

Acts

Bible Study

Paul at Jerusalem

Acts 21:20—26

Paul had come to the end of his third apostolic journey by stopping in Jerusalem and visiting with the Hebrew church. This was the church formed by the Little Flock of believers who were the “sheep” called out of Israel by Jesus and His 12 Disciples. They believed that Jesus was the Messiah and they were looking forward to the setting up of the Millennial Kingdom. This is why Jesus came preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom (Matthew 4:17, 23). Those who believed Jesus was the promised Messiah became members of the Little Flock.

Paul reported to the church how God was working among the Gentiles. They were glad to hear that God was working amongst the Gentiles and glorified God for it. However, there was an issue that could cause a bit of a rift between Paul and the Hebrew church at Jerusalem that needed to be cleared up.

Dispensational division (verses 20–22)

While excited to see how God was working with the Gentiles, there was an issue that was causing some distress within the Hebrew church. They had heard that Paul was teaching the Jews, who are among the Gentiles, to forsake Moses by telling them they don't need to circumcise their children, nor do they need to walk after the customs (teachings) of Moses contained in the Mosaic Law.

In order to understand what is going on, it really helps to see this situation from a dispensational viewpoint. There are two believing groups. The first group includes all those saved while the Gospel of the Kingdom was being preached. This began with the ministry of John the Baptist (Luke 16:16) and continued, I believe, when God temporarily put the nation of Israel aside at the stoning of Stephen. Paul became the first member into the Body of Christ, and everybody who followed in salvation also became members of that Body (1 Timothy 1:16). Beginning with Paul's ministry, he preached to all uncircumcised, which included Gentiles and unbelieving Jews. Unsaved Jews were considered to be spiritually uncircumcised (Acts 7:51). Paul desired not to preach where Christ was already preached so that he would not build on another man's foundation. It is Peter's foundation of the Kingdom that Paul did not want to build upon. This is why Paul preached to both Jew and Gentile, not that he would not reach out to Jews, but that he would not preach his Gospel of Grace to the Jews who were already saved under the Gospel of the Kingdom.

With the division agreed upon by Peter and Paul in Galatians 2:7–9, Paul preached to all people who were unsaved while Peter ministered to the Little Flock of believers who were saved under the Gospel of the Kingdom. Once Paul was saved, all those who followed in salvation became members of the Body, not the Millennial Kingdom. Contrary to many Bible teachers, members of the Body are looking forward to an eternity in heaven, while members of the Little Flock are looking forward to an eternity on earth.

Understanding that there are two groups in view here helps to explain why the church was concerned about Paul's teaching. Paul was absolutely teaching the Jews saved under the Gospel of Grace that they were no longer held under the yoke of the Mosaic Law. They did not need to circumcise and follow the 613 ordinances contained in the Law. He was only teaching this to Jews saved under his ministry, but not to the Jews saved under Peter's ministry. Those saved

under the Gospel of the Kingdom were still required to follow the Mosaic Law because they had not been told not to follow the Law.

It's understandable how the Church at Jerusalem would have heard rumors of Paul teaching the Jews saved under Peter's ministry to stop following the Law. Perhaps some members of the Little Flock heard Paul preaching that those who were saved under the Gospel of Grace were no longer under Law and they assumed he was speaking to them. Paul was only speaking to those saved under his ministry. Again, it's important to see that there are two different groups of believers and notice how each group is treated.

Zealous for the Law (verse 20)

The Little Flock of believers, those saved under the Gospel of the Kingdom, were saved under the Law and were required to live under the Law. Like King David, they were not just trying to obey the Law, they were lovingly accepting the Law as God's word to them, and most likely thought it important to meditate upon it (Psalm 119:97). The man who puts his delight in the Law of God is called blessed. The Hebrew saints were doing exactly what they were supposed to do by being zealous for the Law.

Some suppose Paul was living in sin at this point. They first point to Paul seemingly ignoring the Holy Spirit telling him not to go to Jerusalem (Acts 21:11). Then they look at Paul failing to correct the church at Jerusalem for zealously following the Mosaic Law. What these people fail to do is look at the situation dispensationally with the understanding that there were two distinct groups of people in view. In addition, there are those who think that when the Body of Christ was formed, those saved under the Gospel of the Kingdom were automatically brought into the Church, the Body of Christ. This idea falls apart with the understanding that the 12 Disciples were promised to be rulers in the Millennial Kingdom, the earthly Kingdom promised to Israel (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30). How would they rule in the Kingdom if they were placed in the Body of Christ? People saved before Paul believed are destined for an earthly eternity, while those saved in this Dispensation of Grace are destined for an eternity in heaven. There is no biblical support that people were jumping from one group to another. In fact, Paul writes assuming that there are two separate groups of believers (Galatians 6:16; 1 Corinthians 6:2–3).

Taking a vow (verses 22–26)

Paul was accused of telling the Jews saved under the Gospel of the Kingdom that they were not under the Mosaic Law and therefore they had no need to follow it. This was something he had been telling those who were saved under the Gospel of Grace, that they were not under Law, but under Grace (Romans 6:14). This statement was not addressed to those who were part of the Little Flock, the remnant of believing Israel. To prove that he was telling the truth, he took a vow, and paid for four other men who had previously put themselves under a vow. This was the vow of a Nazarite (Numbers 6:13), and a vow before God. By doing this, Paul was demonstrating, through the Law, that he was telling the truth. Paul was following the Law in his quest to be all things to all people. He didn't need to follow the Law, but did so for the benefit of the Jews, so that he could be a more effective minister of Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 9:20).

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