

PAUL AND MOSES
Acts 21:17-26

Acts 21:17-26

On the surface, this is one of the most difficult passages that one will find in the Bible. Maybe you didn't catch the difficulty that I am referring to. In that case, let me lay it out before you...

The narrative that we just read is taking place at the end of Paul's third missionary journey. Although one could read ALL that is recorded in the book of Acts of Paul's three missionary journeys in less than an hour, the span of time that is covered over those three journeys is many years. During those years Paul has been all around Asia Minor, over into Macedonia and Greece. At some of his stops he had spent literally YEARS. During all this time he had written many of the letters that we now call his epistles: books like Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians and others. In those letters, Paul laid out his understanding of the gospel, and how because of Christ's finished work on the cross and in the resurrection, all believers in Jesus – Jews and Gentiles alike – have been **set free** from sin and from any sort of notion that righteousness can be obtained by ourselves through a strict keeping of the Law of God as laid down by Moses. Our sin, rooted in the sin of Adam, has made it impossible for us to keep the law, try as hard as we like. But God sent us a redeemer in the person of Jesus Christ – what theologians would centuries later call the "God-man." And as the God-man, Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves: he perfectly kept the law and in doing so he became a new Adam, a new federal head and representative for all who would accept his work on their behalf.

As a result of this,
How do we now spell LIBERTY? C.H.R.I.S.T.
How do we spell FREEDOM? C.H.R.I.S.T.
How do we spell REST? C.H.R.I.S.T.
How do we spell HOPE? C.H.R.I.S.T.
And how do we spell LIFE? C.H.R.I.S.T.

It is ALL about Christ.

Christ has become our "all in all."

*Redeemed how I love to proclaim it,
Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb
Redeemed through his infinite mercy
His child and forever I am.*

And so **to the Gentiles** who never knew much about God, or the law of God, or Moses, David or any of the patriarchs and prophets of Israel, there is good news: you can be saved through faith in Jesus! You need not learn, know or understand Jewish history. If you want to learn, great! But **all you need is Christ!**

And **to the Jews** who had all those wonderful things – the covenants, the promises, the kingdom, the prophets, priests and kings – for you as well, there is good news: Jesus Christ has done for you what all your law keeping could never do. He has made you complete and perfect in himself! You can go on keeping the law of Moses if you want, but you don't have to. For Christ did it for you. **All you need is Christ!**

So to Jew and Gentile alike Paul has been preaching Christ: Jesus Christ is God's perfect Lamb, crucified for sinners and raised for our justification and right standing before God.

Okay? You understand this? And I trust you believe this. For to believe it is life eternal and to reject it is damnation of your eternal soul.

Now back to Acts 21...

So Paul, knowing that suffering and probably even death was awaiting him if he came to Jerusalem, came anyway. Once there he met with James, the brother of Jesus, and the elders over the church in Jerusalem. Most, if not all, of the apostles had by this time been scattered, taking the gospel to various parts of the known world very much like Paul had been doing.

Before James and the other elders, Paul then recounted for them the great things God had been doing in seeing so many Gentiles come to faith in Christ. Their response to this news was that – verse 20 – they "glorified God." But they too had great news and that was that just as so many Gentiles had come to faith in Christ, so too had **thousands** of Jews. As those who have been studying the book of Acts we, of course, already know this. Some 3,000 came to faith in Christ back on that first Pentecost when Peter had

preached to the Jews in Jerusalem (as recorded in Acts chapter 2), and later, in Acts 4:4 we read that the number of believing men had grown to some 5,000. And chapter 5:14 mentions even more – multitudes of both men and women – as coming to faith in Christ. So while it was great that Gentiles were coming to Jesus, James and the elders wanted Paul to likewise rejoice over the many thousands of Jews who had also come to believe in Jesus.

But...and here was the problem...many of these Jews who had come to faith in Jesus were also very zealous for the law of God, meaning the law given through Moses. And the word among many of them was that Paul was telling the Jews (who had come to believe in Jesus) who were living among the Gentiles that just as the Gentiles were not required to START obeying the Law of Moses, **the Jews could FORSAKE obeying the law of Moses.** Here, let's read it again....

verse 21

Bible scholars are in agreement that one of Paul's earliest letters was what we call the book of Galatians. Please turn to that book. Let's see if these people's understanding of what Paul was teaching was correct...

Galatians 2:15-16

Galatians 3:10

Galatians 5:1-6

The book of Galatians, we believe, was widely circulated among the churches in the region we call Galatia (central modern Turkey). So it is likely that sooner or later even the Jews in Jerusalem would have heard about what Paul had written.

Jewish society was, of course, a very ritual society. The Sabbath and the keeping of the Sabbath was central to Jewish life, as were the feasts such as Pentecost, the very feast that Paul had wanted to be in Jerusalem at the time that it would be celebrated.

But in Romans (please turn to that), chapter 14, Paul had suggested that these various days meant nothing...

Romans 14:5

Later in Romans 14, as in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul will even suggest that to eat food that had been offered to idols was really not a big deal, if you were okay with it in your own mind and it didn't cause a problem for those around you.

So, back to Acts 21, when the elders said to Paul that it had come to be understood that Paul was speaking against Moses, against circumcision or against the customs of the Jews, I for one read that and say, "Yes, **that sounds pretty much right on.** For it sure seems like Paul was telling the people that they did not need to continue in the ways of Moses as they had for the past 1400 or so years." Right? Can you see how they would take Paul to be saying that?

Clearly James and the elders seemed to be okay with Paul's teaching, but the text seems to imply that many if not most of the people would need to hear Paul and hear his explanation as to why Moses could be set aside.

Are you still with me so far?
Do you understand the situation?

Now here is the problem...

verses 22-24

It is verse 24 that is the problem. On the surface it sounds like what James and the elders are saying is something like this: "**Okay, Paul, WE UNDERSTAND what you are teaching, and we're okay with it. But many of these new Jewish converts to Jesus have heard about your teaching and they are NOT okay with it. So, let's have you get involved in a Jewish custom – let's have you join with some others that have shaved their heads and made a vow to the Lord – and by your joining them everyone will know – or at least think – that what they have heard about you must be wrong and that you really ARE all for observing the law of Moses.**" (repeat)

In this 21st century of partisan politics, on the surface this sure sounds a lot like **a plan to DECEIVE the people.** Or am I the only one that reads it this way? I HATE politics, but I even more HATE POLITICS in the church. But, on the surface, this sure **smells like some political game.**

Now, several times, thus far, I have used the phrase "on the surface." The reason for that is that I believe there is an answer to understanding this whole situation...and it is an answer that removes James and the Jerusalem elders from any political game or attempt to deceive. But before we get to that answer let me first tell you a story from this past week...

This past week I was at a meeting of various pastors and church leaders from this area. The meeting was at a luncheon and following the luncheon, the host said, "Do any of you have an issue that you would like to bring up for discussion?" At that, the pastor who was seated next to me – a good, mature, Mennonite pastor here in the county for many, many years – said, "Well, I actually would like to hear what you all might have to say about Isaiah 58 and the keeping of the Sabbath." And with that we all turned to Isaiah 58 and there read, at the end of that chapter, Isaiah's strongly worded words against Israel and how they had, in great measure, **quit observing the Sabbath** as originally intended.

Isaiah, in that passage, pushes the issue of the Sabbath **to the max** suggesting that on that day a person should not "seek their own pleasure" or even talk idly. This pastor then went on to say that he has been troubled about his own Sabbath keeping and that while he has tried to keep the Sabbath (he mentioned his purchasing of gasoline a day earlier, and, in general, not going out to eat on Sundays) he said that sometimes he has broken that and gone out to eat or even purchased items on a Sunday. And so he wanted people's input.

I listened as a few others gave him their advice and then I finally spoke up, and rightly so I would say as there are **few issues that I have personally thought on or taught on as much as the issue of Sabbath keeping**. And so I said that I believed his problem was rooted in his failure to embrace what the writer of Hebrews taught in Hebrews 8:13. And with that we all turned to Hebrews 8:13...

Hebrews 8:13

We are no longer under an obligation to keep the old law. I said, "Ask almost any congregation of Christians if they think we are under obligation to keep the 10 commandments and the vast majority of them will raise their hands. But," I continued, "those same ones that raise their hands are either **IGNORANT**

of the scriptures or **HYPOCRITES of the worst sort** for almost no Christians are today keeping the Sabbath and they certainly are NOT keeping it as Isaiah said it should be kept."

Now, what does this story about a Mennonite pastor and his troubled soul over keeping the Sabbath have to do with Acts 21, Paul and Moses? I would say it has **EVERYTHING** to do with Acts 21, Paul and Moses. Let me explain...

There was **no political game** going on here in Acts 21. James and the elders were not suggesting that Paul should try and deceive the newly converted Jewish believers in Jesus.

But what they WERE trying to do was to **clarify a misunderstanding**.

You see Paul was **not AGAINST Moses**. Look back at Acts 21:21. The suggestion there was that these new Jewish converts **thought** Paul was teaching people – Jewish people – to "FORSAKE Moses": to not circumcise their children or walk in Jewish customs. But that is NOT what Paul had been teaching.

Paul was not preaching AGAINST Moses. It was that Paul was preaching that because of Jesus we are **FREE to keep, or not keep, the law of Moses**. So, if you want to circumcise your children, that's fine. But it is also fine if you don't. And we see EXACTLY that in how Paul dealt with Timothy back in Acts 16. For right after the Jerusalem Council's meeting in Acts 15, where it was agreed that CIRCUMCISION – as prescribed by Moses – was NOT necessary for believers, Paul had Timothy circumcised. And why did he have Timothy circumcised? Was it because of an OBLIGATION TO KEEP THE LAW OF MOSES? **NO!** He did it so as to not create a problem with the Jews that he knew he would be encountering and who **simply wouldn't yet understand about how Christ has set us FREE from the old law**. Is it understandable that some Jews would have thought Paul was preaching against Moses? I think so...**absolutely**. But he wasn't preaching against Moses. What he was preaching against was some notion of OBLIGATION and that unless that OBLIGATION was kept...perfectly kept...then one is in REAL TROUBLE WITH GOD.

Applied now to the Mennonite pastor, what he needs to understand and embrace is that Christ has set us free from the Old Covenant Law, and the 4th

commandment in particular. Under the New Covenant, Paul is clear that some regard one day special while others consider "all days alike." So if he WANTS to keep a Sabbath, fine. Just as long as he understands that he is **not UNDER OBLIGATION to keep the Sabbath**. It is the difference between the words OBLIGATION and FREEDOM. **He is free to keep (or not keep) the Sabbath. But because of Christ he is no longer OBLIGATED to keep any day special.**

This message of Paul's took a long time to be embraced by the greater church. Indeed, one could make the case that that good, mature Mennonite pastor **still has not embraced it**. Our relationship to the Law of Moses continues to be a problem to many. Whole groups of Christians...entire Christian sects (like the Seventh Day Adventists)...have been founded on the notion that an OBLIGATION to keep the Law of Moses still stands. But they are wrong.

Brothers and sisters, you are free to keep the entire law of Moses as much as you like. But **don't ever try and bind another person's life** or conscience by it. And no matter what, don't ever think...even for a second...that your law keeping will somehow **merit you special favor with God**. For if it is by law keeping that we win the favor of God, then Christ's death on the cross was for nothing.

Well, next Sunday is Palm Sunday. But next week we're going to proceed in Acts 21 and see how though Paul, James and the elders may have all had the best of intentions, Paul still ended up in a heap of trouble.