

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 47, Chapter 21

We continue in The Book of Acts, which is our necessary primer to give us the context and background for understanding everything that comes in the New Testament following the Gospels (and especially for understanding Paul's letters). Acts 21 has brought Paul back to Jerusalem from the Aegean Sea region for 2 purposes: first, to obey the Torah commandment that he participates in the pilgrimage festival of Shavuot (Pentecost). Second, he was delivering money that he had collected from the various congregations he visited. The money was for 2 different purposes: 1) charity for the poor Believers in Jerusalem, and 2) the half-shekel Temple tax that every Jew, no matter where they lived, was to contribute annually for the operational expenses of the Temple. Thus, some of the money was given to James to be distributed; and some was given to the priests as the Temple tax.

I concluded our last lesson by telling you that what James and Paul were discussing beginning in verse 17 of Acts 21 brings up a big and important question. It is a question that is central to understanding everything that follows the Book of Acts, and has to do with what Paul means, and what James means, and sometimes what other writers of the New Testament mean when they use the term "Law". We have delved into this subject as we studied the Torah and other books of the Old Testament; but now we shall explore it in the context of the New Testament to see what the authors of these New Testament books meant by the term "Law", and therefore how we ought to take it to mean as it pertains to ourselves and the practice of our faith as 21st century Believers.

I'll disclose to you upfront that we are going to get detailed and technical today. But these details and technical items are about things you **can** understand, and they are things Believers need to know. Some of what you hear today might shake up your world a little.

Let's begin by re-reading part of chapter 21.

RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 21:17 – end

The setting is this: Paul has completed his arduous journey from Macedonia to Jerusalem. It has been many years (perhaps as many as 20) since Paul has come to Jerusalem and met with James and the elders who form the leadership council of The Way. I want to stress that we cannot be 100% certain that Paul has stayed away from Jerusalem for 2 decades; it is only that the Scriptural record makes no mention that he had been in Jerusalem since he attended the Jerusalem Council meeting that we read about in Acts 15. This was the meeting whereby the issue of circumcision for gentiles was its cause; but also whereby a set of rules were issued (all the rules were prohibitions) for gentiles who wanted to join The Way. These rules insisted upon substantive lifestyle changes for new gentile Believers that dealt with diet, sexual practices, and involvement with idols. Yet, just because Paul's presence in Jerusalem wasn't recorded in the Bible is not ironclad proof that he hadn't come at other, but unrecorded, times.

I personally find it hard to swallow that the pious Pharisee Sha'ul would have ignored the God-ordained Torah laws that required all Israelites to make 3 annual pilgrimages to the Temple in Jerusalem; once maybe, but for 15 or 20 straight years? These Biblical feasts had set the rhythm of Jewish society for centuries and the Feast laws were not optional for Jews; to not make the required pilgrimages was sin. That said, only a relatively small portion of the Jewish families living in the Diaspora ever made that journey, let alone making it 3 times per year. The cost in money and time was significant and beyond the practical means of most Diaspora Jews. So the other side of the coin is that I can see why Paul, himself a Diaspora Jew, may have elected to not make the God-commanded pilgrimages for several years in order to busy himself with evangelizing.

Then there is the matter of the contributions that Paul was collecting. We discussed last week that it was a custom that every Jew (no matter where they lived) was to contribute a so-called half-shekel Temple tax annually. By design each adult male was supposed to bring it to the Temple and personally give it to the priests much in the same attitude as offering a sacrifice. But since only a small portion of the millions of Diaspora Jews made the trip to Jerusalem, the local synagogue would collect the Temple tax and then a representative of that synagogue (or perhaps even of a group of synagogues) would take the combined collected funds to the Temple. It had become customary to collect and pay the Temple tax on the occasion of the Shavuot ceremonies. And by the way, there are reliable historical numbers available that tell us how many Jews were alive at this time. In 48 A.D. Emperor Claudius took a census that revealed that 6,994,000 Jews lived in the Roman Empire (and some lived outside of the Roman Empire so they weren't counted). By the time of the destruction of the Temple a little over 20 years later, there were at least 8 million Jews alive and probably somewhat more, with about 2 million or so of them living in the Holy Land. Thus if even half a million Diaspora Jews journeyed to Jerusalem for the 3 pilgrimage feasts, that was still only perhaps 6 or 7% of the total Jewish population; a fraction of those who were supposed to come according to the Law.

James and the elders of The Way greeted Paul with warmth and were anxious to hear what had been happening with Paul's ministry these past several years. They fully knew that he had a deep involvement with gentiles, both pagans and God-fearers. We are told that they were overjoyed to hear of Paul's great progress in bringing so many gentiles into the fold. It is noteworthy that their reaction is not to congratulate Paul, but rather to praise God for it, properly giving credit to where it is due. Paul must have taken some time to explain what had happened since we're told that he went into detail about it.

In return, James explains to Paul that there had been amazing progress here in the Holy Land as well. He says that tens of thousands of Judeans (Jews who resided in the Roman Province of Judea) had come to faith; but they were also zealous for the Torah. It is my opinion that while we casually read this report and assume it to mean that Jews who already were zealous for the Torah (the Law) became Believers in Yeshua it can just as easily be taken to mean that as a result of their salvation in Christ they became zealous for the Torah. Although I am not a Jew, that is certainly what happened to me (even if not right away), and I know that many thousands of Christians, as a result of their faith, have become zealous for the Torah when, before salvation, they didn't even know what the Torah was.

The important point is that James is connecting faith in Yeshua with zealously for the Torah and presenting it as something perfectly natural; and with this zealously came a determination to obey God. But this also presents a problem because rumors have reached Jerusalem that Paul has been teaching the Diaspora Jews to NOT obey God. Specifically the issue of circumcision once again pops-up. The rumors say that Paul has not only been teaching against the requirement set down by Moses for male circumcision, but also that Paul told the Believing Jews of the Diaspora that they could cease obeying Jewish customs. Let me be clear: the passage says that even though Paul told James in detail about what had been happening with **the gentiles** he was evangelizing, the rumors against Paul were NOT about these gentiles; rather they were about **the Jews** Paul was dealing with. Therefore for Jews, adherence to Jewish customs and traditions was a significant issue, but it really didn't trouble them very much about whatever the gentiles did or didn't do. Our CJB uses the word "traditions" instead of "customs" (as we find in most Bibles) and that is certainly the better translation from the Jewish perspective of the timeframe of when this passage was written. To gentile Christian ears this basically sounds like an accusation that Paul isn't obeying the Biblical laws of Moses; but that really isn't it.

We've discussed on numerous occasions that Jewish law (**Halakhah**) was the root of religious authority and lifestyle in Judaism. And Jewish law was a fusion of the Biblical laws of Moses along with Traditions that had been developed in the synagogue, and then generously peppered with ancient cultural customs of the Jewish people. Just as in Christianity whereby to the minds of average Christians there is no discernable difference between a Church doctrine, a Church tradition, and the Holy Scriptures, so in the minds of average Jews there is no discernable difference between a Jewish Tradition, a Jewish custom, and the Biblical Laws of Moses. In both religions it is assumed that the doctrines and Traditions decided by their religious authorities accurately reflect the meaning and intent of the Bible. So the thought is that if you are following a Tradition or custom, then for all intents and purposes you must be following the Bible.

Thus in verse 21 when James speaks of Paul teaching the Jews to apostize from Moses, as well as from circumcision and even from Jewish traditions and customs, he is speaking about apostizing from **Halakhah**; the entire body of Jewish Law. Further it was simply long established Jewish shorthand to say that one was to obey Moses, when what that technically meant is to obey the **laws** of Moses. Thus from a scholarly viewpoint to apostize from Moses means to apostize from the commandments of God given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. However by New Testament times, in the common way of speaking, to apostize from Moses really meant to apostize from **Halakhah**. But then there was yet another serious issue brought up that just won't go away regarding Believers: the issue of circumcision. Interestingly the complaint of the zealous Judean Believers is not that Paul is against circumcising gentiles, but rather that he is against circumcising fellow Jews. Circumcision is the Biblical sign that a person is a member of God's covenant people. So essentially a Jew who refuses circumcision removes himself from being Jewish. Paul is being accused, then, of converting Jews to gentiles by teaching against circumcision; of course Paul did no such thing. However within a few more decades this would be exactly what the gentile controlled Church would demand and ordain as a fundamental Christian doctrine. That is, the Church Bishops agreed that indeed circumcision was the sign of being part of God's covenant people; and the Church wanted no part of it. Therefore it was

decided that to be a Christian one could NOT be circumcised. In fact if a Jew wanted to follow Christ, he, too, could NOT be circumcised. Why? Because to the Jewish community, and to the gentile community, by refusing circumcision a Jew renounced his Hebrew heritage and became a gentile. The Church wished to be a gentiles-only institution and for a long time used a prohibition against circumcision to enforce it.

OK. With those preliminaries out of the way, verse 22 is where the rubber hits the road. James asks a rhetorical question of Paul: what is to be done? I say rhetorical because he's already thought this through and knows exactly what he's going to do. These tens of thousands of local Jews who are in Jerusalem for the holy feast of Shavuot (Believing Jews who are upset because they think that Paul is a traitor to Judaism) are going to know right away that Paul has arrived and this is going to lead to confrontation and trouble. So, indeed, what is to be done? What comes next makes it crystal clear that James knew he needed Paul's help to squelch this dangerous and unfounded rumor. That is, James knew Paul well enough that he knew that Paul was not doing what he was accused of. So James's solution is to have a public display by Paul that would demonstrate once and for all his continuing devotion to Jewish Law.

Before getting in to the particulars of that demonstration, however, let's see what some of the revered Early Church Fathers thought about this situation with Paul and the rumors that were flying around, and how James decided to handle it, here in Acts 21. In a letter (called Letter 82) that he wrote a little after 400 A.D., Augustine had this to say:

“It is quite clear, I think, that James gave his advice in order to show the falsity of the views supposed to be Paul's, which certain Jews who had come to believe in Christ, but who were still zealous for the law, had heard about him, namely, that through the teaching of Christ the commandments, written by the direction of God and transmitted by Moses to the fathers, were to be thought sacrilegious and worthy of rejection. These reports were not circulated about Paul by those who understood the spirit in which the Jewish converts felt bound to those observances, namely, because of their being prescribed by divine authority and for the sake of the prophetic holiness of those ceremonies.....but NOT for the attaining of salvation.....”

If only the Church at large had listened to Augustine she might not have embarked on the terrible path of anti-Semitism and anti-Law that she has followed for 19 centuries. It is a path that has resulted in a number of wrong minded doctrines that have not only put up a wall between Jews and Christians, but also has mischaracterized God's Word concerning our all-important relationship with Him. Augustine rightly says that it was Christ's own teaching of God's commandments that validated that the Law was still alive and relevant (he was probably referring to Matthew 5). But certain Jews (some of the myriads of Judean Jews) who had come to believe in Christ also believed a slanderous lie that Paul was teaching that Believing Jews should now regard observance of the Law as a bad thing (sacrilegious) and thus should reject the Law of Moses. But what I especially appreciate is where Augustine points out that while the Law still carried the same divine authority it always had, the Law was **not** for attaining salvation. Exactly right. The Law was not now, and never had been, for the purpose of attaining salvation. Trusting Christ is how Jews or gentiles obtained salvation; but that reality didn't somehow abolish the Law. It was never an either/or proposition (that Grace replaces

Law or that one must choose between Grace or Law), or that the new replaces the old. As Augustine points out, that fact comes from God and was taught by Christ Himself.

So here we have one Early Church Father, Augustine, (whose voice was ignored on this and other matters, overridden by the Rome-based Church Bishops) who understands our pertinent passage in Acts literally and therefore correctly. But now listen to another early Church Father, Chrysostom, who lived at the same time as Augustine. Unfortunately what we hear from Chrysostom is him upholding the accepted Roman Church doctrine that the Law was dead and gone and so no one, Jew or gentile, had any business following it.

“Against this Paul defends himself and shows that he does this not of his choice. How did they persuade him? It was part of the divine plan, and (it was) condescension on his part. So this was no hindrance to the preaching, since it was they themselves who decided such things. So he does not accuse Peter in any way. For what he himself did here is what Peter did on that occasion when he held his peace and established his doctrine.....he had to do something more to persuade them that you observe the Law. Condescension is what it is. Do not be alarmed.”

I have in earlier Acts lessons familiarized you with this same line of tortured reasoning from a number of Early Church Fathers about positions they have taken against the continuing relevance of the Law; positions which without their fanciful distortions are otherwise not defensible. Their position is that Paul (and Peter and in some cases James) are insincere when the Scriptures find them observing the Law or telling others to do so. Thus whenever we find them personally obeying the Law, or telling others to obey it, it is not by their free will or choice that they do so. Rather their circumstances are compelling them to pretend; but these Early Church Fathers say that they are pretending to be obedient to the Law in order to serve the greater good of expanding the Gospel so that they can get rid of the Law. The idea is that Paul, Peter, and James are deceiving others in words and deeds so that more people might receive salvation. Here Chrysostom tells his readers to therefore “not be alarmed” by what the Biblical text plainly says. It is rather that Paul was merely being “condescending” (to use Chrysostom’s term) by agreeing to James’s instruction to participate in a holy vow offering and to pay for 4 others to do so as well. But ultimately this was God’s divine plan, says Chrysostom, that it happen this way; therefore neither Paul nor James was doing any wrong by their insincerity and play acting.

Does this not make you angry? If it doesn’t, why doesn’t it? Here we have the recorded words of one of the men who was instrumental in shaping the fundamental doctrines that the Church is built upon saying that Paul, Peter and James don’t mean what they say or do when it comes to the Law of Moses; it was all for show. Rather they are intentionally deceiving the new Believers (and potential new Believers) for their own good. And that God is the father of this deception; but it’s OK because it’s all part of His divine plan that all these New Testament writers keep obeying the Law and urging others to do so....but later, after they’ve converted more people, then they’ll tell them the truth. Happily we have a plain admission by Augustine that indeed it was Christ’s own teaching that His followers should obey the Commandments. But sadly that Church Father was not listened to very much because he wouldn’t follow in lockstep with the agenda of the Bishops of Rome and their allies.

Getting back to our passage in Acts, in verse 23 James begins to tell Paul exactly what he needs to do to put down this false rumor against him. Paul is to go with 4 men who are under a vow; pay his and their expenses, and go through the standard purification procedures that include altar sacrifices. This way, says James in verse 24, these upset Judean Jewish Believers will see for themselves that the rumors they have heard about Paul are false, and that in fact Paul himself keeps the Torah scrupulously. I've said on numerous occasions that it is the Book of Acts that defines who the historical Paul is; and that without the Book of Acts then it is all too easy to distort Paul's several Epistles and make them sound as though he was anti-Law, even anti-Jewish. But here in Acts 21 it is made abundantly clear that Paul himself obeyed the Law. So just so there is no doubt or ambiguity about this fact, I'll repeat this verse to you from a couple of common English Bible versions so that it is explicit to all who are listening that the words and intent agree no matter which version you read from.

^{KJV} Acts 21:24 *Then 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.*

^{NIV} Acts 21:24 *Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law.*

^{RSV} Acts 21:24 *take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you but that you yourself live in observance of the law.*

Every version that I checked (and it was many) has it that James is having Paul perform this vow offering and ritual purification so that everyone can visibly and tangibly see that Paul keeps and obeys the Law. I hope you now grasp why, if they were going to insist on creating and supporting a Church doctrine that says that Paul was against Believers obeying the Law, that some of the gentile Early Church Fathers had little choice except to come up with the most intellectually dishonest distortions to make it seem so. They determined that despite what Scripture plainly says, the accepted Church doctrine had to be upheld. So the spin is that Paul was deliberately deceiving people (at God's instruction no less) so that the Gospel could go forth all the better. I told you at the outset that some of what you heard today would shake your world. But what needs to be shaken is not your faith in God, or in Yeshua, or in God's Word. What needs to be shaken is your faith in manmade religious doctrines that have ruled over the institutional Church for so very long; and many of them need to be exposed for what they are and then reformed.

Now for the \$64,000 question: when verse 24 says that Paul was being obedient to the Law, what does that mean? Remember: just moments earlier James said that his goal was to publically demonstrate that Paul did not apostize from Moses or the Traditions.

^{CJB} Acts 21:21 *Now what they have been told about you is that you are teaching all the Jews living among the Goyim to apostatize from Moshe, telling them not to have a b'rit-*

milah for their sons and not to follow the traditions.

Thus James is clearly talking about ***Halakhah***, the overall body of Jewish Law that had developed especially since the creation of the synagogue system during or shortly after the Babylonian exile. And ***Halakhah***, Jewish Law, consisted of a fusion of the Biblical laws of Moses as given on Mt. Sinai, plus the Traditions of the Rabbis, and the many long held Jewish cultural customs. In Greek the word we find in the original Scripture to describe this is ***nomos***, which is usually translated in English Bibles as “law” (nothing wrong with that translation). However as the most authoritative Lexicons on Greek in use today explain (those such as the Friberg or the Thayer Lexicons), the term ***nomos*** means: “anything established, anything received by usage, a custom, a law, or a command”. Thus ***nomos*** can be used in a number of ways, it has a wide range of meaning, and we have to derive from the context how the author means for us to take it in any given circumstance. As used in Acts 21:24, ***nomos*** is meant as a general term to denote not only an obedience to God’s commandments but also an allegiance to their Hebrew heritage and an unwavering identity as a Jew and all that entails. So James is having Paul prove to all these Jews who have gathered in Jerusalem for Shavuot that he remains fully Jewish and fully committed to Jewish practices and traditional religious beliefs. And when one honestly and fairly reads Paul in his Epistles and reads what Luke says about Paul in Acts, within the Hebrew context that is the entire Holy Bible, then we find that Paul indeed remained fully Jewish and fully committed to Jewish practices. All that changed in Paul is that he came to understand that Yeshua of Nazareth was the Messiah that Israel had been waiting for (for centuries), and that Yeshua was the Son of God.

So of all the possible things that James might ask Paul to do, why would he choose to have him participate in a vow offering and a ritual purification? It is because undertaking a vow was seen in Paul’s day as an affirmation of one’s devotion to the Laws of Moses and to the sanctity of the Temple. It is fascinating that we see that Herod Agrippa (Herod the Great’s son) had done the same thing some years earlier. In Josephus’s historical work *Antiquities*, he says this:

“Agrippa naturally, since he was to go back with improved fortunes, turned quickly homewards. On entering Jerusalem, he offered sacrifices of thanksgiving, omitting none of the ritual enjoined by our law. Accordingly he also arranged for a very considerable number of Nazarites to be shorn”.

So from a Jewish cultural perspective not only does it prove a person’s loyalty to Judaism to offer sacrifices in the Temple, but it was regarded as particularly meritorious if one paid for the vow offerings of others. Notice that James says that “***we*** have” 4 men who are under a vow; the “***we***” apparently meaning that the 4 were members of The Way: they were Believers. So picture this: 4 Believing Jews were just completing a vow, and were about to ritually purify themselves and then go into the Temple to sacrifice at the altar. Wait; haven’t we been taught that the Law is dead and gone? Apparently Believers in Paul’s day didn’t think so.

This vow offering in verse 24 clearly was the formal ending of a Nazarite vow, the length of which was usually 30 days (one lunar cycle). Exactly what was vowed by these 4 Believing Jews is not told to us; but it doesn’t really matter because common to all vows of this type

were that one could not drink wine or any grape product, or become ritually unclean, or cut their hair at any time during that 30 days. At the end of the vow period the candidate was to bring 3 different offerings of sacrifice to the Temple: a peace offering, a sin offering, and a whole-offering. This was an expensive proposition; so for Paul to pay for 4 men plus himself showed an extraordinary level of dedication and generosity to those who were watching him. As important as Paul was to the movement it was James's intent that Paul's actions would make an impact such that it would be nearly impossible for those skeptical Jews to continue believing the false rumor that Paul had turned away from Judaism.

Verse 25 is fascinating; what is James trying to communicate? Why remind Paul of the very thing he was instrumental in bringing about, concerning the requirements that the Jerusalem Council put on gentiles who wanted to join The Way? To James there was apparently some connection between what Paul was doing with the gentiles and the belief among the Judean Jews that Paul had apostatized from Judaism. I think that Joseph Shulam probably has it right when he surmises that the more zealous Jews were, the more problem they had with association with gentiles. Yes, the Jerusalem Council had declared its edict regarding the acceptance of gentiles. Yes, these Jews were no doubt also aware of Peter's encounter with God in a vision (when the cloth with the animals was let down from Heaven) whereby God told Peter that the Jewish tradition that gentiles were inherently unclean was wrong. However we must keep reminding ourselves that what Jews followed was **Halakhah**; and that didn't change in any significant way for Jews who accepted Yeshua as Messiah. So even if gentiles weren't inherently unclean, to the Jewish mind gentiles were involved nearly daily in unclean activities that thus rendered them ritually unclean (just as improper activities could render any Jew ritually unclean). Add to that the subjugation of Rome that the Jews were under, and regardless of the Gospel, Jews had little regard for gentiles. That Paul seemed so focused on saving gentiles didn't go over well at all; at least it didn't among the Holy Land Jews.

The other point in James reminding Paul of the Jerusalem Council edict was probably to affirm that it was still in force as originally given; nothing had changed or supplanted it.

Verse 26 informs us that Paul did what James suggested; and he did it immediately (the next day). First he purified himself (he had come from the Diaspora so it was a given that he would have arrived in Jerusalem in a ritually unclean state). Now clean, he was able to enter the outer courts of the Temple but only to tell the priests when his period of purification would end, which would then determine when he could approach the altar area to make the vow sacrifices. The purification rituals can be described mainly as a wash and a wait. That is, one had to immerse in water and then afterwards, depending on the type of impurity one was being cleansed from, had to wait anywhere from the change of the current day to the next day, or commonly 7 days. Verse 27 confirms that the wait for Paul was 7 days.

Everything seemed to be going to plan when some non-Believing Jews from Asia recognized Paul. What were they doing there in Jerusalem at the same time as Paul? They had come for Shavuot. They knew immediately who it was, grabbed him, and began to shout for other Jews to come and help them deal with this apostate from Judaism.

So the process that James had envisioned was prematurely interrupted; Paul never got the

opportunity to bring his sacrifices along with the 4 men and their sacrifices to the Temple Altar. Instead, the prophecy that Agav had prophesied to Paul in Caesarea was coming about.

We'll finish up chapter 21 next week.