

L. Paul's Final Jerusalem Visit (21:17-23:22)

At last the day arrived that Paul and his companions found themselves entering Jerusalem. They immediately sought out the brethren, who received them with joy. Many months and hundreds of miles of hard travel had gone into the amassing and transport of the Gentiles' offering to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem, and yet Luke made no mention of it when the day finally came for it to be presented to the church there. Clearly that presentation was made, but it was eclipsed by what Luke regarded to be a more significant concern. Luke's emphasis highlights his recognition that, for all its obvious importance, the offering served primarily as the providential occasion for Paul's trip to Jerusalem; in the end, the Lord had larger reasons for Paul's presence there.

- As already noted, Jesus intended that Jerusalem and the opposition Paul would encounter there would facilitate his trip to Rome and ministry in that city (ref. again 23:11).
- But Paul's presence in Jerusalem was also designed to serve the Church's progress in the gospel. Jerusalem was the seat of Jewish Christianity as well as Judaism, and this made it "ground zero" in the Church's struggle to come to grips with the fulfillment of Old Covenant Judaism in the person and work of Jesus Christ and what that fulfillment means to God's people under the New Covenant – Jews as well as Gentiles.

This context makes it clear that the Jewish Christian community continued to wrestle with these challenges well beyond the Jerusalem Council. This was partly because the council was concerned with Gentile issues, but also because of an inadequate understanding among some within this community of what has come in Christ. This situation, too, was part of the Spirit's reason for leading Paul to Jerusalem. The gospel is the answer to the questions of Judaism and Jewishness, and there was no person better grounded in that gospel than the apostle Paul. Paul had arrived in Jerusalem armed with Christ's gospel; in the Spirit's hand, that gospel would serve the edification of the Jewish Christians and the provocation of the unbelieving Jews.

The decades following Pentecost had seen the advancement of Jewish and Gentile mission and the fruitfulness of both. The Jerusalem apostles were the focal point of the Jewish component; Paul was the focal point of the Gentile one (ref. Galatians 2:7-9). Now the two representatives were face-to-face in Jerusalem – Paul recounting God's exploding work among the nations, the Jerusalem elders the enlargement of the Jewish Christian community in Palestine. This meeting accentuated God's determination to build a covenant people in His Son consisting of Jews and Gentiles, but it also spotlighted the ongoing challenges confronting Christ's *catholic* Church: As much as the Jewish Christians struggled with accepting Gentile believers *as Gentiles*, they equally struggled to understand and interact with their own Jewishness in the light of Christ.

This dynamic of a single, unified Church comprised of Jews and Gentiles is also emphasized in the offering Paul presented to James and the Jerusalem saints. He and his Gentile companions stood before these Jewish believers with a Gentile offering – one that Paul understood reflected and acknowledged the salvation-historical privilege and role of the Jews. God's salvation had flowed to the Gentiles through Israel in accordance with His promise to Abraham, and, in that sense, the Gentiles were debtors to the Jews. Their offering was one of gratitude and humility, and Paul hoped the Jewish saints would receive it in that way (ref. Romans 15:25-31).

1. One important implication of these things is that misunderstanding of Christological fulfillment existed among believing Jews as well as unbelieving ones, and the result was that both stumbled over and expressed resistance to Paul and his teaching. Throughout the preparatory narrative Luke emphasized that Jewish opposition awaited Paul in Jerusalem; it is ironic that the first instance of it involved Jewish *Christians* (21:17-26). Indeed, that very opposition and Paul's handling of it became the providential occasion for the bonds and affliction promised by the Spirit.

The first thing to notice about this situation and Luke's account of it is that it hearkens back to the Jerusalem Council held many years earlier (cf. 21:25 with 15:1ff). This connection means that this context must be read and interpreted in the light of the matter and concerns the council met to consider and the conclusions it reached. Most importantly, *the way in which the council's decision is introduced in the present context indicates that its import for the Church as a whole had not been fully understood.*

The Jerusalem Council had convened to consider the "Gentile question": whether and to what extent Gentiles who were embracing Jesus as the Messiah were obligated to enter the household of Israel by adopting the Israelite covenant identifiers of circumcision and the Law of Moses. Thus the council and its determination pertained directly to Gentiles – a fact reiterated here by the Jerusalem elders (21:25). And yet, the very nature of the issue the council addressed together with the way they resolved it showed that Jewish believers in Jesus were equally implicated. *Apparently many Christian Jews – if not the Jerusalem elders themselves – failed to fully grasp those implications.* That failure contributed, in whole or in part, to the dilemma Luke addresses in this context.

The heart of the matter was the perception among many of the Jewish believers that Paul was teaching against the Law of Moses and the obligation of circumcision. The Jerusalem elders were well aware of this growing perception, but Luke provides no insight into how (or if) they had been addressing it. Perhaps they themselves were unclear regarding exactly what Paul was teaching since they'd had no personal contact with him for many years. They did know of his longstanding ministry among the Gentiles, and that may have lent some credibility to his detractors' claims. If indeed the Jerusalem elders were uncertain about Paul's position, they'd have been reluctant to come to his defense and speak on his behalf. But even if they were convinced that the accusations against Paul were untrue, they may not have been able to adequately answer them, either because they themselves didn't understand all the implications of Jesus' fulfillment or because they hadn't been able to put forth a persuasive apology.

Whatever role the Jerusalem elders had played in the Jewish Christians' growing concern, Paul's account of God's work among the Gentiles provided the occasion for them to inform him of it and propose their solution (21:17-24). Several things about this passage are troublesome and liable to wrongful interpretation and for that reason some commentators steer clear of it altogether. But it can be successfully navigated if it is read through the lens of the Jerusalem Council – *specifically as that episode is itself interpreted in the light of Luke's overall understanding of the "Christ event," its outcomes and their meaning for the Church of the "new creation."*

- a. The first difficulty concerns the elders' statement that the Jewish Christians were "zealous for the Law" (21:20). Some scholars find in this a tacit acknowledgment of a Jewish legalism that infected the Church in the early decades. Whether or not these believers were guilty of some sort of legalism in their Christian faith, their preoccupation with the Law shows that they at least didn't yet understand the implications of Jesus' fulfillment of the Law. If they weren't Judaizers in the strict sense, they were at least guilty of a Judaistic coloration of their faith in Christ.

The "Judaizers" weren't legalists who believed that they could earn some sort of legal righteousness through conformity to the Mosaic code; they were Jews who acknowledged that a right standing before God is gained through faith in Christ. At the same time, they saw their membership in God's covenant household as tied to their participation in the covenant sign of circumcision and their commitment to the covenant itself as embodied in the Law of Moses. *The Judaizers weren't addressing the question of how a man obtains a blameless standing with God, but what characterizes and qualifies membership in God's covenant household.* Such Jewish believers regarded themselves as members of God's household by virtue of their circumcision and ownership of the Law; it was as such members of the covenant community that they had now found their blamelessness in Christ.

As strange as this conception might appear, it flowed very naturally out of Jewish life under the Mosaic Covenant. A person – Jew or Gentile – became a member of the covenant household of Israel through circumcision and personal commitment to the covenant itself (the Law of Moses). It was within this covenant context that the sacrifices of atonement functioned and had their efficacy. *That is, atonement didn't grant a person covenant status; it was God's provision for cleansing and forgiveness for those who were already members of the covenant household.* Israel's priests didn't offer sacrifices for the nations, but for the sons of the covenant, whether natural-born or proselytes. Under the Mosaic Covenant, atonement operated within the confines of the covenant community, and membership in that community was determined by circumcision and the Law.

Thus it was perfectly natural for Jewish Christians to apply the same dynamic to the household of the "new covenant." That is, Jesus' atoning death secured cleansing and forgiveness for those who have a share in Him, but such ones are those who stand within God's covenant, and covenant status is granted on the basis of circumcision and allegiance to the Law. This is the reason the Judaizers insisted upon these things for Gentile converts (ref. 15:1-5); it is the reason they were themselves zealous for the Law; it is the reason they found fault with Paul for his apparent depreciation (if not rejection) of the Law and circumcision.

- b. The second thing to note – which is not troublesome in itself, but which raises other potentially problematic concerns – is that the charge against Paul focused on his instruction, not to Jewish believers in general, but those who were "among the Gentiles": Christian Jews who lived and worshipped in intimate contact with Gentile believers. This will be an important key in interpreting this context.

c. The next thing to consider is the resolution the elders proposed: In order to demonstrate to the Jewish Christian community around Jerusalem that what they were hearing about Paul was unfounded, the elders advised him to publicly demonstrate his fidelity to the Law by joining himself with a group of men who'd taken a vow under it (21:22-24). This is troublesome on a couple of fronts.

- First, it suggests that the elders were directing Paul toward *compromise*, if not *duplicity*. Paul recognized that the whole of the Law – including its rituals and vows – had found its true referent and fulfillment in Jesus. For him to embrace the notion of ritual purity was to deny that true cleanliness is found in union with Christ (Colossians 2:16-23; cf. Hebrews 9:1-14).
- Secondly, it possibly makes the elders guilty of *deception* (and so Paul for complying with their request). Whatever they may have believed about Paul's doctrine, he had indeed taught against the notion of ongoing obligation to the Law of Moses (including circumcision). He instructed Jews and Gentiles alike that the Law had been fulfilled in Christ and therefore circumcision is nothing; a true Jew is identified by inward, not outward circumcision (cf. Galatians 6:12-16; Romans 2:28-29). For that reason, anyone who submitted to circumcision was, in effect, placing himself under obligation to the whole of the Law, and, in that way, separating himself from God's grace in Christ (cf. Galatians 5:1-4).

In a critically important sense Paul *was* guilty of teaching the things his detractors were accusing him of (21:21), and now the elders were exhorting him to engage in a public ritual in order to show the Jewish brethren that all such charges were utterly untrue (21:24b). Knowing that this was the intent, why would Paul even consider doing such a thing? Wouldn't it only serve to undermine his gospel, reinforce the error of the Jewish believers and otherwise confuse those who observed him?

d. Another interpretive difficulty is the elders' reference to the Jerusalem Council's decision in relation to their advice to Paul (21:25). *What did that decision decades earlier have to do with the problem facing the elders and Paul that day in Jerusalem?* To many the most obvious (and allegedly correct) answer is that the elders mentioned it because it served to highlight an important distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers. That is, the council had acknowledged and made a matter of decree the fact that Gentile Christians need not be circumcised or bind themselves to the Law of Moses in order to be saved (or recognized as bona fide members of God's covenant household). This decision, however, didn't apply to Jewish Christians; they were still to remain faithful to the Mosaic code and circumcise their children (ref. again 21:21).

The obvious problem with this interpretation is that it upholds some form of *essential* distinction between Jews and Gentiles *as Christians* – a notion Paul vehemently rejected and never would have reinforced (ref. Galatians 3:26-29).