

Compromise or Faithfulness: Paul's Nazarite Vow

Acts 18:18-23; Numbers 6:1-21

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In the Book of Acts the apostles and the Church of Jesus Christ were moving from the temporary shadows of the Old Covenant into the permanent administration of the New Covenant. And during that approximately 40 year transitional period (from the Day of Pentecost in 30 A.D. until the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D.), the apostles of Jesus Christ realized that the ceremonies, the holy days, and the dietary laws of the Old Covenant were legally abolished by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and yet they used those Old Testament shadows as a means to bridge a temporary gap in seeking to bring Jews that were still planted in the Old Testament economy and laws to hear the gospel of Jesus (1 Corinthians 9:20).

Paul did not use these shadows of the ceremonial law as having any moral or religious obligation upon him or anyone else. In fact, Paul makes it clear that such a supposed obligation is contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:14-17). That was the meaning of God rending the veil in the Temple when Christ died (Mark 15:38). That was the meaning of the vision given to Peter (Acts 10:15). It was also made clear in the Synod at Jerusalem that there was no religious obligation to observe the ceremonial law as New Covenant Christians any longer (whether Jewish or Gentile Christian, Acts 15:10).

One aspect of our liberty in Jesus Christ is faithfully summarized in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (20:1):

under the New Testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish Church was subjected.

Dear ones, if you don't understand this truth as you read through the Book of Acts, you will be conflicted and perplexed in reading that on various occasions Paul seemed to make compromises and seemed to betray the truth about the abolition of the ceremonial law. But in reality, Paul did not compromise the truth in the least, but was rather using the ceremonies as a temporary bridge to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Jews. The main points from our text this Lord's Day are in the form of two questions: (1) Why Does Paul Take a Nazarite Vow (Acts 18:18)? (2) Why Does Paul Make Haste to Attend the Feast in Jerusalem (Acts 18:19-23)?

I. Why Does Paul Take a Nazarite Vow (Acts 18:18-23)?

A. The promises of the Lord Jesus fueled the perseverance of Paul in his calling, and after the Lord used Gallio (the Roman Proconsul) to deliver Paul from the clutches of the Jews, Paul continued to minister there in Corinth "yet a good while" (literally, "many days" after the deliverance of the Lord, Acts 18:18). Next, we are informed that Paul took his leave of the brethren in Corinth with a view to returning to Antioch in Syria and reporting to the Church there what God had accomplished in this second missionary journey (but he will first stop in Ephesus and Jerusalem). As Paul leaves Corinth, his devoted Christian friends, Aquila and Priscilla, accompany him across the Aegean Sea as far as Ephesus (in Asia Minor, 2 miles from modern Selcuk, Turkey). But before Paul set sail for Ephesus, we read, "having shorn his head in Cenchrea: for he had a vow" (Acts 18:18). Although grammatically, Aquila is the closer antecedent to "having shorn his head", yet it seems that the person who is the main subject of this verse is Paul (Paul tarried; Paul took his leave; Paul sailed; Paul having shorn his head). What is behind this vow of Paul and what is its significance?

1. **Vows** are promises made directly to God. Whereas **oaths** are promises made to one or more people calling God to be a witness to what was promised or declared.

a. Both vows and oaths are binding (Deuteronomy 23:21) unless what is promised is unlawful or what is promised cannot be performed (not simply because it is hard to perform or difficult to perform—Psalm 15:4—but because it is unlawful to perform—Acts 23:21—or because we do not have the ability to perform it—“I vow I will sin no more” rather than “I will strive to overcome the sins in my life by the grace of God”).

b. This is serious business, and that is why vows and oaths should not be taken rashly, for we cannot simply break such promises without consequences (Joshua 9 and 2 Samuel 21:1—even nations as moral persons are so obligated 500 years later). For that reason, it is wise not to make vows to God or to swear oaths invoking the name of God without writing them out and allowing a mature Christian (father, husband, minister, elder, or friend) to read it and counsel you in it. Fathers (single mothers) and husbands are given the right (Numbers 30) to confirm or veto a vow or an oath by minor children or wives if they express some form of objection or concern or a desire to yet discuss it on the day that they hear it.

c. This may seem like foolishness to the world and legalism to many who profess Christ, but we see the destruction of marriage and society when our word means nothing (a violation of the Third Commandment—consent of parents to marry—reading of the banns in *Directory For Public Worship*). To not keep our word to God (vow) or to man when invoking the name of God (oath) is to lie to God—remember Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). It matters that God keeps His promises to us, His people (heaven or hell hinge upon God’s faithfulness to His covenant promises to save us through faith in Jesus Christ). But what treason against such a faithful covenant-keeping God to act as though we can innocently break our covenants and promises to Him, or that He doesn’t care whether we keep them or not.

2. The act itself of cutting the hair in association with a vow to the Lord is the Nazarite vow—which pertained to men and women (Numbers 6). This was a vow that moved from being a private matter to being evident for all to see. It did not bind more than an ordinary vow, but it had more visible outward effects than ordinary vows.

a. Nazarite means one who is separated unto or consecrated to the Lord. One could be a Nazarite for a limited period of time (as was true here of Paul) or for a lifetime from birth (Samson, Samuel, John the Baptist).

b. Nazarites were to abstain from any grape product (whether the grape, the juice of the grape, dried grapes, wine, or vinegar from the grape), and Nazarites during the time of their vow were not to cut their hair, and Nazarites were not to go near the dead (even a close relative). Once the vow was complete, the hair was to be shorn and burnt in the fire upon the brazen altar in the presence of the Lord.

c. A Nazarite was one who separated himself/herself from certain lawful pleasures of this life (the grape/wine) in order to be devoted to the Lord in the matter of the vow specified. Consecration to the Lord always means self-denial. The hair was seen as a sign of glory and strength, and growing the hair/cutting the hair/burning the hair in the fire of the altar was a picture of offering everything to God. The Nazarite did not even allow love for family to break his/her vow. These principles of self-denial and offering all to God are most fully realized in the life and work of Jesus Christ and in all His disciples: Matthew 16:24.

3. The Nazarite vow was an Old Testament ceremony, so why was Paul practicing a ceremony that the Lord Jesus had legally abolished on the cross? Paul did so not as a religious or legal obligation, nor as an act of authorized worship unto God, but as a means of using a ceremony that would allow him a connection to preach to the Jews (1 Corinthians 9:20). Paul was neither comprising nor Judaizing the gospel. What he did was lawful and was profitable at that time in the history of the Church.

4. What about Jewish converts to Jesus Christ (Messianic Jews) who believe they are bound to keep the Old Testament holy days, ceremonies, and dietary laws? What about Gentile converts to Jesus Christ who likewise believe they are bound to follow the Old Testament holy days, ceremonies, and dietary laws? I don’t question their sincerity, but sincerity is not the question any way—we can all be sincerely

wrong. To return to the Old Testament ceremonies is denying the work of Christ in nailing them to the cross. Let me note some differences between what Paul did and what modern day Messianic Jews/Gentiles are doing.

a. Paul did not keep the Old Testament ceremonies as religious obedience to God (as Messianic believers do), but out of love to win Jews to Jesus Christ (Galatians 5:1).

b. Paul did not *permanently* keep the Old Testament ceremonies (as Messianic believers do), but did so *temporarily* when he was ministering to Jews (to the Jew he became a Jew, but to the Gentile he became a Gentile, 1 Corinthians 9:20-22). The Old Testament ceremonies were given to the Church in its infancy and childhood, but with the coming of Jesus Christ the Church was not to return to the childish pictures, types, and shadows of the Old Testament, but was to move on to maturity as adopted sons of God who have received their full inheritance from the Father (Galatians 4).

c. Paul did not use Old Testament ceremonies and then say nothing about the legal end of these ceremonies in the death of Jesus Christ (as Messianic believers do), but he taught the Old Testament ceremonies and ordinances were nailed to the cross of Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:14).

d. To return to the Old Testament ceremonies in one point, Paul says, is to obligate one to the whole ceremonial law (Galatians 5:3). Paul understood that if he rebuilt an obligation to the ceremonial law (which he preached was destroyed), he would show himself to be a confused transgressor for rebuilding what he destroyed in his preaching and which Jesus destroyed in his death (Galatians 2:18).

e. The Book of Hebrews clearly lays out the end of the temple, the priesthood, the sacrifices, holy days, and ceremonies of the Old Testament as shadows that are realized in Jesus Christ and the New Covenant (Hebrew 9:10). The Book of Hebrews warns Jewish Christians about the danger in returning to the Old Testament ceremonies as an obligation once the full revelation of Jesus Christ has brought the ceremonies to an end. To return to those Jewish ceremonies is not faithfulness, but is defection from the freedom purchased in Christ.

f. Thus, Paul's use of the Nazarite vow was not an endorsement for the Old Covenant ceremonies to continue, but a temporary and transitional bridge to be used during the apostolic period until temple and priesthood were brought to an end at the destruction of Jerusalem (70 A.D.). Our reformers said that Paul was giving the Old Testament ceremonies that had been appointed by the Lord an honorable burial, not an honorable resurrection.

II. Why Does Paul Make Haste to Attend the Feast in Jerusalem (Acts 18:19-23)?

A. When Paul along with Aquila and Priscilla arrive in Ephesus, they come to the commercial and banking center of Asia and the Roman capital of Western Asia Minor. Paul once again begins in the synagogue of the Jews (Acts 18:19), where he had a favorable response to the gospel. In fact, these Jews wanted Paul to stay longer with them (Acts 19:20), but Paul surprises us at this point by not consenting to their invitation to stay and proclaim the gospel to them, and rather explains that he needed to bid them farewell for the present time, so that he might make it in time to the feast in Jerusalem (whether Passover or Pentecost). Paul assures these Ephesian Jews (perhaps Jewish Christians by this time) that he plans to return (if God wills it).

1. Dear ones, that is how we should make future plans and set future goals: if God wills it. One reason we become angry about goals that do not work as we planned is because we have not truly given all our plans, all our ambitions, all our dreams, our today, our tomorrow, and all the days of our life to the sovereign wisdom, love, and will of our good and gracious God. If we truly did so, we would realize that the Lord Jesus has the right to alter those plans at any point. He is Lord, not you or me.

2. I fear that "God willing" often becomes no more meaningful than "In Jesus name." Dear ones, it is right to commit all our ways to the Lord, to call upon Him to guide us, and to make clear to us and to others that we really do believe our lives (and all the hardships, disappointments, afflictions, trials, sorrows,

as well as all of the blessings of life) fall under the sovereign direction and control of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us be guilty of taking God's name in vain, we must not utter pious expressions using God's name that we do not truly mean ("Praise the Lord", "God willing", "In Jesus name", "O Lord", "My God" etc.). Let us live our lives in light of "God willing".

B. But why does Paul make haste to attend the feast in Jerusalem?

1. For the same reason that he went to the synagogues to preach and to teach the Jews—to lead them to faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 10:1). For the same reason he took a Nazarite vow—to gain some contact that the gospel might be preached to their salvation. Paul did not attend the synagogue or make haste to the feast in Jerusalem because he wanted to worship with unbelieving Jews or because he believed Old Covenant ceremonies were yet a scriptural obligation. He did so because there would be present more Jews in Jerusalem at one time than perhaps all of the Jews in the synagogues to which he preached in all of his missionary journeys. This was not Paul caving to Jewish holy days, but was Paul showing his passion to see unbelieving Jews brought to Jesus Christ and looking for the greatest opportunity to do so.

2. Those professing Christians today who would appeal to Paul's going to Jerusalem for the feast (whether Passover or Pentecost) in Acts 18:21 and believe that gives warrant to Christians and Christian Churches to celebrate holy days like Christmas, Easter, etc. are taking their precedent for man-appointed holy days today from God-appointed holy days in the Old Testament (which have now been legally abolished by Christ upon the cross).

a. There is no scriptural authority for churches, synods, popes, or ministers to appoint holy days on their own authority. The only holy day appointed by the Lord in the New Covenant is the Lord's Day (as a celebration on the first day of the week to worship the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, Revelation 1:10).

b. The Lord having appointed those Old Testament ceremonies, holy days, and dietary laws, He alone has the authority to end them (which He did in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ). Only that same Lord Jesus has the authority (as Head of the Church) to appoint in His Word what we are to bring to Him by way of the worship which pleases Him—nothing more and nothing less (The reading and preaching of Scripture; prayer; singing of the Psalms in the Psalter without instruments; the benediction; the sacraments; and occasionally solemn vows and oaths in worship).

C. Paul lands at the seaport of Caesarea, goes up to the Church in Jerusalem and greets them (doesn't even mention the feast day) and returns to Antioch to submit his encouraging report to the Church of Antioch that had commissioned him (Acts 18:22). Then Paul sets out upon his third missionary journey by revisiting the churches in Galatia and Phrygia that had already been planted to strengthen them (Acts 18:23). Making disciples is not just gaining converts, it is strengthening converts in the faith that they might go out to gain new converts.

In closing, first, just as the legal abolition of the ceremonial law that was nailed to the cross of Jesus Christ was instantaneous and forever, but was worked out and applied by the apostles in the process of time, so likewise our legal justification by faith alone is instantaneous and forever, but is being worked out and applied by us in the process of time. All true Christians would love to see that which is true of them before the throne of God perfectly realized in this temporary, transitional period where we struggle with sin, where we face temptations we hate, where we war against the world, the flesh, and the devil. But during this temporary, transitional period of life we are growing in faith and love in applying the glorious benefits of the death and resurrection of our Savior to our lives every day until that which is presently temporary and transitional (struggling with sin) becomes permanent (forever removed from all sin). Let us not despise the days of transition, because they are preparing us for the day of everlasting permanence in the presence of the Lord.

Second, times of transition are temporary and not permanent. Let us then realize that our present prosperity is temporary and not rest in it as if it will last forever or make an idol of it. So likewise, let us realize that our present hardships, pain, and sorrows are temporary and not lose hope in God's promise and God's goodness to us here in this temporary and transitional land of the living, which is preparing us for our permanent, eternal, heavenly home. This world is not our home. We are pilgrims looking for a better, righteous, and permanent city whose Builder and Maker is God. Lot's wife looked back with desire for Sodom and the temporary pleasures of this life and she was judged. Abraham looked in faith to Jesus Christ and looked forward to that permanent city of glory in heaven and he was saved. Therefore, my brethren, let not your heart and hopes be in this world which is passing away, but in the glories of heaven that will never pass away (2 Corinthians 4:17-18). Let us be spiritual Nazarites, letting go of the hold of everything that pulls our hearts away from that which is permanent and eternal in Jesus Christ.

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