

Acts 21:18-26 Becoming All Things To All Men

I. The Jerusalem Elders Glory In Paul's Ministry (18-20a)

A. Paul Meets With the Elders (18)

1. James, the brother of Jesus, leader of the Jerusalem church is there
2. In Paul's letters, his main purpose is to deliver the collection for the Jerusalem church from the churches in Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia Minor
3. This was probably a large gather of the Jerusalem leaders

B. Paul Reports The Gentile Ministry (19)

1. Paul lays out his ministry in the Gentile cities
 - a. This would have been about four years after his last visit to Jerusalem
 - b. Paul plans to go to Rome and Spain. Perhaps he thought this was his last opportunity to meet with the elders
 - c. Paul would tell them of all the conversions and the churches started in the Gentile cities
2. Notice Luke makes sure we understand that this is what God had done
 - a. Gentiles were being converted (Jews were as well but the focus in on Gentiles)
 - b. The kingdom prophecies of the nations are being fulfilled

C. The Elders Glorify God For Paul's Ministry (20a)

1. The Elders recognize Paul as a brother
2. The Elders recognize that Paul's ministry is the work of God's kingdom
 - a. ...however there is a "but" coming

II. The Jerusalem Elders Relay Concerns About Unity (20b-25)

A. The Elders Report Rumors About Paul (20b-22)

1. Many Jewish Believers Are Still Zealous For the Law (20b)
 - a. Notice that the mission in Jerusalem has continued after Paul's departure – thousands of Jews have come to faith in Christ
 - b. The Elders tell Paul that these Jews are still zealous for the law of Moses – these are the purification rites and the traditions of the Jews (presumably this didn't include the Temple sacrifices)
 - i. For the Jews, holding to their traditions wasn't a bad thing as long as they understood that they aren't salvific and only the blood of Christ truly purifies
 - ii. Paul didn't require Jews to renounce their traditions and lifestyles

- iii. Paul also did not require the Gentiles to take up these Jewish traditions
 - iv. This was the focus of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 – and the Elders agreed.
 - 2. Rumors of Paul's Ministry Among Jewish Believers (21)
 - a. They said Paul taught Jews to forsake Moses
 - i. Paul has not taught Jews to forget or do away with Moses
 - ii. He has taught that believers are “no longer under the law” (Rom. 6:14-15)
 - iii. He has taught that the law cannot bring salvation or right relationship with God
 - iv. He has taught that we have freedom in Christ
 - b. They said Paul taught Jews to stop circumcising their children
 - i. Paul has never commanded Jewish believers to refrain from circumcising their children
 - ii. Paul has not required circumcision of Gentile believers, and the elder council in Acts 15 agreed with this
 - iii. Paul has taught that circumcision is not definitional to salvation – He said it is nothing, but what is important is becoming a new Creature (Gal. 6:15; 1 Co. 7:19)
 - c. They said Paul taught Jews to stop walking in their traditions
 - i. Paul never taught the Jews to reject their traditions
 - ii. Paul himself “became a Jew so that he could win the Jews” (1 Co. 9:20)
 - iii. Paul had Timothy circumcised because he was half Jewish, so that it wouldn't hinder the gospel among the Jews.
 - 3. The Concerns About Paul's Presence (22)
 - a. The elders are concerned that Paul's presence in the city would cause an uproar because of the rumors flying around about him
 - b. The elders believe that something must be done to quell the unhealthy animosity for Paul in the city.
- B. The Elders Instructions To Paul (23-24)
 - 1. The Elders Present Four Jewish Believers Under a Vow (23)
 - a. “Do what we tell you” is not an outright command here, but a request
 - b. They elders are privy to four Jewish believers who are under some kind of vow (the shaved head in v.24) – which is probably a Nazarite vow.

- i. More than likely these four were seeking God's intervention in something and refrained from intoxicating drink, cutting the hair, and defiling themselves
 - ii. They have completed the time of their vow, so they shaved their heads and were about to go to the Temple priest to declare their vow finished, and offer the necessary offerings.
 - 2. The Elders Tell Paul to Join Them in Purification (24a)
 - a. There is considerable debate about what Paul was specifically being asked to do here.
 - i. Paul should join in their purification, purifying himself because of his travels into Gentile lands
 - ii. Paul should pay the expenses of their purification without reference to becoming involved in the ceremony.
 - iii. Paul should pay the offering of the animal sacrifice
 - iv. We are not exactly sure to what extent Paul was asked to be involved.
 - 3. The Elders Believe this will Settle The Rumors About Paul (24b)
 - a. This will cause the Jewish believers to know the reports of Paul's activities are baseless
 - b. This will show that Paul conforms to the observance of the Mosaic law.
 - c. This would lay the rumors to rest
 - C. The Elders Already Addressed the Gentile Question (25)
 - 1. They remind Paul that they have addressed the Gentile question already
 - a. Paul knew well the letter, he delivered it to Antioch
 - b. They may have been reminding him to show that they have bent and now it is his turn
 - 2. They expect Paul now to act to preserve the unity of the Jewish / Gentile Church
- III. Paul Complies To Keep Unity Among the Brethren (26)
- A. Paul Purifies Himself With the Four
 - 1. He does this the next day
 - 2. He goes through the ritual water purification ceremony
 - a. He knows that Jesus has made him pure
 - b. He goes through with it to preserve unity
 - B. Paul Gives Notice of the Purification in the Temple
 - C. Paul Provides For the Men's Offering
 - 1. Paul is willing to lay down his freedom as a Christian in order that the other brethren would not stumble.

2. Paul has chosen to finish his course by acting on his Jewish identity in order to keep unity and harmony in the church.
3. Paul could rightly have raised an objection to the purification rituals seeing that we are pure in Christ, but he laid aside his freedom for the sake of the brethren.