

PAUL BEFORE THE ELDERS OF THE JERUSALEM CHURCH  
Acts 21:17-26

INTRODUCTION:

- A. Paul has not been here for many years
  - 1) He was here as a student of Gamaliel
  - 2) He was here to try Stephen
  - 3) He was here to stone Stephen
  - 4) He was here for letters to Damascus
  - 5) He was here after his conversion 9:26
  - 6) He was here for the council 15:5
  
- B. He received "gladly" by some vs. 17
  - 1) asmenos = "readily", "joyfully"
  
- C. Why has Paul returned to Jerusalem?
  - 1) To deliver a gift from the Gentiles-Rom. 15:25-28; Acts 24:17
  - 2) To defend the worth of the Gentiles-Galatians 2:9-10
  - 3) To be in Jerusalem on Pentecost
  - 4) To fellowship with the Elders
  - 5) To see some of his own people 23:16
  - 6) To fulfill his mission

I. Paul's Report of His Ministry vs. 18-19

- A. He was ready to meet the Elders vs. 18
  - 1) "the day following Paul went in with us unto James"
  - 2) "and all the Elders were present"
  
- B. Paul with the Elders vs. 19
  - 1) He saluted them, "to embrace", "to greet"
  - 2) He gave details of God's work
    - "declared" = exegeomai = "to lead or bring out", "unfold"
    - "particularly" = kata en ekaston = "according to one each"
  - 3) He was careful to give God the credit
  - 4) This great work had been done among the Gentiles

II. The Elder's Response to Paul's Report

- A. They glorified God vs. 20
  - 1) "glorified" = doxazo = "to glorify"
  - 2) They do not express thankfulness for Paul and his ministry
  
- B. They quickly justified themselves
  - 1) There were thousands of Jews in Jerusalem at this time who were believers
  - 2) They were all "zealous" of the law, zelotes = "to boil", "to seethe", "vehement passion". This is not a political party although one did exist at this time. Simon Zelotes, Acts 1:13



- C. Paul's presence will create problems vs. 21-22
- 1) "informed" = katecheo = "to resound", "to sound a thing over and over in one's ear" A method of oriental teaching "word upon word, line upon line"
  - 2) "that thou teachest"  
[two things not to circumcise, and to abandon the law]
  - 3) "forsake" = apostasia = "falling away"
  - 4) Did Paul teach that they "ought not" or that it wasn't necessary any longer to observe the rituals of the law?
  - 5) His presence will be noted and crowds will gather. 22b, "A crowd of them will surely gather about you, as they are certain to hear of your arrival."
- D. The challenge of James to Paul vs. 22a
- 1) "What is it therefore?"
  - 2) "What is your duty then?"
  - 3) "You must do something to prove these accusations false, for you will surely be recognized and the people will come together"
- E. Paul had an unfinished vow Acts 18:18
- 1) "having shaved his head in Cenchræa, for he had a vow"

For he had a vow. A vow is a solemn promise made to God respecting anything. The use of vows is observable throughout the Scripture. Jacob, going into Mesopotamia, vowed the tenth of his estate, and promised to offer it at Bethel to the honor of God, Genesis 28:22. Moses made many regulations in regard to vows. A man might devote himself or his children to the Lord. He might devote any part of his time or property to his service. The vows they were required sacredly to observe, Deut. 23:21-22, except in certain specified cases they were permitted to redeem that which had been thus devoted. The most remarkable vow among the Jews was that of the Nazarite, by which a man made a solemn promise to God to abstain from wine, and from all intoxicating liquors, to let the hair grow, not to enter any house polluted by having a dead body in it or to attend any funeral. This vow generally lasted 8 days, sometimes a month, sometimes during a definite period fixed by themselves, and sometimes during their whole life. When the vow expired, the priest made an offering of a he lamb for a burnt offering, a she lamb for an expiatory sacrifice, and a ram for a peace offering. The priest then, or some other person, shaved the head of the Nazarite at the door of the tabernacle, and burnt the hair on the fire of the altar. Those who made the vow out of Palestine, and who could not come to the temple when the vow was expired contented themselves with observing the abstinence required by the law, and cutting off the hair where they were. This I suppose to have been the case with Paul, his hair he cut off at the expiration of the vow at Cenchræa, though he delayed to perfect the vow with the proper ceremonies until he reached Jerusalem, Acts 21:23-24. Why Paul made this vow, or on what occasion, the sacred historian has not informed us, and conjecture, perhaps, is useless. We may observe, however, 1) that it was common for the Jews to make

such vows to God, as an expression of gratitude or of devotedness to his service, when they had been raised up from sickness, or delivered from danger or calamity. See Josephus, 1:2, 15. Vows of this nature were also made by the Gentiles on occasions of deliverance from any signal calamity (Juvenal, Sat., 12, 81). It is possible that Paul may have made such a vow in consequence of signal deliverance from some of the numerous perils to which he was exposed. But, 2) there is a reason to think that it was mainly with a design to convince the Jews that he did not despise their law, and was not its enemy. See chapter 21:22-24. In accordance with the custom of the nation, and in compliance with a law which was not wrong in itself he might have made this vow, not for a time-serving purpose, but in order to conciliate them, and to mitigate their anger against the gospel. See I Cor. 9:19-21. But where nothing is recorded, conjecture is useless. Those who wish to see the subject discussed Grotius and Kuinoel in loco; Spencer, De Legibus Hebrae., page 862; and Calmet's dictionary article Nazarite.

Barnes Notes on the Old New Testaments

- 2) Paul may have revealed this information at this time to show that he still respected the law of Moses.
- 3) This would explain why Paul entered into this circumstance with four men of the Jerusalem church.

4) 22 What is it therefore? What is to be done? What is it proper to do to avoid the effects of the evil report which has been circulated? What they deemed it proper to do is suggested in the following verses. [The multitude] The multitude of Jews. [Must needs come together] There will be inevitably a tumultuous assemblage. It will be impossible to prevent that. The reasons were, because the minds of the Jews were exceedingly agitated that one of their own countrymen had, as they understood, been advising apostasy from the religion of their fathers: because this had been extensively done in many parts of the world, and with great success; and because Paul, having, as they believed, himself apostatized from the national religion, had become very conspicuous, and his very presence in Jerusalem, as in other places, would be likely to excite a tumult. It was, therefore, the part of friendship to him and to the cause to devise some proper plan to prevent, if possible, the anticipated excitement.

23 We have four men. There are with us four men. It is evident that James and the elders meant to say that these men were connected with them in the Christian church; and the fact shows that the Christians at Jerusalem did not disregard the institutions of Moses, and had not been so far enlightened in the doctrines of Christianity as to forsake yet the ceremonial rights of the Jews. Which have a vow on them. Which have made a vow. See notes on chapter 18:18. From the mention of shaving the head [in vs. 24], it is evident that the vow which they had taken was that of the Nazarite; and that as the time of their vow was about expiring, they were about to be shaven, in accordance with the custom usual on such occasions. See notes on chapter 18:18. These persons Paul could join, and thus show decisively that he did not intend to under value or disparage the laws of Moses when those laws were understood as mere ceremonial observances.

Barnes notes of the Old and New Testaments

F. The recommendation of Elders vs. 23-24

- 1) "Do therefore this that we say to thee:"
- 2) "We have four men which have a vow on them."
- 3) "them take and purify thyself with them."

agnizo = "to make [agnos] = "clean",  
"pure from defilement",] "to prepare one's self by  
purification"

- 4) "and be at charges with them", "that they may shave their heads"

24. Them take. Take with you. Join yourself with them. And purify thyself with them. Join them in observing the forms of purification prescribed by the law of Moses and the observance of the vow of the Nazarite. The purifying here refers to the vows of sanctity which the Nazarites were to observe. They were to abstain from wine and strong drink; they were to eat no grapes, moist or dried; they were to come near no dead body, nor to make themselves "unclean" for their father, mother, brother, or sister, when they died, Numbers 6:3-7; and they were to present an offering when the days of the vow were completed, Numbers 6:8.

And be at charges with them. Share with them the expense of the offerings required when the vow is completed. Those offerings were a ram of a year old for a burnt offering, a sheep of the same age for a sin offering, a ram for a thank-offering, a basket of unleavened cakes, and a libation of wine. See Numbers 6:13-20. That they may shave their heads. The shaving of the head, or the cutting off the hair which had been suffered to grow during the continuance of the vow, was an observance indicating that the vow had been performed. Paul was requested to join with them in the expense of the offerings, that thus, the whole of the ceremonies having been observed, their heads might be shaved as an indication that every part complied with.

Barnes Notes on The Old and New Testaments, Albert Barnes

III. Their Decision Concerning the Gentiles is Still Valid-vs.25

- A. "As touching the Gentiles which believe, we have written and concluded that they observe no such thing"
  - 1) "written" = episello = "to send word to anyone"
  - 2) "concluded" = krino = "to divide", "separate", "judge"
  
- B. They should consider four things
  - 1) "Keep themselves from things offered to idols" I Cor. 8:4-9
  - 2) "and from blood"
  - 3) "and from strangled" I Tim. 4:1-5
  - 4) "and from fornication"

IV. Paul Follows Their Advise vs. 26

- A. "Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself with them entered into the temple"
  - 1) "on this Paul joined the men"
  - 2) "placing himself under the same vow"
  
- B. "to signify the accomplishment of the days of purification, until that an offering should be offered for everyone of them"
  - 1) "signify" = diaggello = "report further"
  - 2) "accomplishment" = ekplerosis = "entire fulfillment"

The only thing we can do!

V. Paul's Decision Examined by the Scriptures

We have the right!

- A. Paul had rebuked Peter for "dissimulation"
  - 1) Galatians 2:11-13
  - 2) hupokrisis = "stage-playing", "playing a part"
  
- B. He had refused to have Titus circumcised
  - 1) Galatians 2:1-6
  - 2) Circumcision does not affect anything
  
- C. He commanded the Galatians to stand fast
  - 1) Galatians 5:1
  - 2) He did not preach circumcision 5:11
  
- D. The book of Hebrews condemns law and ceremony keeping
  - 1) Ceremony is for the immature
  - 2) Maturity is better

V. Paul's Actions Viewed From Motive

A. Paul's great burden for Israel

- 1) Romans 10:1-
- 2) Romans 9:1-3

B. Paul's explanation

- 1) I Cor. 9:19-23
- 2) "that I might gain the move"

C. Motive does not justify or purify!

- 1) What about mercy killing?
- 2) Is it proper to say, "I would do anything to get people to church or to see souls saved?"
- 3) God hasn't told us to do, "everything you can". He has commanded us to witness and to preach.
- 4) But what if that doesn't work?
- 5) He has limited us to the truth and that which gives glory to truth.

VI. Did This Strategy Work?

A. Paul did something that had no value or profit to himself.

- 1) He could be no cleaner than the blood of Jesus that had cleansed him.
- 2) He could have no sin forgiven because of it that he could not have without it!
- 3) He could not be made better by it than he could be without it.
- 4) This was for another's eyes.

B. Paul's purpose was not realized vs. 27

- 1) These people cried, "away with him"
- 2) His brethren did not defend him vs. 36

C. The Elder's purpose was not realized

- 1) They sought peace
- 2) The plan started a riot

VII. Some Valuable Truths

A. We must never sacrifice principle in the hope of gaining an opportunity.

- 1) We never win opportunity this way
- 2) Paul at Philippi did not accommodate the woman with a spirit or the Jailer.

B. Love must ever be loyal to truth

- 1) You don't love more because you will do anything. Love restrains and gives.
- 2) Most people who will do anything, do it for themselves. [Jimmy Swaggart]

- C. High spiritual exaltation may create an opportunity for weakness
  - 1) When we are beaten with rods, our resolve is usually quite strong
  - 2) Promotion and success may make us vulnerable to temptation
  
- D. God's power to use our blunders are a thing of wonder
  - 1) Paul will be spared!
  - 2) His nephew is an instrument

VIII. What Happened to the Church at Jerusalem?

- A. It never seems to rid itself of the fetters of Law-Keeping
  - 1) James, the Pastor, seems more intent on sending out goon-squads to protect Jewish customs than in sending out missionaries.
  - 2) The largest church in history with the largest number of Pastors in history soon fades from the pages of history.
  
- B. They experienced the "spiritual aids" of the church and that is the inability to resist the destruction of compromise.
  - 1) We must do this or lose our Law-Keeping member.