

Acts 21:17-22:1 ~ Teacher's Lesson
The New Covenant Believer and the Law of Moses

Review: At the end of his third missionary journey, Paul traveled to Jerusalem to deliver a love offering from the churches in Achaia and Macedonia (modern Greece).

Hair Cut: Do you remember earlier when Luke recorded that Paul stopped in X and got his hair cut as part of a vow (18:18). It seems to be a random comment. However, today we will see why Luke might have included that information.

******What misunderstanding did the Jerusalem elders seek to clear up (21:17-26)?** There were false rumors that Paul was demanding that Jewish Christians forsake Moses and refuse circumcision for their children, 21:20-21. On the contrary, Paul was quite happy for Jewish believers to voluntarily keep the Law of Moses.

1. What would this rumor (21:20-21) have been based on? The basis of the rumor was doubtless due to the fact that Paul boldly taught it is not necessary for Christian Gentiles to keep the Law of Moses. In other words, a Gentile does not first have to become a Jew in order to be a Christian. As a corollary, it is also a fact that no believing Jew was still obligated to keep the Law of Moses (though Paul was not against someone voluntarily keeping the Law due to a weak conscience). The New Covenant made the Mosaic Covenant "obsolete" (Heb 8:13).

Perspective: Based on 21:17, how did the brothers in Jerusalem feel about Paul? It is important to observe that the brothers received him gladly, but there were concerned about the weak consciences of the Jewish Christian in Jerusalem who could not imagine letting go of Moses.

Perspective: Based on 21:20, how did the Jerusalem church leaders¹ feel about so many Gentiles coming to faith? They glorified God because of it.

2. According to 21:20, what was true of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem? *Romans 14:5, 14, 20.* They were all still zealous for the Law of Moses.

Transition: During the period of transition from law to grace, from Judaism to Christianity, from old covenant to new covenant, many of the early Christian Jews still kept the Mosaic Law (civil, ceremonial and moral). These Jewish believers were weak in faith, and considered any abandoning of the Law of Moses to be wrong. They just could not let go of the Law. However, the absolute truth is that they were not obligated to keep the Law of Moses. Paul was very gentle with such believers:

¹ It is interesting that Paul met only with James¹ (Jesus' brother, author of the epistle of James) and the local elders. Evidently the Apostles were no longer in Jerusalem at this point.

ESV **Romans 14:5** One person esteems one day [Sabbath day] as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.

ESV **Romans 14:14** . . . nothing is unclean in itself [pork], but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean.

ESV **Romans 14:20** . . . Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.

3. What solution did the elders devise to quell the false rumor (21:21-24)? See *Acts 18:18*. They wanted Paul to participate in ritual purification and to pay the expenses of four local men who had taken a vow related to shaving their heads, just as Paul had done earlier (18:18). This would demonstrate to the local believing Jews that Paul himself was still obedient to the Law of Moses (which he was). A picture is worth a thousand words!²

4. According to 1 Corinthians 9:20, why did Paul Himself continue to keep the Law of Moses? Paul's obedience to the Law was purely voluntary, not due to any actual new covenant obligation. His purpose for keeping the Law was the effective evangelism of unbelieving Jews.

ESV **1 Corinthians 9:20** To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.

5. Why did the elders repeat the decision of the Jerusalem council to Paul (21:25)? See *Acts 15*. Perhaps it was for the benefit of the Gentile Christians who accompanied Paul to Jerusalem, or to reassure Paul that they understood that Gentiles were not under the Law.

ESV **Romans 6:14** . . . you are not under law but under grace.

ESV **Romans 10:4** Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

Application: No Christian is under the Law of Moses (civil, ceremonial or moral). However, the Christian is under the Law of Christ. What was ethical under Moses is still ethical in Christ.

ESV **1 Corinthians 9:21** To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.

6. How does 21:26 illustrate Romans 14:1-12? Relative to the Law, Paul was willing to do what it took to keep from being a stumbling block to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

7. How can you apply what Paul did here to your life (21:26)? See *1 Corinthians 9:22-23, 10:23-24, 31-33*.

² Kistemaker, 761.

Application: We must be careful when around Christians with a weak conscience so that our liberty in Christ does not hurt their weak faith. We must also be careful not to needlessly offend unbelievers:

ESV 1 Corinthians 9:22-23 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

ESV 1 Corinthians 10:23-24 "All things are lawful," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor.

ESV 1 Corinthians 10:31-33 . . . whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

******What near-fatal mistake did the unbelieving Jews make (21:27-36)?** See Acts 20:4. When the Asian Jews saw Trophimus (an Asian Gentile), they wrongly assumed Paul had brought Greeks into the temple and so tried to kill him, 21:27-30.³

Archaeology: Warnings were posted in Greek and Latin outside the inner temple courts. Two of these have been found, one in 1871 and the other in 1935: "No foreigner may enter within the barricade which surrounds the temple and enclosure. Anyone who is caught so doing will have himself to blame for his ensuing death".⁴ These signs indicate how serious it was to break temple regulations and why there was such an outburst of feelings against Paul.⁵

8. Why is it significant that these were Asian Jews (21:27)? Paul spent three years in Asia (in Ephesus), and these Asian Jews recognized Trophimus as a Gentile from Ephesus (20:4). They also doubtless knew of Paul's work among the Gentiles there, and how Paul did not require Gentiles to become Jews in order to worship Jehovah.

9. How did the Roman government intervene yet again to protect Paul (21:31-36)? Always sticklers for law and order, the local Roman peace-keeping force stopped the beating, arrested Paul, and took him away toward the soldiers' barracks.

Roman Soldiers: A "tribune" was the commander of 1,000 men (a centurion commanded roughly 100 men). The Roman garrison was located in a fortress on the northwest corner of the temple wall. This fortress had a high tower that allowed a full view of the temple area. The soldiers could reach the scene almost immediately.⁶

³ According to 20:4, Trophimus was one of two men from Asia who accompanied Paul back to Jerusalem.

⁴ Bruce, 434.

⁵ Marshall, 167.

⁶ *ESV Study Bible*, 2132.

Insight: During the time covered by the book of Acts, persecution almost always came at the hands of the unbelieving Jews. Unbelieving Jews are not God's people. God only has one people: the church. Abraham's sons are those who have the same faith as Abraham the man of faith. Anyone can become one of Abraham's sons based on belief, not birth. Unbelieving Jews belong to the synagogue of Satan (Re 2:9, 3:9). For that matter, unbelieving Western Gentiles belong to the church of Satan. Unbelieving Muslims are in the mosque of Satan. Unbelieving Hindus are in the temple of Satan. The situation changed under the terrible reign of Nero, who was probably responsible for both Paul and Peter's deaths and for John's banishment as a political prisoner to the island of Patmos.⁷ Starting with Nero, the Roman government persecuted the church off and on for the next 200 years. It was the Roman Empire of Satan.

10. Why couldn't the tribune determine who Paul was or what he'd done (21:33-34)?

11. What prophecy did 21:33-36 fulfill? See 21:11. In fulfillment of the Spirit's forecast, Paul was bound and taken away by the Gentiles (21:11)!

Application: Bad things do happen to good people. Bad things may happen to you precisely because you obey God's Word.

*****What was Paul given permission to do (21:37-22:1)?** Paul was given permission to speak to the people, 21:39.

Application: Paul was respectful to governing authority.

Amazing Grace: This mob had come very close to killing Paul, and yet next the thing that was on Paul's mind (now that the Romans had rescued him) was to have the chance to present the Gospel to that same mob.

12. Why was the tribune surprised that Paul knew Greek (21:37-38)? He mistakenly thought Paul to be an Egyptian rebel leader of four thousand men. Joseph wrote about this Egyptian rebel and of the Assassins; the revolt was put down by the Roman governor Felix, but the Egyptian escaped capture.⁸

13. Why did Paul speak to the people in Hebrew rather than Greek (21:40)? He wanted them to know that he was one of them. He also wanted to be more convincing, so he spoke to them in the language of their heart.

⁷ John would later describe the Roman Empire as a red beast associated with seven hills that makes war on the Lamb (Re 17:3, 9, 14).

⁸ Ibid., 2133.

Personal Testimony: Paul is about to give them his personal conversion testimony. It is common, when training a person how to give his salvation testimony, to organize it into three parts: his life before Christ, how he came to Christ, and his life after Christ. This is exactly how Paul presented his testimony to the crowd. It is good for every believer to spend time preparing his own salvation testimony.

So What?

14. What is every believer's relationship to the Law of Moses?

15. Paul kept the Law of Moses so that he did not offend weak Jewish believers. How can you apply that principle in your life?

16. God used the Roman government to protect Paul. The longer Paul lived, the more people he could reach with the Gospel. According to 1 Timothy 2:1-2, how should we pray regarding governments?

ESV **1 Timothy 2:1-2** . . . I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

**** = ask this question before reading the text aloud. Doing so will cause focus.

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Stephen E. Atkerson
NTRF.org
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