

Valley Bible Church
Sermon Notes for December 17, 2017

Paul Alleviates a Controversy
Acts 21:18-26

1. The account from Paul (21:18-19)

The last recorded time that Paul was in Jerusalem was seven years earlier after the first missionary journey (Acts 15:1-19). James (the half-brother of Jesus) continued to be a leader of the church in Jerusalem along with other elders (cf. Acts 15:13). Peter and the other apostles had apparently travelled elsewhere. Church tradition notes that each of the apostles travelled far and wide. Similar to his prior return to Jerusalem, Paul reported on the conversion of the Gentiles (cf. Acts 15:3).

2. The accusation against Paul (21:20-21)

When the Jewish people believed in Christ, “many thousands” of them became zealous for the Old Testament Law.

In contrast to the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15, the issue in this passage was not what was required for the Gentiles, but what was allowed for the Jews who believed. Were the Jews required to forsake the Old Testament Law upon faith in Christ?

What the Jewish believers had heard about Paul was untrue. Paul’s actual teaching was not that the Jews should forsake the Law of Moses, but rather he encouraged the Jews to continue the practice of circumcision (1 Corinthians 7:18). He also had Timothy, who was half Jewish, circumcised for the effectiveness of ministry on the second missionary journey (Acts 16:3) and practiced Jewish traditions in order to minister to Jews (1 Corinthians 9:20).

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 (Galatians 5:1-6; Ephesians 2:15; 1 Corinthians 7:18-19).

3. The approach for Paul (21:22-25)

Note the direction given by the elders to Paul. If Paul was willing to listen to a group of godly church leaders regarding how to serve the church, how much more should we?

Paul was instructed (1) to purify himself and (2) to pay for the expenses of the four men. Paul’s purification was likely a seven-day Jewish ritual (cf. 21:27) that was practiced upon return from Gentile lands. The mention of head-shaving points to a Nazarite vow taken by the four men (Numbers 6:2-21).

The conclusion of the Council of Jerusalem regarding the Gentiles was repeated in order to reaffirm that they were not under the Law of Moses. The reason why the Gentiles were given certain specific instructions was because of the widespread practice of Judaism (Acts

15:21). These offensive Gentile practices were considered to be hindrances for Jews who might come to faith in Christ.

Some people view that putting himself under the Law was the greatest mistake of Paul's ministry. However, we are free to adopt Jewish practices yet we should understand they are not essential to godliness.

The elders and Paul understood the need to make accommodations in practice in order to serve the greater whole. There are times when our teaching cannot be effectively understood due to the preconceptions of those to whom we minister. This is particularly true in areas involving cultural practices.

4. The acceptance by Paul (21:26)

Verse 26 gives the sense of full completion. The issue of Paul's view of the Law was put to rest. Paul serves as an example to us regarding the importance of adjusting our behavior for the sake of our ministry to others. Actions speak louder than words.

May we be willing to sacrifice our freedoms for the greater goal of advancing the ministry of Christ.