

'Acts' - Extra Teaching Points #30

Acts 21:15-36(NASB)

Acts 21:15

After these days we got ready and started on our way up to Jerusalem. ¹⁶ Some of the disciples from Caesarea also came with us, taking us to Mnason of Cyprus, a disciple of long standing with whom we were to lodge. ¹⁷ After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. ¹⁸ And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. ¹⁹ After he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. ²⁰ And when they heard it they began 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; ²¹ 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. ²² "What, then, is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. ²³ "Therefore do this that we tell you. **We have four men who are under a vow; ²⁴ 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. ²⁵ "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."** ²⁶ Then Paul took the men, and the next day, 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.**

Q: While Paul was making disciples among the Gentiles, the Jerusalem church had been making disciples among the Jews. In fact, there were thousands of Jewish disciples in Jerusalem who were "zealous for the Law" and ready to go after Paul, even though the leaders had accepted him. What insight does this give us into churches?

- It can take a long time to un-teach deeply held convictions!
- Being zealous for the Law – and dangerously wrong – didn't mean they weren't really disciples... but they were obviously not pleasing Jesus or honoring His Name.
- About 15 years from this time, these disciples, who were zealous for the Law, would see their temple and their city destroyed by the Roman army, functionally ending Judaism and everything they were zealous for.
 - How must it have felt for them to have Jesus rip away from them the things they refused to repent of?
 - How must it have felt for them to realize they had been so wrong and had done so much needless damage?

Q: Were the rumors about Paul true? Had he been teaching the Jews, among the Gentiles, to not circumcise their children or walk according to the Jewish customs?

- No! Paul told the Gentiles **they** didn't need to do those things; but he never told the Jewish converts that.

Q: So if Paul told the Gentiles they didn't need to be circumcised, why didn't he tell the Jews **they didn't need to be circumcised either?**

- Paul was trying to help real people, who really wanted to be loyal to Jesus, figure out how to do that in their real lives.
 - Paul was teaching people how to have a relationship with God... not just God's rules.
 - The principles involved in having a right relationship with God, will cause something to be *right* in one situation... and *wrong* in another.
- **In this situation, where circumcision is involved, Paul said that a man should not seek to change his state... whatever it may be. ([Gal. 5:6](#); [6:15](#))**

- If you are zealous for rules, you are going to have a problem with Paul’s “complicated” approach to following Jesus!
- Living for God isn’t always simple; sometimes it gets complicated trying figure out how to live for God in the situation you are in at that moment.
 - “Zealots”, then and today, are hard to convince they need to look for the deeper principles of relationship with God, rather than a black and white set of rules!

Extra Info on the Circumcision debate in Paul’s day:

Circumcision was seen as crucially important to the Jews... especially after the Maccabean revolt, which occurred between the Old and New Testament periods.

- The Jews divided the world into two groups: circumcised, and uncircumcised.
 - The circumcised were those who were a part of God’s covenant, and qualified to receive His blessings.
 - The uncircumcised were outside God’s covenant, and cut off from His blessing.

The Gentiles saw circumcision as a matter of scorn—a mark that identified you with a despised people.

- Gentiles saw it as a sign of enlightenment when a Jewish man tried to cosmetically hide the effects of circumcision through surgery, so he could be accepted in the wider world of Hellenistic culture. ([Macc. 1:15](#); Josephus, [Ant. Xii.241](#))

In [1Cor. 7:19](#), Paul says, firmly, that these distinctions do not matter in the slightest—both circumcision and uncircumcision are nothing; they do not matter at all.

- **No ritual observance can be set alongside the keeping of God’s commandments.**

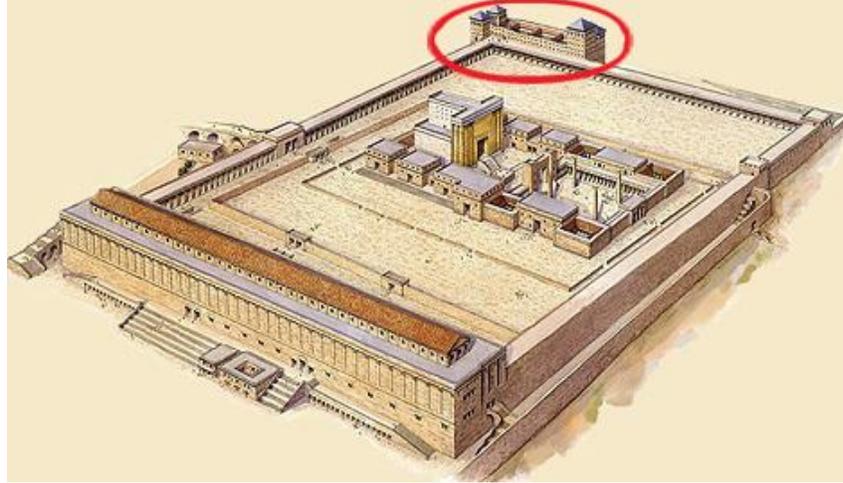
Q: What was the vow these 4 men had taken? And why did James and the elders think having Paul take that same vow, and pay for these men to take it, might change people’s ideas about him?

- Because it included shaving their heads, it was most likely a Nazirite vow.
 - [Numbers 6:1-21](#) details what a Nazirite vow was.
 - It prescribed a way of purification by which people could, for a fixed period of time, live a life of extra devotion.
 - A Nazirite vow was prescribed by Moses, and was respected by the Jews.
 - It was so restrictive that no one would take this vow if they weren’t *for real*.
- It was the hope of James and the elders that the Jewish disciples would see Paul taking this vow, paying for others to take it, and conclude that the rumors about Paul weren’t true.

[Acts 21:27-36](#)

*When the seven days were almost over, **the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, began to stir up all the crowd and laid hands on him,*** ²⁸ *crying out, “Men of Israel, come to our aid! **This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the Law and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.**”* ²⁹ *For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple.* ³⁰ ***Then all the city was provoked,*** and the people rushed together, and taking hold of Paul they dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut. ³¹ *While they were seeking to kill him, a report came up to the commander of the Roman cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.* ³² ***At once he took along some soldiers and centurions and ran down to them; and when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.*** ³³ *Then the commander came up and took hold of him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains; and he began asking who he was and what he had done.* ³⁴ *But among the crowd some were shouting one thing and some another, and when he could not find out the facts because of the uproar, **he ordered him to be brought into the barracks.*** ³⁵ *When he got to the stairs, he was carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob; ³⁶ for the multitude of the people kept following them, shouting, “Away with him!”*

The soldiers and centurions were stationed in the Fortress Antonia which overlooked the temple... that's how they got to Paul so fast! It also tells us something about how prone to riots the temple was, that Herod would build the barracks right there.



Q: Who were the “Jews from Asia”, and why were they mad at Paul?

- They were probably from Ephesus and had seen what Demetrius and his friends did to shut Paul down, so they started a riot in Jerusalem like the one in Ephesus ([Acts 19:23-41](#)).
- They were mad at Paul for teaching about “the Way” in Ephesus ([Acts 19:9](#)), so they made up false charges against him to start a riot... a recurring theme in Paul’s ministry!

Q: Why weren’t the Jews able to kill Paul?

- The only explanation is that God performed a miracle... actually two miracles.
 - The first miracle is that Paul wasn’t killed before the Romans could get there.
 - The barracks were close, but not close enough to get Paul before they could kill him.
 - This was probably at the time of Pentecost, so there would have likely been thousands of people in and around the temple... Luke records that “...all the city was provoked, ...”
 - The second miracle is that God used the Romans, who were not exactly justice-loving people, to save Paul.
 - God has done this before: He used the pagan, Cyrus, to rescue Israel from Babylon (Isaiah 45:1).
 - **God can, and will, use even ungodly people to defend His servants and achieve His purposes!**

Follow Up Assignment

Q: Which are you more passionate about: Knowing and insisting on keeping God’s rules, or knowing and pleasing God?

- Is there a difference between these two? Explain.

Q: Are you satisfied with being given rules to follow, or do you insist on knowing when and why something should or shouldn’t be done?

- How do you treat people who don’t follow the same “rules” you follow?

Q: Knowing that God uses even ungodly people to defend His servants and achieve His purposes, how does that change the way you look at politics and social issues today?