

The Great Stories of the Early Church
74-Paul to Jerusalem 01
Worshiping as a Jew
Acts 21:15-40

- 15 And after those days we took up our carriages, and went up to Jerusalem.
- 16 There went with us also certain of the disciples of Caesarea, and brought with them one Mnason of Cyprus, an old disciple, with whom we should lodge.
- 17 And when we were come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly.
- 18 And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present.
- 19 And when he had saluted them, he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry.
- 20 And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord, and said unto him, Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law:
- 21 And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs.
- 22 What is it therefore? the multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that thou art come.
- 23 Do therefore this that we say to thee: We have four men which have a vow on them;
- 24 Them take, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads: and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law.
- 25 As touching the Gentiles which believe, we have written and concluded that they observe no such thing, save only that they keep themselves from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from strangled, and from fornication.
- 26 Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself with them entered into the temple, to signify the accomplishment of the days of purification, until that an offering should be offered for every one of them.
- 27 And when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews which were of Asia, when they saw him in the temple, stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him,
- 28 Crying out, Men of Israel, help: This is the man, that teacheth all men every where against the people, and the law, and this place: and further brought Greeks also into the temple, and hath polluted this holy place.
- 29 (For they had seen before with him in the city Trophimus an Ephesian, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.)
- 30 And all the city was moved, and the people ran together: and they took Paul, and drew him out of the temple: and forthwith the doors were shut.
- 31 And as they went about to kill him, tidings came unto the chief captain of the band, that all Jerusalem was in an uproar.
- 32 Who immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down unto them: and when they saw the chief captain and the soldiers, they left beating of Paul.
- 33 Then the chief captain came near, and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and demanded who he was, and what he had done.

- 34 And some cried one thing, some another, among the multitude: and when he could not know the certainty for the tumult, he commanded him to be carried into the castle.
- 35 And when he came upon the stairs, so it was, that he was borne of the soldiers for the violence of the people.
- 36 For the multitude of the people followed after, crying, Away with him.
- 37 And as Paul was to be led into the castle, he said unto the chief captain, May I speak unto thee? Who said, Canst thou speak Greek?
- 38 Art not thou that Egyptian, which before these days madest an uproar, and leddest out into the wilderness four thousand men that were murderers?
- 39 But Paul said, I am a man which am a Jew of Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city: and, I beseech thee, suffer me to speak unto the people.
- 40 And when he had given him licence, Paul stood on the stairs, and beckoned with the hand unto the people. And when there was made a great silence, he spake unto them in the Hebrew tongue, KJV

Introduction:

You recall, I hope, the story. This is the final chapter of Paul's Third Missionary Journey. After his tearful farewell to the Ephesian elders at Miletus, the group has made its way along the Mediterranean coast to the city of Caesarea and then inland to Jerusalem. This will be, as far as we know, Paul's last visit to the city and his last encounter with the church there. Some years later, history records, he and Peter will reunite in Rome but we do not have any record of any other interaction with the other apostles after this.

There is probably not a more confusing subject to the casual Bible student than the topic of Paul's position on the keeping of Jewish ceremonies. On the one hand, as we see in our text, he considered them important, and he had no objection to Jewish Christians keeping them or even to keeping them himself. But... he did not find them necessary, even to Jews, in the proper worship of God. And... he did not recommend them to the Gentiles at all. In fact, he went to war with Peter because of his behavior which at one point endorsed a teaching that the Gentiles should convert to Judaism in order to worship God properly. You will recall, I hope, the text.

Gal 2:11-14

- 11 But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed.
- 12 For before that certain came from James, he did eat with the Gentiles: but when they were come, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing them which were of the circumcision.
- 13 And the other Jews dissembled likewise with him; insomuch that Barnabas also was carried away with their dissimulation.
- 14 But when I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, If thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews? KJV

You see the tension here. Peter had not been living according to Jewish custom, even in the

choice of food. But because of pressure from Jews who had newly arrived at Antioch from Jerusalem and supposedly from James, he changed his behavior, stopped eating with the Gentiles, began keeping the Jewish diet again, and created confusion among the Gentiles. ***Must we convert to Judaism in order to worship properly?***

Paul nailed him, “thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles.” Now, understand, Paul was not condemning him for this but, rather, for his mixed message to the Gentiles. It was perfectly fine in Paul’s mind for a Jewish believer to live outside of Jewish laws and customs. Yet this position had led to charges being made against him among the non-Christian Jewish community. And that charge had leaked into the church so that there were Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who were suspicious that Paul had abandoned Judaism altogether.

21 And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs.

He was walking a tightrope, as it were, of some very carefully considered ideas which people have consistently failed to understand over time. Some have imagined him as a libertine, rejecting completely the place of Jewish doctrine and customs in Christian life. Some have seen him at odds with the other apostles, especially Peter, over the matter. But it is clear in our text that the leaders and the church were perfectly fine with what he was teaching the Gentiles. We have no reason to believe that he told anything other than the complete and honest story of his ministry.

But there was still an uneasiness among the Jewish believers at Jerusalem. The leadership of the church made a request of Paul to do a most radical thing to make it clear to the church that he had not become anything other than an honest and believing Jew.

22 What is it therefore? the multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that thou art come.

23 Do therefore this that we say to thee: We have four men which have a vow on them;

24 Them take, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads: and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law.

This was, as far as we can tell, the same vow that Paul had made on his Second Missionary journey. He had shaved his head in Cenchrea and made as quickly as possible to Jerusalem to officially end the vow at the Temple by offering the hair and a sacrifice on the altar. It was the Nazarite vow, the same one that Samson and Samuel had observed. As we said when we discussed Paul’s vow, the Nazarite oath was intended to be a temporary thing with an ending date and ceremony. Very few were lifelong Nazarites.

The reality is that the early church, Jewish and Gentile, is riddled with stories of people doing strange things in an effort to draw as near to God as is humanly possible.

Jesus Himself spoke of the extreme measures to which some would give themselves in His service. He spoke of taking up one's cross and following Him. He spoke of loving Him in such a great degree that all other human loves would seem like hate. Then, he said this after having declared the Divine position on marriage in Matthew 19.

Matt 19:10-12

- 10 His disciples say unto him, If the case of the man be so with his wife, it is not good to marry.
- 11 But he said unto them, All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given.
- 12 For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it. KJV

Matt 19:10-12

- 10 Jesus' disciples then said to him, "If that is how it is, it is better not to marry!"
- 11 "Not everyone can accept this statement," Jesus said. "Only those whom God helps.
- 12 Some are born without the ability to marry, and some are disabled by men, and some refuse to marry for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven. Let anyone who can, accept my statement." TLB

These ideas have, for the most part, been lost to thinking of most Christians. Voluntary celibacy that is holy, pure and sacred is not even considered as an option.

This is the kind of thing that was going on with the Nazarite vow. These were men who were using a means available to them to set themselves apart from ordinary life for a while to seek God energetically in a special way. We think of this as 'weird' but the First Century Church did not. These were not men who were thinking that by doing a vow like this they would gain some reward, they were setting aside any kind of alcoholic drink, any contact with the dead, and any cutting of their hair in order to focus clearly and specifically on their relationship with God that they might grow and prosper spiritually.

I think that we do not realize that there are levels of devotion and service to God that exist for us that we never use to our spiritual advantage. One reason is that our enemy resists them so forcefully and another is that we settle for rations when we could be enjoying a feast.

Paul honored their decision and joined himself to them to show support and approval. At the same time he showed openly to all of the Jewish church that he had not abandoned them or come to consider their worship at the temple as vain and foolish.

It is difficult for us to imagine that the heroes of heaven will be people who have been considered as weird here on earth.

Phil 3:7

- 7 But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. KJV

Rev 12:10-11

10 And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night.

11 And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death. KJV

The Jews considered people especially holy and pure while they were going through their time under the vow.

Lam 4:7

7 Her Nazarites were purer than snow, they were whiter than milk, they were more ruddy in body than rubies, their polishing was of sapphire: KJV

Activities similar to the Nazarite vow have been used by Christians over the centuries for a variety of reasons. Some have used them to seek to deal with problematic sin in their lives. Some have had a burden for others that they wanted to focus on in a special way. Others have sought specific information from God as to what to do with their lives, how to serve Him. Then, there have been those who have sought Visitations of the Spirit of God upon their communities or their nations by times of special, forceful, and extended prayer.

Among the Gentiles married couples at times agreed upon a separation of sorts so that they could focus on spiritual things.

1 Cor 7:3-5

3 Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband.

4 The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife.

5 Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency. KJV

Regardless of what else is said here, it is obvious that husbands and wives, with the blessing of the apostle, were separating in some fashion that they might spend extra time in prayer and fasting, seeking the Face of God for some matter.

So, now, back to our story. Paul was supporting and identifying with these men who were bringing their vow to an end in the Temple and he was doing it to show the church at Jerusalem that he had not abandoned them and that he was not encouraging Jews in other places to abandon their Jewish heritage.

There are two important principles in play here in this story.

1. The importance of the pursuit of holiness, and
2. The importance of going the extra mile in Christian unity.

Paul was a man who continually called upon people to put away sin in repentance and seriously pursue a holy walk with God.

He prayed continually for the believers in the churches that they would know an extraordinary closeness to God, intimacy with His Spirit, and a commitment to obedience to Him.

Rom 12:1-2

1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. KJV

Gal 5:22-25

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,

23 Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

24 And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts.

25 If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. KJV

Eph 4:21-24

21 If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus:

22 That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts;

23 And be renewed in the spirit of your mind;

24 And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. KJV

The life of a Christian is to be a life of holiness. There is no other format that God has revealed for His people. They are not to walk as close to the world as they can possibly walk but as close to Him as possible.

Sometimes this calls for doing extraordinary things, things that seem odd and strange to others, even other Christians.

The other great desire of the apostle was that there be unity in the Church, especially between the Jews and the Gentiles. Their worlds, their cultures, their dress, and even their food were so very different, and the Jews had been taught such strict requirements, that having a mixed church, part Jew and part Gentile, was a call for compromise.

Paul could have argued at Jerusalem that he did not need to prove anything to anyone. The charges were false, his doctrine was approved by the leadership of the Jerusalem church, and he need not bother himself with any extra duties at the Temple to prove that. But, he did not.

Unity within the church was important, and it still is.

Eph 4:1-3

- 1 I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called,
- 2 With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love;
- 3 Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. KJV

Eph 4:1-3

- 1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,
- 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love,
- 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. NASU

Division has ever been the enemy of the church and of Christian Fellowship. From the very beginning, people sought to separate and divide Christians from each other in order to introduce false doctrine. The very word 'heresy' means 'division.'

Paul talked about that issue a good deal. The Galatian churches had been troubled by false teachers that had come to them with a different message than that of Paul. If you recall, he first encountered the Galatian Christians on his first missionary journey and had been stoned almost to death at Lystra.

Gal 4:13-17

- 13 Ye know how through infirmity of the flesh I preached the gospel unto you at the first.
- 14 And my temptation which was in my flesh ye despised not, nor rejected; but received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus.
- 15 Where is then the blessedness ye spake of? for I bear you record, that, if it had been possible, ye would have plucked out your own eyes, and have given them to me.
- 16 Am I therefore become your enemy, because I tell you the truth?
- 17 They zealously affect you, but not well; yea, they would exclude you, that ye might affect them. KJV

Gal 4:13-17

- 13 As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you.
- 14 Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself.
- 15 What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.
- 16 Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?
- 17 Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you [from us], so that you may be zealous for them. (from New International Version)

This was the story everywhere. Paul would introduce the gospel to a region, establish churches there and then false teachers would come in behind him with a different message and divide the churches. His lifelong labor was for that not to happen.

So, in spite of the fact that charges made against him were false, in spite of the fact that he was an apostle of God with authority equal to that of Peter and James, in spite of the fact that he needed to prove himself to no one, he went the extra mile and joined the men in the Temple with a vow, stooping to be gracious to those foolish souls in the Jerusalem church who were being affected by the lies.

When he was arrested he might have complained that had it not been for these people believing false charges against him this would never have happened, but we hear nothing like that from him.

What we do see is one of the most incredible displays of Christian love ever recorded.

The crowd has seized him and was beating him. They intended to beat him to death, again over a false charge.

When the Roman commander rescued him, he asked for a favor. Look at it again.

Acts 21:37-22:8

- 37 And as Paul was to be led into the castle, he said unto the chief captain, May I speak unto thee? Who said, Canst thou speak Greek?
- 38 Art not thou that Egyptian, which before these days madest an uproar, and leddest out into the wilderness four thousand men that were murderers?
- 39 But Paul said, I am a man which am a Jew of Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city: and, I beseech thee, suffer me to speak unto the people.
- 40 And when he had given him licence, Paul stood on the stairs, and beckoned with the hand unto the people. And when there was made a great silence, he spake unto them in the Hebrew tongue, saying,

Acts 22

- 1 Men, brethren, and fathers, hear ye my defence which I make now unto you.
- 2 (And when they heard that he spake in the Hebrew tongue to them, they kept the more silence: and he saith,)
- 3 I am verily a man which am a Jew, born in Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, yet brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, and taught according to the perfect manner of the law of the fathers, and was zealous toward God, as ye all are this day.
- 4 And I persecuted this way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women.
- 5 As also the high priest doth bear me witness, and all the estate of the elders: from whom also I received letters unto the brethren, and went to Damascus, to bring them which were there bound unto Jerusalem, for to be punished.
- 6 And it came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and was come nigh unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me.
- 7 And I fell unto the ground, and heard a voice saying unto me, Saul, Saul, why persecutest

thou me?
8 And I answered, Who art thou, Lord? And he said unto me, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest. KJV

We will save the rest of the text for the next message from this story but I want you to see that this man who was just rescued from being beaten to death turned and asked permission to speak to those who had been beating him. Rather than rail against them, he told them what Christ had done for him.

This is the example set for all who would ever lead the people of God.
Be Holy and preach holiness
Commit to Unity and be willing to stoop to those who are weak
Love your enemies and share the gospel with them when possible

This, in fact, is a good lesson for us all in this day of political bitterness and enmity.

Matt 5:43-48

- 43 Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.
44 But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;
45 That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.
46 For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?
47 And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so?
48 Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. KJV