

74. Paul Took a Vow in Jerusalem

In our last topic, we saw that we want to provide an example for our physical and spiritual children of the love of Christ for us. They will grow in their understanding of that love as they see that it is that love that motivates us to live for Christ. They will also grow in their understanding of that love as we serve them with the love of Christ. In this topic, we are going to see Paul gave a report to the Jews in Jerusalem about the things that the Lord was doing among the Gentiles.

Acts 21:17-19 says, “And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. On the following *day* Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.” The Christians in the church at Jerusalem had heard much about the ministry of Paul among the Gentiles. Now, they were able to see some of the results of that ministry. In Acts 21:8, we read, “On the next *day* we who were Paul's companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him.” Here, we are reminded that a group had traveled to Jerusalem with Paul. The church had the opportunity to meet Gentile Christians from various cities as well as receive the gift that this group had brought for the needy Christians in Jerusalem.

Paul and the group traveling with him met with the elders from the church in the city of Jerusalem. Paul had the opportunity to share in detail what the Lord had done among the Gentiles. Regarding an earlier visit of Paul, Acts 15:4 says, “And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them.” Here, we see that Paul did the same thing this time, because we read that Paul told in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. We see that the focus was on what God had done. This would be in agreement with what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:31, where we read, “Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” In the same way, we are to give all glory to God for whatever He has chosen to do through our lives.

Acts 21:20-22 says, “And when they heard *it*, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, ‘You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law; but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise *their* children nor to walk according to the customs. What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come.’” The elders in Jerusalem all glorified God when they heard what the Lord had been doing among the Gentiles. At the same time, the elders also realized that there was a possible problem.

The number of Jews that had become Christians had grown so large that their number could no longer be counted. Three thousand had become Christians on the day of Pentecost. Later, Acts 5:14 says, “And believers were increasingly added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.” Acts 6:7 adds, “Then the word of God spread, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith.” By Acts 21, we see that the elders did not know how many Jews were now Christians.

The elders also recognized that the Jewish Christians were all zealous for the law. The word translated “zealous” means *one with a strong desire to uphold a thing*. God told Abraham in Genesis 17:14, ““And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.”” God had made an everlasting covenant with Abraham. That covenant is summarized in Genesis 17:7-8, where we read, ““And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.””

The Jewish Christians recognized that God had given certain promises to Abraham for all Jews, which were not cancelled when Jews became Christians. When these Jews recognized that God had also given repentance to the Gentiles, Acts 11:18 says, “When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.’” The Jewish Christians recognized that the repentance of Gentiles did not cancel the promises that God had made to them as Jews. Instead, they rejoiced when they heard that the Gentiles who become Christians could also look forward to eternal life.

However, the Judaizers with their false teaching that said that Gentiles must be circumcised to be saved had also spoken evil about Paul to the Jewish Christians. In verse 21, we see that the Jewish Christians had been told that Paul was teaching “all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise *their* children nor to walk according to the customs.” In actual fact, what Paul had done and taught is clearly explained in 1 Corinthians 9:20-21 where we read, “And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those *who are* under the law, as under the law, that I might win those *who are* under the law; to those *who are* without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those *who are* without law.” Paul wanted to have a ministry to both Jews and Gentiles in every city where he went.

The elders recognized that the rest of the Christian Jews would hear that Paul had come to the city of Jerusalem. As a result, the elders told Paul, in Acts 21:23-24, ““Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave *their* heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but *that* you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law.”” Paul had shown that he also obeyed the Jewish law, because Acts 18:18 says, “So Paul still remained a good while. Then he took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila *were* with him. He had his hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow.” Paul had made it clear by his own actions that a Jewish Christian was still free to keep the Jewish law and make Jewish vows.

The elders of the church in Jerusalem realized that the false teaching about Paul would be quickly stopped among the Christians if he took a Jewish vow again. At that time, they also had four other Jewish Christians who had also taken a vow. The elders suggested that Paul purify himself with

them and pay their expenses. That would be clear evidence to the Jewish Christians that the Judaizers had spread lies about Paul. They would see he lived his life in agreement with the commandments of God. They would see that he also obeyed the Jewish law to minister to the Jews.

At the same time, we read in Acts 21:25-26, ““But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written *and* decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from *things* offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.’ Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them.” The elders also made it clear that none of the Gentiles had to follow the Jewish law.

In Acts 15, we saw that the Jerusalem Council had said that there were only four things that the Gentile Christians were not to do. Those four things all came from the first nine chapters of Genesis long before the call of Abraham. They were to keep themselves from idols. In Genesis 4:3, we read, “And in the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord.” Here, we see that Cain was the first idol worshiper, because he tried to present his own efforts to God.

The Gentile Christians were also to keep themselves from blood and from things strangled. Genesis 9:3-4 says, ““Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, *that is*, its blood.”” Here, we see that the eating of blood was forbidden when God gave Noah and his family permission to eat animals. That would include both blood and things strangled. Then, Genesis 2:24 says, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” This is a principle for all mankind, because Adam and Eve had no parents to leave. This excludes immorality of any kind. Here, we see that God explained what a godly marriage should be like.

Paul followed the advice of the elders of the church at Jerusalem. Here, we see again that Paul was a Jew and was willing to do whatever was best to help both additional Jews and additional Gentiles come to Christ. Paul explained his motivation in 1 Corinthians 9:22-23, where we read, “To the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with *you*.” Paul was willing to do whatever was best for the sake of the Gospel. In the same way, we want to provide an example for our physical and spiritual children by being willing to do whatever is best for the Gospel. In that way, we provide an example for our children so that they can also learn to do what is best for the sake of the Gospel. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children understand why Paul did what he did.