



G R A C E

REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

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## THE BOOK OF ACTS

### Sermon Notes

#### Paul in Route to Rome, Part 1

#### *The Apostle Paul Reports to the Jerusalem Elders*

Acts 21:17-26

April 13, 2008

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- In the early morning hours of December 8, 1982, the body of Debra Carter, a 21-year old waitress was found at the Coachlight Club, a nightclub in the small town of Ada, Oklahoma. After five years of “false starts and shoddy police work” by the local police force, a local man, named Ron Williamson, was arrested.
- Interestingly, Williamson was a local hero, of sorts, being drafted in the Major League Baseball draft in 1972, and playing for the Oakland A’s and Yankees organizations.
- However, due to poor police work and a corruption, Williamson was wrongly convicted of the murder and sentence to the death penalty.
- The town Williamson knew; the town he grew up in; the town he loved turned on him in a criminal act of injustice.
- However, after serving eleven [11] years on death row, DNA later exonerated Williamson and he was freed from prison in 1999. Williamson’s story is recounted in

John Grisham's highly acclaimed non-fiction work, *The Innocent Man: Murder and Injustice in a Small Town*.

- ❑ One can only imagine what it must be like for the town you grew up in – and people you love and have known all of your lives – to betray you in such an unjust manner.
- ❑ **In fact, few things are more painful, more devastating than betrayal by those whom you love.**
- ❑ Yet, this is exactly the kind of suffering that Christ, as well as the Apostle Paul, experienced during their respective lives on this earth.
- ❑ When Paul arrives in Jerusalem, following his Third Missionary Journey, he discovers that many of his fellow Jews are spreading vicious lies and rumors about what he has been doing in the “Gentile world.”
  - To put matters in a more accurate perspective, one must understand that to Jews in the first century, Jerusalem was much more than just the capital city of the nation of Israel...it was the Holy City...the “hometown”, if you will, of all who claimed to follow YHWH.
  - Consequently, the city Paul loved turned against him.
- ❑ However, the manner in which Paul responds to these painful accusations demonstrates for the modern reader a Christ-like example that requires a degree of humility that we should all pray for.

#### I. Paul Reports to the Jerusalem Elders [vv. 17-19]

- ❑ Luke makes it clear that Paul and his entourage were, at least initially, warmly received by the “brethren” in Jerusalem [**Verse 17**].
- ❑ Then, Luke writes, in **Verse 18**, “And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.”
  - By this time, it appears that the apostles had left Jerusalem, and the elders were now leading the church there.
  - Furthermore, it seems that James was the “first-among-equals” or the one with the greatest influence in the Jerusalem Church.
  - So, it is that in the meeting of **Acts 21:18**, the reader observes the leaders of the two respective branches of the young Christian Church: James, the leader of the Jewish branch and Paul, the leader of the Gentiles.
  - This is at least the fourth meeting between James and Paul.

- During his first Jerusalem visit several years prior to this meeting, Paul had summoned James [Galatians 1:18-19].
  - Then, fourteen years after the encounter of Galatians 1, Paul returns once more, meeting with James [Galatians 2:1, 9].
  - Next, both Paul and James played a pivotal role in the Council of Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15.
  - Finally, this meeting, in Acts 21, would constitute the fourth recorded in Scripture.
  - In other words, they were not strangers to one another.
- Then, in **Verse 19**, Luke writes, “After he [Paul] had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.”
- No doubt Paul explained how many had received the Gospel throughout the Greco-Roman world.
  - Furthermore, it is likely that here Paul presented the offering he had gathered among the Gentiles, intended to help aid the impoverished Jerusalem Church.
  - We do not know this for sure, as Acts 24:17-18 is the only reference in the book to this offering.

<b>II. The Elders Praise God [v. 20a]</b>
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- Upon hearing of how God had moved among the Gentiles, Luke writes, in **Verse 20**, “And when they heard it they began glorifying God...”
- It is encouraging to see the reaction of the Jerusalem elders to Paul’s report. They were not jealous, as many of us in today’s all-too-competitive Church may have been. Rather, they glorified God, being strengthened and encouraged by the words of Paul.
  - Furthermore, one of the things they heard from Paul may have been the news of the relief fund that he had collected for the Jerusalem church. This would have been a further source of encouragement.
  - Not only that, but the tangible action on the part of the Gentile Christians would have demonstrated that their faith was not in vain, but was, indeed, true and sincere.
  - James will later write that “faith without works is dead” [James 2:17]. However, here, the faith of the Gentiles certainly is not dead – it is genuine, therefore, it is

followed by action – through the giving of the money to support the Jerusalem Church.

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- However, the success of Paul’s mission had actually caused some problems for the elders of the Jerusalem Church.
- For whatever reason, certain individuals had spread rumors – quite possibly out of jealousy – about Paul’s work in the Gentile world.

**III. The Jerusalem Elders Report to Paul [vv. 20b-25]**

**a. The Jews are Spreading Rumors Concerning Paul [vv. 20b-21]**

- Immediately after glorifying God for His work through the hands of Paul among the Gentiles, Luke writes, in **Verses 20b-21**, “...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.’”
- In order to fully understand the context of this passage, one must first examine the political state of Israel, and specifically Jerusalem, at this time.
  - The completion of Paul’s Third Missionary Journey, and his subsequent return to Jerusalem, likely occurred around AD 57. This was a period of time when, according to scholar Darrell Bock, “Jerusalem is tense with rising Jewish nationalism, political unrest, and the presence of Rome in a ruler, Felix, who was said to have the ‘instincts of a slave’ (Tacitus, *History* 5.9).
  - John Polhill continues, “Paul’s arrival in Jerusalem probably was in spring of A.D. 56 or 57 during the procuratorship of Felix. Josephus described this period of the mid-50s as a time of intense Jewish nationalism and political unrest. One insurrection after another rose to challenge the Roman overlords, and Felix brutally suppressed them all. This only increased the Jewish hatred for Rome and inflamed anti-Gentile sentiments. It was a time when pro-Jewish sentiment was at its height, and friendliness with outsiders was viewed askance. Considering public relations, Paul’s mission to the Gentiles would not have been well received.”
- The elders begin their statement by saying “...many thousands...among the Jews...have believed, and they are zealous for the Law;”
  - At this point, during the mid-50’s, the Jerusalem church had a population of about thirty to fifty thousand.

- Not only is there a large number of these Jews, but they are “zealous for the Law.”
  - In this context, this term is not used for the religious party, known as the Zealots.
  - Rather, it speaks of those who are passionately, if not violently, committed to the Mosaic Law in all respects – to include ceremonial and civil.
  - In fact, the term is used throughout the Inter-Testamental book, known as 1 Maccabees, when describing those Jews who stood up against the ever-increasing hellenization of Judaism. That is, the movement that sought to syncretise and assimilate aspects of Greek culture with Judaism.
  
- According to the rumors told to the zealot Jews, Paul was 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.”
  - According to one scholar, this is language that is indicative of “defection” from Moses. The term is also used of apostasy (Joshua 22:22; 2 Chronicles 29:19; 1 Maccabees 2:15).
  - In fact, in later Jewish sources, such apostates have no place in the world to come – a most serious punishment.
  - Even Philo, the Jewish historian and a Diaspora Jew himself, spoke of respecting the Mosaic Law, specifically referring to the Sabbath and the Jewish Feasts.
  - It would be difficult, if not impossible, for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Gentile to overestimate the importance of circumcision to the first century [zealot] Jew. It was their identity.
  - Circumcision was a physical mark that set the Jews apart from all the other nations.
  - The two great customs that the Jews focused on were Circumcision – for it was the sign of the Abrahamic covenant – and Sabbath-keeping – Sabbath being the sign of the Mosaic covenant.

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- Consequently, the accusations against Paul were **very** serious.
- Yet, the Council of Jerusalem, in Acts 15, had already dealt with these issue, and in actuality, Paul was in perfect accordance with the ruling of the Council.

- As such Paul did firmly deny any belief that taught salvation through the keeping of the Law. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.
- However, the Council of Jerusalem, and Paul’s own teachings, declared the freedom of Jews to maintain the practice of their ancestral Jewish customs, in accordance with their own consciences.
- However, **no biblical or extra-biblical evidence exists which would implicate Paul in the charge that he had actively sought to persuade Jews to willfully neglect the precepts of the Jewish ceremonial and civil law.**
- Paul’s teaching is clear regarding circumcision: Jews should not seek to “undo” their circumcision [1 Corinthians 7:18]; however, physical circumcision is ultimately not of any spiritual value [Galatians 6:15].
- Darrell Bock writes, “So the likelihood is that Paul does not teach nonobservance, but neither does he insist on observance where Gentiles are involved.”
- Actually, Paul refutes the belief that Gentiles should undergo circumcision as a sort of “insurance policy.” To do so would indicate a belief/fear on the part of the Gentile that Christ alone is insufficient to save [Galatians 5:2-4].
- For Paul, no essential distinction existed between Jew and Gentile (Galatians 3:28); and conversion from Judaism to Christianity required no physical acts [1 Corinthians 9:19].

**b. Paul Should Demonstrate His Respect for Jewish Law [vv. 22-25]**

- One can imagine the difficult – if not, impossible! – situation that that Jerusalem elders found themselves “trapped” in. On the one hand, they were called to lead and shepherd the Christians of Jerusalem – many of which still [albeit, wrongly] maintained their anti-Gentile posture. On the other hand, the elders most certainly recognize the legitimacy and Christ-centeredness of the Apostle Paul’s witness and ministry to the Gentiles.
- Ultimately, the elders of the Church state, in **Verses 22-25**, “What, then, is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. 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. 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.”
  - The elders, then, make a proposal that is rather straightforward: Paul should demonstrate in a clear manner that he is still faithful to the Torah – the Jewish Law.

- The manner in which he will do this is as follows:
  - The elders presumably will introduce Paul to four men who are under a vow.
  - This is most certainly a Nazarite vow, for they will have to shave their heads [Verse 24]. According to **Numbers 6**, the individual participating in the Nazaritic vow was not to cut his hair during the period of time in which he was under the vow. However, once the vow was completed, he was to shave his head, then take his hair and burning it as a sacrifice unto the LORD [Numbers 6:18-19].
  - Yet, not only must the Nazarite shave his head and offer the hair as a sacrifice, but he must also (1) a male lamb for a burnt offering; (2) a female lamb for a sin offering; (3) a ram for a peace offering; (4) a basket of unleavened cakes and wafers for a grain/cereal offering; and (5) a drink offering [Numbers 6:14-15].
  - As one could imagine, these sacrifices would be **very costly financially**.
  - Consequently, the elders propose that Paul bear the financial burden of these four men as they complete their respective Nazarite vows. This, then would involve Paul paying for **(1) four male lambs; (2) four female lambs; (3) four rams; (4) four baskets of unleavened cakes and wafers; and (5) four drink offerings**.
  - We are not told *how* Paul pays for these exorbitant expenses, although, it may have been through the money he had collected among the Gentiles for the Jerusalem church.
  - What is interesting is that **according to the Jewish historian Josephus, paying for the Nazaritic sacrificial expenses was an especially exemplary act of piety and commitment. In fact, Josephus states that it was through the paying of such Nazaritic expenses that King Agrippa I attempted to win the favor of the Jews when he returned to Israel [Antiquities 19.294].**
  - However, not only was Paul to pay for the expenses of these four men; but he was to “purify...[himself] along with them...”
    - This would not have involved Paul participating in the Nazaritic vow, for such a vow lasted for a minimum of thirty days [*m. Naz.* 6.3].

- Rather, the purification spoken of with respect to Paul involved a process whereby a Jew who had traveled throughout the Gentile world would undergo a **seven day purification ritual** [Numbers 19:12].
- This purification ritual would ensure Paul’s ceremonial cleanness, allowing him to enter the Temple in order to participation in the completion of the four men’s Nazaritic vow.

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- Notice, in Verse 25, James and the Jerusalem elders, repeat the apostolic decree, concerning the Gentiles, issued at the Council of Jerusalem, in Acts 15.
  - The purpose of this additions, concerning the Gentiles, was most certainly to demonstrate to Paul that the decree issued at the Council of Jerusalem was to remain unchanged.
  - The Gentiles were not expected to follow the Jewish ceremonial Laws; with the exception of the Laws pertaining to food and fellowship. Again, this would allow Jews and Gentiles to fellowship together, without the Gentiles unnecessarily offending Jewish Christians.

<b>IV. Paul Submits to the Request of the Elders [v. 26]</b>
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- Finally, in **Verse 26**, Paul agrees to the request of the elders, with Luke stating, “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.”
  - It is fascinating, here, to consider what Paul did **NOT** do:
    - First of all, with respect to the rumors mentioned by the elders, he did not become defensive.
      - The accusations against Paul were totally false.
      - He could have aggressively asserted his innocence with respect to the charges, offering up example after example of how they were false.
      - Yet, Luke’s account seems to show that Paul did not do this.
    - Secondly, Paul does not question the competence of the Jerusalem leadership. In other words, he does not say, “Gentlemen, you know these accusations concerning me are false, why have you not reprimanded these zealots?”



- Thirdly, Paul does not attempt to point out the unreasonableness of the request by the elders. After, all, the payment for the four Nazarites would have been huge!
  - Although Paul was not, technically speaking, under the authority of the Jerusalem elders, he certainly appears to respect their wisdom regarding their people and what they need.
- Fourthly, Paul did not assert his freedom in Christ and therefore refuse to submit to the request of the elders.
  - In other words, Paul could have said, “I am free in Christ. I do not have to submit myself to the yoke of the Law any longer! This request is wrong and I will not do it!”
- However, finally, Paul does not violate his convictions.
  - In no way do Paul’s actions indicate a departure from his conviction with respect to salvation: **It is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.**

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- Consequently, Paul agrees to the elders’ suggestion.
  - By agreeing to their suggestion, Paul is not saying that these rituals are necessary; rather, he is **actively demonstrating a spirit of respect towards weaker brethren.**
  - These Jewish Christians certainly did not understand the relationship between Christ and the Law.
    - It is important to note that whereas these Jews may have put a greater emphasis on keeping the details of the Law, to include the civil and ceremonial aspects, most Christians today see the Law as completely irrelevant to the modern believer.
    - Yet, the truth that both groups have failed to see is that a faithful, biblical study of the Torah leads to a deeper understanding of Christ – the fulfillment of the Torah.
    - Law-keeping saves no one; rather, true believers are saved by grace through faith in the One who did keep, in fact fulfilled, the Law – the Lord Jesus Christ.
    - **In other words, as these early Christians appeared to embrace a Christless Law; we far too often embrace a Lawless Christ. Yet, our Lord and Savior is the Law-fulfilling Christ!**

- Although it is merely speculation, Paul may have taken this opportunity to demonstrate to the Jewish Christians the relationship between the Law and faith in Christ. Paul may have taken the time to show how the Law actually is a reflection of, and therefore, points to and is fulfilled in Christ Himself.
- Ultimately, what Paul has done here is that, **for the sake of the unity of the Church and the ultimate glory of Almighty God, he has given up some of his “rights” for the sake of reaching out to weaker brethren.**
  - In so doing, Paul has become a Jew to the Jews [1 Corinthians 9:20]. This is perfectly consistent with Paul previous and future actions, such as having Timothy circumcised in Acts 16:3.
  - As F.F. Bruce eloquently states, “a truly emancipated spirit such as Paul’s is not in bondage to its own emancipation.” Darrell Bock concurs, “Liberty is a great thing, but sometimes the expression of liberty can be counterproductive.”
  - Ultimately, Paul’s actions modeled the work of our Lord Jesus Christ, “who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself...” [Philippians 2:6-7].
  - Yet, many Christians today have misapplied Paul’s actions here in Acts 21, as well as his words in 1 Corinthians 9.

**Today, we think “being all things to all people” involves trying to attract a world that is apathetic and uninterested in biblical and spiritual matters by becoming enough like them in order to make them feel “at home” or comfortable during Christian worship. However, this was NOT Paul’s “methodology.” Rather, he sought to act in a manner that he did not unnecessarily offend religious zealots. Once he had established his respect for *the individual* by respecting their practices which did not directly stand in contrast to his biblical convictions [“to the Jew becoming a Jew”] then and only then was he free to share the gospel of our LORD Jesus Christ [for the religious and cultural barriers had been removed]. Thus, the distinction between Paul’s actions and the “seek-friendly” movement today are clear.**

- Therefore, Paul is able to submit to the Jewish Law as an act of true worship to Almighty God, not because the Law is still binding on him, but rather, because he acts in a manner that is humble and Christ-like, voluntarily submitting himself to the Law in order to reach those who are still under the Law.
- This should be our passion as well.
- Read **1 Corinthians 9:19-23**.