

**Paul Alleviates a Controversy**  
**Acts 21:18-26**

It's great to sing together, but it's also great to enjoy the giftedness of other people. This weekend we once again get to experience the abundance of people that are gifted in so many ways to serve us, and we just want to realize that that's not probably normal. We are extra blessed in the church to enjoy varieties of people that are very talented, and the Lord blesses us through them. Thank you for all that.

In this Christmas season, I've mentioned this before, not to beat a dead horse, but things today aren't always as they've been, that what we know of as the Christmas season hasn't always been the Christmas season throughout the history of our land. Our country in the early days in the 1600's and the 1700's, the people that were the most connected to us, the people that were Bible-believing Christians, were of the mindset that all the stuff and the trappings that surrounded Christmas was not a plus but a minus, was a negative not a positive; so much so that in various cities, they flexed their political muscle and got it to be declared illegal. So, as time went on, as the centuries moved along, gradually by the 1800's, Christmas was more recognized, even set apart as a holiday when you get time off work and things like that with the industrial revolution, until we arrive to today when so much now of Christmas is embraced by our society that even non-Christians would see a lot of value in the season. When I was growing up (I remember my mother), I didn't grow up in a Christian home, but my mother felt like my friend, my grade school friend who was from a family who was Jehovah Witness and couldn't celebrate Christmas, was just so deprived, and this was so sad.

So, what is at the moment hasn't always been, and we have a society that we have opportunities to minister to according to their understanding and what they were willing to accept, and we have great opportunities, and we try to take advantage of those great opportunities to minister the truth of Jesus Christ. In this setting that we presently have where people will come to a concert, will come to opportunities to hear about Jesus, and we want to take advantage of that, what does this have to do with Acts chapter 21? Well, in the setting of Jerusalem, they had certain religious practices that were well-entrenched, and there's opportunities to minister in the midst of those religious expressions. And we will find that happening today as we look in

to Acts chapter 21. Grab your Bibles, and we'll be covering Acts 21:18-26, and where we are in the book of Acts is we have concluded the third missionary journey.

Paul has arrived back at Jerusalem, and now the church of Jerusalem receives him back. So, we're going to learn what transpires as he's returned back to Jerusalem, and this is verses 17-19, Paul's account to the church when he returns. Verses 18-19; "And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry." So this is now Paul arriving with Luke because we have an "us" there. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, is with Paul as they come in. From our record, it's been seven years since Paul was last in Jerusalem. The last recorded time was seven years ago back in Acts chapter 15, so some time has elapsed, and he now comes to James and the elders. James being the half-brother of Jesus. If you recall, James the apostle, back in Acts chapter 12, had been put to death by Herod. And now, this James is the same James that we find in Acts chapter 15. He's the half-brother of Jesus. He's the author of the epistle of James, and he is one of the church leaders along with the other elders that are in Jerusalem.

Also, there's no apostles here. We don't really know where they all might be at this time, but we know that Peter and other apostles have traveled. They're not here, and as we look at church tradition, it tells us that each of the apostles traveled far and wide, from Peter heading to Rome, and John out that direction to the west, to some of the lesser known apostles, like Bartholomew, heading north into Armenia and the southern parts of even as far as Russia. Thomas goes east to India - Matthew, possibly Andrew, south to Africa and Ethiopia. They spread, so we don't find them in Jerusalem or any note of them at this point in time. We have James the half-brother of Jesus and the other elders.

So, the last time that Paul was here, he gave a report of his first missionary journey in Acts chapter 15. Now, he is giving a report of what has transpired over the last seven years; "And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry." So very likely, we have some accounting of the same sorts of things we've been reading since Acts chapter 16 and the second

missionary journey, and then Acts chapter 18 and the third missionary journey. So, a great opportunity to kind of recount one by one what had transpired for us. Just to review the second missionary journey, Paul set out from Antioch with Silas across modern-day. Along the way, he picked up Timothy and the three of them headed west to Troas by the coast where they picked up Luke. And Paul had a vision of the man from Macedonia saying come. So, at this point, there was only an attempt to sort of minister to the places where they had already been.

But now, there's a movement that God directed them toward Greece across the Aegean Sea, a break through toward ministry to the Gentiles, to a whole other land. And then they moved to Philippi, encountered persecution like had happened in the first missionary journey in Lystra and Derbe and Iconium. Paul lands in jail, and there's an earthquake that frees him and releases him, and he flees Philippi south to Thessalonica where his ministry there wasn't that long, only about three weeks before the Jews oppose him and run him out of town. And they land in Berea where he gets a reception, where there's people that are really more serious about what he's saying and embrace that as the truth of God. But the Thessalonian Jews chase him down at Berea, and he has to flee there. So, he goes all the way south, Greece. In the north is Macedonia, that region in the south is Achaia, and he lands in Athens the town very filled with idols and idol worship, an idol on every corner. Paul preaches there to the Athenians, but there's not much record of a church being established there. He goes inland toward Corinth, a very immoral city. In Corinth, there's a lot of kind of like Las Vegas would be today, what we think of that, and in there, he spends quite some time, maybe a year and a half and ministers to a church that is developed in Corinth. Later, he writes a couple of books to the Corinthians and heads back to Antioch by way of Ephesus, stops by there, takes Aquila and Priscilla with him from Corinth, drops them off at Ephesus and then lands back in Antioch. That's the second missionary journey.

Now, the third missionary journey, once again Paul wants to go and visit the places where he's been to see how these people are faring, so he heads back across modern-day Turkey to Ephesus where he left Aquila and Priscilla, spends quite some time there, three years it appears, and has some challenges, some opposition because of the great god Artemis, and riot breaks out in Ephesus and controversy there. So, the church of Ephesus is a little challenged. He wants this visit, and he does, the other churches that he

had established to Philippi, down to Corinth and Achaia, and then back around again which is where we left off. In Acts chapter 20, he's back at Ephesus or nearby in Miletus, talking to the Ephesian elders, giving them encouragement to not have false teachers come and savage the church. And now he's headed back to Jerusalem.

So, that's kind of where he's been, and that's what he's recounting to the church of Jerusalem all of these things that had happened. Now there's believers throughout Greece and the Word of God has spread, and they're rejoicing with this. Verse 20; "And when they heard it they began glorifying God..." so, they're very responsive to all of what they heard. This brings what's been going on in Jerusalem, so Paul lets them know what's been going on in the ministry, to Greece, to far away places. They then explain to him what's been going on in Jerusalem since he's been gone, which involves some accusations against him. So, we'll read in verse 20. So, they're "...glorifying God; and they said to him, 'You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.'" So, when the Jewish people had believed in Jesus, there's many thousands of them, many thousands of the people of Jerusalem and surrounding areas had been responding to Jesus, and they do a very natural thing and that is they become zealous for the law.

I remember when I became a Christian at 19, and with Christmas, I suddenly found, oh, all this stuff that I kind of have some vague knowledge of about Jesus in the midst of the Christmas season, suddenly became much more meaningful. And so, you want to attach yourself to what you know of God, and the same thing was true for them. They were attaching themselves zealously for what they knew of the Old Testament Law. They were zealous for it in their attempt to follow Jesus, so this created some challenges because as verse 21 notes, "...they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses..." So, there's a different issue here back in Acts chapter 15. The issue was what was required for the Gentiles. Now, the issue is what is allowed for the Jews who are believers. So, there was a conclusion about what was required in Acts chapter 15; they weren't required to obey the Old Testament Law. Peter said it this way, how can we expect them to carry the yoke that neither we

nor our forefathers were able to carry. So, that was the conclusion of Acts chapter 15. Now, there's the issue of what about the Jews? Were they required to forsake the Old Testament Law? Upon faith in Christ, should they do away with that? Because they hadn't been, and they'd understood that was what Paul was teaching. Was that what Paul was teaching?

As you read the epistle, should you conclude when Paul says in Romans which he'd already written at the end of the third missionary journey that we are released from the Law? Christ is the end of the Law. There is no value in circumcision as we find him writing about. Well, the Jews had heard about Paul, but what they'd heard was untrue because there were other things in the context of what he was saying that were not encouraging the Jews to forsake the Old Testament Law. His actual teaching was not that Jews should forsake the Law of Moses, but rather, he encouraged the Jews to continue the practice of circumcision. 1 Corinthians 7:18; "Was any man called when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God. Each man must remain in that [a]condition in which he was called." Also, when he traveled in the second missionary journey and added Timothy to the ministry of him and Silas, what did he do? He had him circumcised. Timothy was half Jewish, and Paul was concerned of the ministry of the Jews. So, in order to effectively minister to the Jewish people, he had Timothy circumcised.

Also, he practiced the Jewish traditions in order to minister to the Jews better. 1 Corinthians 9:20; "To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law..." so, he practiced these. We find in Acts chapter 18, him taking a vow. So, there's things that he did to embrace the Jewish Law according to what would be effective in ministry. So, his view was not that it was imperative that the Old Testament Law be forsaken, and even he allowed for people in Romans chapter 14 who wanted to keep certain dietary laws to continue to do that, and that we shouldn't judge one another in the midst of all that. So, this, what had been heard about Paul, was completely untrue. Paul's view of circumcision and the Law was not that it should be forsaken, but that it was not essential for salvation or godliness, and there's passages for you like Galatians 5:1-6, like Ephesians 2:15, 1 Corinthians 7:18-19, that

salvation isn't dependent upon whether someone's circumcised. It's the circumcision of the heart, not the flesh.

The Law does not deliver someone to godliness, but it could be practiced if you choose to practice it. You have the freedom according to New Testament teaching to practice the Law. If you would like to adopt dietary laws, you have the freedom to do that. If you'd like to adopt the Sabbath and you'd like to keep the Sabbath holy, Saturday, you have the freedom to do that. Paul never taught that you're forbidden to do these things. So, what was being said wasn't true. Okay. So, the church still has a problem. We've got, now, people far and wide who have heard about Paul and the teachings of Paul, now thinking that Paul is demanding that the Law of Moses be forsaken. So, what does the church do? Well, they give him some directives, some plan of how to approach this difficult situation, and their approach begins in verse 22; "What, then, is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come." This demonstrates that the ministry of Paul was well-known, and Paul himself was a highly visible figure. Verse 23; "Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law."

So, they have a plan, and that plan is given with direction. You can't miss the direction they give him; "Therefore do this that we tell you." Now, if you're Paul, you might be tempted to think, whoa! I'm the apostle Paul here. Who are you, the non-apostles, to give me direction? But he doesn't do that. They're the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, and they have a concern and a knowledge of the circumstances surrounding Jerusalem, and so, they have a plan, and they direct him; "Therefore do this that we tell you." So, I'd suggest, if Paul was willing to listen to a group of godly church leaders regarding how to serve the church, how much more should we. There's people that are looking out for the whole of the church, and Paul hadn't even been there, so he defers his view of what needs to be done, whatever that might be, and fully adopts their plan, their approach. He runs the play. He goes with it, their direction. So, what is their direction? Well, he's instructed to do two things: One, to purify himself, and two, to pay the expenses of the four men who were under the vow.

So, first off this purification, you know, we can't know conclusively what this is but there is a tell-tale sign in verse 27 because there's a phrase there; "When the seven days were almost over..." So, it indicates there's like a seven-day period connected to what he's supposed to do, so that kind of points us to a purification ritual that was a seven day process that the Jews practiced upon returning from Gentile lands. So, their habit was when they were in a Gentile area and came back, they went through a purification ritual to keep themselves pure as a Jew. So, this seems to be what this probably was. He adopted Jewish traditional practices in doing this. The second thing he does is he pays "...their expenses..." Now, these expenses weren't just to shave the head, like he payed off the barber. The expenses were a little more than that. This is the dealing with the Nazarite vow that is most likely being referred to because that's the head-shaving that gets connected to that in Numbers 6:2-21, and with that there's sacrifices that will need to be offered. So, there's cost involved of paying for animals that would be sacrificed. And so, he foots the bill for these things. So, there's an approach that he adopts to join with these men in their practice of their vow and pays their expenses to support that. He is not fundamentally opposed to practicing the Law or even Jewish tradition; he's willing to do that and defer himself and his practices.

Then we get to verse 25, and there's a last statement; "But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication." So, there's also a redo of the first meeting in Jerusalem in Acts chapter 15, and what came out of that. And as you read this, there's three things that are similar and one that's dissimilar. The three things that are similar are the "...meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled..." And the one thing that is dissimilar is "...fornication." We have had quite a bit written in this book of Acts about food and dietary laws and how all foods are clean. And we have chapter 10 and chapter 11, of Peter having to have a vision, and the Lord repeatedly telling him that he can take and eat of all these unclean things and that there is no obligation to keep dietary laws from the Old Testament in order to live righteously. In the church age, we have freedom for these things, but now they give directives to these Gentiles who had believed to restrict their diet regarding food even though morally this was allowed. They had been restricted to this as they practiced their faith. Then there's the last thing which is fornication which is immoral which is clearly taught against in the New Testament as well as the Old Testament.

So therefore, what's going on here? How do you explain all this? Well, there's certain practices that the Jewish people would have been finding very abhorrent and great sensitivity to, and that's this "...meat sacrificed to idols..." And Paul even addresses that in 1 Corinthians 27-28. If there's meat sacrificed to idols and somebody invites you and "...says to you, 'This is meat sacrificed to idols,' do not eat it..." because of the perception. Now, the meat's just a meat, but when somebody views this as being significant, because now we're doing some sacrifice here, you can't participate. So, there's really issues with the Jewish sensitivities to meat that has been sacrificed to idols and certain dietary restrictions. Then we have fortification which is sort of the caricature of the Gentiles. The Jewish people looked at the Gentiles and viewed them as just a bunch of fornicators that were in wanton debauchery. So, to be specifically careful in that, lest you more validate their already preconceived judgment upon you. So, that's what was written. The Gentiles were not under the Old Testament Law. They had freedom, but they were warned to just be careful of certain things in order to minister to Jewish people successfully. That's what's going on here, and it's sort of reestablishment of what had already been stated in Acts chapter 15.

The conclusion of the Jerusalem council regarding the Gentiles was repeated in order to reaffirm that they were not under the Law of Moses. That's verse 25. There's no longer an obligation to follow the Law of Moses for the Gentiles. The reason the Gentiles were given certain instructions was because of the wide-spread practices of Judaism, and that's what the Jerusalem council said in Acts 15:21; do these things because the Christ had been preached among many Jewish people, and there's going to be a lot of issues when Gentile people practiced their faith among Jewish people. The challenge that the church had at this point in time was the difficulty of joining the Jews and the Gentiles together in one body, the church. So, how do they join together? There needs to be some accommodation and some deference to one another. The Jews should be deferential to the Gentiles, and the Gentiles should be deferential to the Jews. The Jews don't need to require the Gentiles to keep the Old Testament Law, but they do have some sensitivity that the Gentiles need to be cognizant of. That's what we found in Acts chapter 15.

But when we look at Pauls' situation here, there's some offensive practices that might be hindrances to Jewish people to come to faith. And there's

people that might think, as they look back at what Paul was required to do, that he's capitulating himself to Jewish people. There's some people that look at verse 24 and say this is the greatest mistake of Paul's ministry to put himself back under the Law, and they would think better for Paul to not do this and to teach rightly rather than to put himself back under the Old Testament Law and accommodate these practices and sort of lapse back into Jewish practices when these are not essential to godliness or salvation. So, what about all these things? Well, clearly, we have freedom to practice these, and Paul had freedom to practice these. We are free to adopt Jewish practices if we chose to, but we should understand that they are not essential to godliness. That process of understanding that they are not essential to godliness is a path that needs to be traveled. It took Peter a lot of reaffirmation by the Lord in Acts chapter 10 and 11 to embrace that all foods are clean. These Jewish people that have followed Christ to be able to better understand the role of the Old Testament Law in the New Testament age was a process. We find even this today where we have people having a hard time understanding how the Old Testament relates to the New Testament and the freedom that we have under the law of Christ. As the New Testament says this is "Love your neighbor as yourself." ... "...he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law." And we have been released from the Law, and we have the ability if we so chose to no longer keep the Sabbath, but we can hold one day above another, and each one should do what his own faith allows him to do. But some people struggle with this and find the construct upon them of the Old Testament to be binding. So, we have sensitivities here.

So, we have to recognize, at this point in time, the church of Jerusalem was in progress, and they were being transformed from the Old Testament, and Paul was needing to be sensitive to this, and he adopted Jewish practices in order for them to better understand what was necessary for godliness. The elders and Paul understood the need to make accommodations in practice in order to serve the greater whole, and that's what the leaders of Jerusalem were seeking to do, to serve the greater whole. So, there are at times our teaching cannot be effectively understood. People won't get it because they have preconceptions. Those who we minister to come to us with certain preconceptions, and we have to recognize if we're going to administer effectively that we have to work through these preconceptions in order for them to truly understand the teaching of the New Testament, and this is particularly true with cultural practices - cultural practices, and this affects

all of us. Every single one of us is surrounding us with our culture, and it's very hard to see the culture that surrounds us. This is one of the real blessings of going to a church in another culture and seeing how they conduct themselves, and then suddenly, you're saying, well, this is weird, and I don't do this, and how can they do that? And it forces us then to be driven to the Scriptures to know what is required? What is moral? What are the obligations? What does the New Testament actually teach verses what are these? Just practices that I've just kind of grown with a sense of right and wrong about, things that really aren't bad. They are just cultural practices, and this is the challenge that we have in ministry, to bring the truth of the Scriptures to people without the cultural trappings that surround ourselves.

In this day and age, I think we are living in a time and a place where we see cultural change happening faster than ever in our country, where things that used to be seen done one way are now changing and being seen and done another way. That has been happening throughout time. Culture is not stagnant. It changes but with the influx of varieties of people, culture is being impacted by this and changed. So, we have to be recognizing what is cultural, what we have options for verses what's Biblical. And what we don't have options for and what we must hold to as God's truth that will help us in ministry just like it helped Paul in ministry. And we can accommodate ourselves as he accommodated himself as we become more sensitive to what's cultural practices verses what's Biblical teaching, and we can more effectively serve people.

So, what did Paul do? Verse 26, Paul did the drill, he ran the play to a T here; "Then Paul took the men, and the next day [verse 26], purifying himself along with them, went into the temple giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them." So, he, with detail here, fulfilled this. This verse gives a sense of full completion, so we could then see the issue of Paul teaching, whether he was teaching that the Law of Moses must be forsaken. That was put to rest. No longer was that an issue. Paul serves as an example to us regarding the importance of adjusting our behavior for the sake of others. He did that. He adjusted his behavior. He could have just taught them what he had been teaching in other places in Corinth or in Philippi or in Thessalonica or in Ephesus, but he adopted certain practices because, really, actions speak louder than words. He could see, and the church of Jerusalem could see, that by practicing these things which he had the freedom to practice would take

that issue off the table and would allow the truth to be able to be understood at the pace with which they would be able to understand it, having grown up and esteemed in this Jewish system of traditions and laws. That's what Paul did. He accommodated and ministered according to the needs of the hearer for the sake of the whole.

What a great example for us. May we be willing to sacrifice our freedoms which we have in abundance for the greater goal of advancing ministry of Christ, to make adjustments to the cultural sensitivities of people around us for the sake of the truth of Christ to be more known and more understood. And when we do that, we will be more effective in helping others know Jesus and know the truth of the Scripture in accordance with their ability to understand.