

I. Introduction

A. Review

1. Acts recap: October 22, 2023
2. Paul has just made a long journey back to Jerusalem
 - a. Bringing with him a generous and sacrificial offering from the Gentile churches for the mostly Jewish church in Jerusalem
 - b. Clearly warned/made aware of the loss of freedom that awaits him in Jerusalem

B. Context of Acts 21

1. Chapters 21-23 make up this part of the narrative which will unfold over the next handful of weeks
2. This is the last of Paul's ministry as a free man (an ambassador in chains) *praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the Gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak. (Ephesians 6:18-20)*
3. Paul's ministry trajectory
 - a. This doesn't change his objective.
 - b. He is not obeying Jesus differently as a prisoner in chains than he was obeying Jesus as a free man
 - c. Paul's lack of freedom doesn't minimize his ministry
 - d. *So often, we capitulate to our circumstances and surroundings. God's assignment and our sent-ness do not depend on anything that the world can give us or take away from us.
4. Communion, concerns, compromise, and consequences (themes in Acts 21-23)

II. Acts 21:17-26

A. Communion

When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God. (Acts 21:17-20a)

1. Paul reported all that God had done throughout his travels (mostly modern-day Turkey) and how salvation had come to the Gentiles and how churches had been planted and are growing, along with the generous and sacrificial gift from those churches to Jerusalem.
2. This kind of report today, coming from an unreached area, would be almost unbelievable but would also demand rejoicing and a pretty big celebration (like in the parable of the lost son).
3. They all, James and the elders at the Jerusalem church, glorified God.

4. *Whenever God is at work growing His Kingdom, taking away influence and power from the enemy (whether spiritual or human), there will arise opposition.
 - a) It requires great discernment to identify what is fallen opposition and what is of legitimate concern for the purity of the Gospel and faithfulness to Jesus.
 - b) We are really good at elevating to primary importance things that aren't and demoting things of first importance (in the garden, knowledge over obedience).

B. Concern

And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come." (Acts 21:20b-22)

1. We are excited about what God is doing, but we also have some concerns...
 - there are rumblings, rumors, and confusion about your teaching.
2. Many Jews are zealous for the customs and traditions contained in the Law of Moses
 - they have become our identity and culture.
 - a. These customs are not inherently right or wrong.
 - b. There is a genuine attachment to these customs.
3. Rumors, believable and reasonable, abound
 - a. Teaching Jews to forsake the Law of Moses.
 - b. Don't circumcise your children.
 - c. Don't uphold the customs you've lived in and have identified you for generations of the faithful.
 - d. *The word used here for "forsake" is apostasy, the rumor is that Paul is leading people away from the faith of their fathers.
4. What do you do with this kind of situation?
 - a. Paul did tell the Gentiles they don't need to circumcise their children nor do they need to follow the Jewish customs in accordance with the Jerusalem council.

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell. (Acts 15:28-29)
 - b. Paul did not tell the Jews to abandon their faith customs. He did not direct them either way, he left it up to them to do as their conscience and the Holy Spirit led them. Paul spoke clearly on things of primary importance.
 - c. *Therefore, people who have heard Paul through others, or are opposed to Paul, or who haven't listened with care would conclude that Paul is teaching things that he isn't.

C. Compromise

"Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; 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 also live in observance of the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality." Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them. (Acts 21:23-26)

1. Compromise as neutral in the way I am using it.
 - a. Not absolutes or those things of primary importance
 - b. Taco salad: Sherri compromises by placing the tomatoes in a separate bowl rather than in the mix (that's a neutral, not negative, compromise)
2. The ask (command - imperative)
 - a. Practice visibly and publicly a custom of purification for yourself that clearly upholds the customs of the Mosaic Law
 - b. Also, at significant cost to yourself, pay for the purification of 4 others
 - c. *This will clearly communicate Paul's adherence to the customs contained in the Law.
3. Should Paul do this?
 - a. I don't believe that there is one permissible way through this dilemma.
 - 1) Paul is responsible to communicate clearly
 - 2) The people in question are responsible to hear and interpret honestly
 - 3) Both groups are responsible to clarify in humility when there is known confusion.
 - 4) *There will be those who see this as compromising faith in Christ alone: the other end of the offense spectrum, that Paul is capitulating to a Law-infused salvation.
 - b. Paul, defender of people's freedom from the Law, chose to take on himself to release his rights to care for and pursue those who are far from the heart of Jesus.
 - c. *Consistent to how Paul followed Jesus:
For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 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. 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. 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. (1 Corinthians 9:19-23)
4. The mission of Jesus to be presented to all people is more important than anything else and there is nothing too costly for me to give up, no comfort of mine too loved that rises above that mission. At the same time, that mission is to present them to the revealed Jesus in Scripture without compromise.
5. *"A truly free man is not in bondage to his freedom." F.F. Bruce

III. Conclusion

A. What we learn...

1. Life with Christ is not a spectator lifestyle.
 - a. You (each of us) are primarily accountable for your growth and your right beliefs.

- b. We are accountable to live in unity, even if it means the discomfort of our customs and that deeply held comforts are challenged.
 - 2. Life with Christ is not a one-way street.
 - a. We (you) are called to humility and grace as we “work out our salvation with fear and trembling.”
 - b. We have no excuse before God to live outside of a local, engaged community.
 - 3. Life with Christ must be honest and accountable to the things of primary importance without compromise.
 - a. Paul was not opposed to Moses. Paul was opposed to Justification having to do with anything other than or in addition to Christ alone, including the Mosaic Law
 - b. We must be very certain of the things we demand and the cultural creep that moves my thing to God’s things.
 - 4. Life with Christ, even an obedient and faithful one, will not correct all rumors, wrong interpretations, or confusion in the hearts and minds of others
- B. Some personal notes

Communion