

We are not told who these brethren were or how many joined in this welcome, but they were glad to see Paul return and would also have been very thankful for the gifts that the others had brought for those in need. Luke gives us few details about those donations or how they were sent or distributed because his focus is on the Apostle Paul’s final visit to Jerusalem.

The next morning Paul is warmly greeted by James and other leaders of the Church at Jerusalem and BOTH Paul & James have reports to give:

**19** “When [Paul] had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. **20** And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord.”

➤ We should note that this would not have been a short meeting!

Luke tells us that Paul told them in detail those things which God had done: The King James Bible puts it this way: ‘he declared particularly what things God had wrought.’ And the more modern translations say that he told them ‘one by one.’

James & the others were eager to hear such reports & Luke tells us that they glorified God and later that they had no problem with what Paul had been doing with the Gentiles.

Again, Luke makes no mention of the gifts but these Church leaders do have something important on their minds:

**“And they said to [Paul], "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law; 21 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.”**

- **First we see what Paul explained to the Church at Rome: God has not forsaken the Jewish people.**

**Not only were Paul and these leaders Jewish, but many thousands had come to embrace Jesus as the Messiah. So that we do NOT get confused, we must remember that we now have at least four different groups of Jewish people mentioned in Acts: As we shall see in the coming weeks, there are still many Jews who have hardened their hearts against Jesus, just as the Prophet Isaiah had predicted.**

**We also know that there were Jews, who are referred to as the Judaizers, who made a profession of faith, but after that looked to the law as their means of earning salvation.**

- **They troubled the Saints at Galatia and other places and were condemned by both Paul and the leaders of the Church at Jerusalem.**

**Of course we have the Jewish Church leaders who have gathered along with the Apostle Paul and most of those Jews who labored in the Gentile world who more fully understood that Jesus was serious about the destruction of Jerusalem and the physical end of the many customs of the law.**

**And finally, we now see that you also have faithful Jews who have become Christians in Jerusalem and the sounding areas who are what James calls ‘zealous for the law!’**

- **These Jewish Saints are the focus of our text and message today.**
- **NOT those with hardened hearts or those who have turned away...**

**James and the other Elders are concerned for those believers there in Jerusalem: They know that word of Paul’s arrival will quickly spread and they are rightly concerned about how they will react to his presence.**

**As we consider what happens next, we should remember our study from last week so we can see how Paul and these leaders of the Jerusalem Church saw things as natural branches who were faithful while we see them as wild branches that have been grafted in.**

- **So James offers Paul a path they would like him to follow and he agrees with them:**

**22 “What then? The assembly [referring to Jewish converts] must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come. 23 Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. 24 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. 25 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.”**

**They appeal to Paul to be careful with how he approaches the Jewish Christians in their city but they have NO problem with how Paul has taken the Gospel to the Gentiles.**

**They are reaffirming the decision by the Church Council held in Jerusalem that we studied at length in chapter 15. The actions they want Paul to take for sake of the Jewish Christians were NOT to apply to the Gentiles: These leaders were not supporting the Judaizers who Paul condemned for preaching a false Gospel.**

- **The Jewish Saints here in Jerusalem are being addressed as weaker brothers...  
NOT false brothers!**

I believe the leaders of the Jerusalem Church were concerned that these Saints might believe the false reports that had been circulated about Paul and that it would cause them to go the way of the Judaizers. Paul has the same heart for these people and agrees with their plan:

26 “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.”

- Now if we are going to learn the right lessons for today from this passage, we need to more fully understand what is going on here.

As we pointed out last week, Jesus said that the Temple and Jerusalem would be destroyed and that event was now only about ten years away. I am pretty sure you would have had the same kind of spirited discussions about the end of Jerusalem that we have today regarding the Second Coming of Jesus.

Obviously the hardened Jews and the Judaizers had rejected what Jesus said and thought Jerusalem would continue to stand as the dwelling place of God and the place of sacrifice for all time.

- Paul and the Church leaders understood what Jesus taught and would have been preparing the Saints in Jerusalem to flee when the time came just as Jesus told them.

So what did the Saints that the leaders were concerned about believe? Some may have been tempted by all the talk of Jerusalem continuing to stand, & tried to spiritualize what Jesus said. Others may have believed what Jesus said and were just patiently waiting for the time to come.

We have no way of knowing for sure what all of these thousands of Saints were thinking, BUT we need to see that many of the Jewish customs continued AND that neither Paul nor the Church leaders condemned them or those who participated in them at that time!

- This is one of those places where we come to something in the Bible that does not want to fit nicely into one of our theological boxes!

We look back with almost two thousand years of history under our belts and thus we know well that Jesus meant what He said:

- Jesus was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament ceremonial Laws and thus both the Temple and the City where God dwelled were destroyed to finalize that point!

Anyone who tried to do some of what these Christians were doing today would be quickly condemned, so the tough question for us to wrestle with is why Paul and these leaders did not do the same in their day?

To properly answer that question, we must honestly look at what was taking place: NO ONE reading Luke's orderly account in that day could have misunderstood what was happening...

- Remember, these types of practices were going on all the time in Jerusalem and were well known in all Jewish circles.

For us to be more familiar, we need to quickly go back and review just what the Nazirite vow that these four men had taken involved:

Numbers 6:1 “1 Then Jehovah spoke to Moses, saying, 2 "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When either a man or woman consecrates an offering to take the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to Jehovah, 3 he shall separate himself from wine and similar drink; he shall drink neither vinegar made from wine nor vinegar made from similar drink; neither shall he drink any grape juice, nor eat fresh grapes or raisins. 4 All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, from seed to skin. 5 All the days of the vow of his separation no razor shall come upon his head; until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to Jehovah, he shall be holy. Then he shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow. 6 All the days that he separates himself to the Lord he

shall not go near a dead body. 7 He shall not make himself unclean even for his father or his mother, for his brother or his sister, when they die, because his separation to God is on his head. 8 All the days of his separation he shall be holy to the Lord. ...”

Moses goes on to give more details about avoiding the dead, but we should note that someone who took a vow had to avoid three things to demonstrate their separation and holiness:

- They could partake of nothing derived from the vine, they could not cut their hair and they could have NO contact with the dead.

This is what these four men had done for whatever time they had taken the vow *[explain the vows & timing]* These four men were near the end of their vows and would soon be doing what Moses goes on to outline and they needed help with the expenses which is where Paul comes in:

- Luke does NOT tell us that Paul took a Nazirite vow!
- However, to help with the expenses and to be at the Temple he would need to be purified since he had traveled with, and eaten with, Gentiles.

The regulation for such purification is found in Numbers 19:12:

“He shall purify himself with the water on the third day and on the seventh day; then he will be clean. But if he does not purify himself on the third day and on the seventh day, he will not be clean.”

This is why Paul went with them to the Temple to make the arrangements: He would submit to the two washings and be ready after seven days to assist these four men with the completion of their vows... The Church leaders knew this would all take place for all the Saints to see and that they would understand that the rumors about Paul were false.

Well, so far our modern sensibilities have not been greatly offended: We are OK with people fasting or taking a vow and we can easily relate those purification washings to baptism so there is no reason to accuse any of them of preaching a false Gospel, yet! However, we need to understand that sacrifices would have been involved in the completion of the vows and that this is what Paul was willing to pay for! Moses gave great detail for how the vow was to be concluded:

13 “Now this is the law of the Nazirite: When the days of his separation are fulfilled, he shall be brought to the door of the tabernacle of meeting. 14 And he shall present his offering to Jehovah: one male lamb in its first year without blemish as a burnt offering, one ewe lamb in its first year without blemish as a sin offering, one ram without blemish as a peace offering, 15 a basket of unleavened bread, cakes of fine flour mixed with oil, unleavened wafers anointed with oil, and their grain offering with their drink offerings. *[those expenses that Paul covered]* 16 Then the priest shall bring them before Jehovah and offer his sin offering and his burnt offering; 17 and he shall offer the ram as a sacrifice of peace offering to Jehovah, with the basket of unleavened bread; the priest shall also offer its grain offering and its drink offering. 18 Then the Nazirite shall shave his consecrated head at the door of the tabernacle of meeting, and shall take the hair from his consecrated head and put it on the fire which is under the sacrifice of the peace offering. 19 And the priest shall take the boiled shoulder of the ram, one unleavened cake from the basket, and one unleavened wafer, and put them upon the hands of the Nazirite after he has shaved his consecrated hair, 20 and the priest shall wave them as a wave offering before Jehovah; they are holy for the priest, together with the breast of the wave offering and the thigh of the heave offering. After that the Nazirite may drink wine.’ 21 “This is the law of the Nazirite who vows to Jehovah the offering for his separation, and besides that, whatever else his hand is able to provide; according to the vow which he takes, so he must do according to the law of his separation.”

- I think you can see why anyone who did such things today would be labeled as a false teacher at best!
- So why was it allowed then?
- Why did the Apostle Paul go along with the suggestion of these church leaders?
- Was it not Paul who declared that anyone who preached another Gospel should be cursed?

ALL true and that is why this text is a tough one to handle IF we handle it honestly...

We can pretend that these men were doing some sort of 'Nazirite light' type of vow and did not really participate in the Temple sacrifices.

We can side with some commentators who simply say that Paul and these Church leaders were wrong to allow such things and give their approval: In fact some hold that this is exactly why Paul got in so much trouble!

- Either of those options make us feel better, but they do NOT agree with the text or its context!

We need to step back and ponder a question that we do not often ask and perhaps some have never asked... There were approximately forty years from the time that the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost until the final destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. As we see in our text and other places in Acts, thousands and thousands of Jews were converted in this time. Did they all immediately stop all of the customs they had participated in with regard to the law and the Temple?

Again with 20-20 hindsight, we know that the Temple and Jerusalem were destroyed and that we are NEVER to return to the Old Testament animal sacrifices that pointed to Jesus... To do so would be to declare that His sacrifice was not THE great sacrifice.

- But did these Saints see it that way?

After they came to faith and believed that Jesus was the Messiah who came as the Lamb of God to save His people from their sins, did this suddenly give new meaning to many of the rituals they had long practiced? Could these four men have taken their Nazirite vows because they were excited about knowing the Savior and wanted to demonstrate how serious they were about serving Him?

Could these four have been willing, in faith, to offer those required sacrifices because they wanted to obey all that God had instructed them to do AND because they now understood more than ever how important the TRUTH that those sacrifices and customs represented really was!?

Again, if we approach our text honestly, the answer has to be yes. With that said, we must remember that these men and the other Saints were NOT the Judaizers that Paul condemned: They were not taking vows and making sacrifices in order to be saved or even to be proud of their Jewishness:

- They were faithfully serving Jesus under the light they had been given!
- The Apostle Paul had a great love for his people as we saw at length last week.

I strongly believe that here in Jerusalem Paul has given us a great example of how we are to reach out to others with that same love without compromising the Gospel!

I am going to conclude with some very familiar passages from the letter that Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth sometime after the Church Council at Jerusalem.

As we listen to Paul's passion and instructions, I hope that what we have considered here this morning regarding his latest visit to Jerusalem will give us new insights to these truths and new challenges for how we are to serve the Lord of Lords today:

**I Corinthians 9: 16** “For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel! **17** For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship. **18** What is my reward then?

That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel. **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.

**23** Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.”

**Communion Meditation:** I Corinthians 9:24 [*given just before his admonition on Communion*]

“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize?

Run in such a way that you may obtain it. **25** And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown.

**26** Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. **27** But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”