

# The Rest of the Story

Studies in the Book of Acts

***“We will move the world not by criticism of it, nor conformity to it – but by combustion within it of lives ignited by the Spirit of God”***

*Vance Havner*

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Text

Acts 21:15-26

Topic

Paul agreed to pay the expenses of four Jewish believers who had taken a vow in order to dispel the rumors he was antagonistic to the customs of the Jews

Title

*Pay Per Vow*

**Acts 21:15** And after those days we packed and went up to Jerusalem.

**Acts 21:16** Also some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us and brought with them a certain Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we were to lodge.

**Acts 21:17** And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly.

**Acts 21:18** On the following *day* Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.

**Acts 21:19** When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

**Acts 21:20** And when they heard *it*, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law;

**Acts 21:21** but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise *their* children nor to walk according to the customs.

**Acts 21:22** What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come.

**Acts 21:23** Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow.

**Acts 21:24** Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave *their* heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but *that* you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law.

**Acts 21:25** But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written *and* decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from *things* offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality."

**Acts 21:26** Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them.

## Introduction

*Living with the saints above that will be glory;  
Living with the saints below - well that's another story.*

It's an anonymous rhyme. I sometimes wonder if the apostle Paul didn't write it after this episode in the Book of Acts.

He and his party arrived at Jerusalem at their own effort and expense to present a financial gift to the saints who were suffering and struggling during an economic crisis. Instead of a hearty, "Thank you, Paul," the first recorded words spoken to Paul were,

**Acts 21:20** ..."You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law;

**Acts 21:21** but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise *their* children nor to walk according to the customs.

Wow. There's nothing like vicious false rumors to make your day. Paul must have felt he'd been punched in the gut.

No chance to catch his breath though. Immediately the elders of the Jerusalem church reveal what qualifies as a cockamamie<sup>1</sup> plan for Paul to participate in a Jewish Temple ritual.

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<sup>1</sup> Cockamamie' means something worthless or trifling, even absurd or strange; a 'cockamamie' excuse or story is an implausible, ridiculous one. The word may be a corruption of 'decalcomania' ('a cheap picture or design on specially prepared paper that is transferred to china, wood, etc. '), a word youngsters on New York's Lower East Side early in the century found tiring to pronounce and impossible to spell." From "Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins" by Robert Hendrickson (Fact on File, New York, 1997).

Just when you think Paul would argue, he agreed! Why would he do such a thing?

He tells us why in First Corinthians chapter nine where we read,

**1 Corinthians 9:19** For though I am free from all *men*, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more;

**1 Corinthians 9:20** and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those *who are* under the law, as under the law, that I might win those *who are* under the law;

**1 Corinthians 9:21** to those *who are* without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those *who are* without law;

**1 Corinthians 9:22** to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some.

The Jewish believers in Jerusalem were in the category of being **weak**. Paul **became as weak** in order to not stumble them and to perhaps serve them.

You don't want to remain a **weak** and immature Christian but there is a strength in a mature Christian becoming **as weak**. I'll organize my thoughts along those lines around two points: #1 There Is A Weakness You Might Choose So You Don't Stumble Others, and #2 There Is A Weakness You Should Refuse So You Don't Shackle Others.

- being changed to bring change -

#1 There Is A Weakness You Might Choose  
So You Don't Stumble Others

There is a tendency to want to decide if Paul was right or wrong. That's not what this story is about. That's not what will minister to us.

What this story is about and what will minister to us is to gauge the great lengths Paul was willing to go to in order to not stumble others.

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"Cockamamie is the child's version of 'decalcomania,' dye transfers that youngsters used to put on their hands and arms. Since they were cheap, they soon wore off. So, 'cockamamie' first meant anything trifling or second-rate, and later came to mean simply silly or laughable." From "Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins" by William and Mary Morris (HarperCollins, New York, 1977, 1988).

By ‘stumble’ we mean doing or saying something that becomes an obstacle or hindrance to another believer in their walk with the Lord.

We pick up the story as Paul and his party are on the last leg of their long journey to Jerusalem.

**Acts 21:15** And after those days we packed and went up to Jerusalem.

**Acts 21:16** Also some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us and brought with them a certain Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we were to lodge.

Paul’s party included Luke, Titus, Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, Timothy, Tychicus, and Trophimus. They were joined by **some of the disciples from Caesarea** and **Mnason of Cyprus**. Apparently Mnason’s home in Jerusalem was large enough to accommodate all of them upon their arrival.

It’s a snapshot of the joy Paul and his party were experiencing. God was going with them and preparing the way before them. Serving the Lord was no burden; it was a blessing.

**Acts 21:17** And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly.

**Acts 21:18** On the following *day* Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.

The church at Jerusalem **received** them **gladly**. It sounds like some kind of official reception. The next day there was a board meeting with **James and all the elders**. This ‘**James**’ was the half-brother of the Lord Jesus and author of the Book of James which was already in circulation at the time. After the departure of the apostles from Jerusalem he emerged as the leader of the church at Jerusalem in conjunction with an undisclosed number of **elders**.

**Acts 21:19** When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

**In detail** translates to words that indicate Paul went point-by-point describing his amazing ministry among the Gentiles. It was everything we’ve been reading about in Acts only in great detail and with the passion of the person whom God used.

Paul's talk must have gone on a long time. He concluded and we read,

**Acts 21:20** And when they heard *it*, they glorified the Lord...

**Of course they did!** How could you not glorify the Lord as Paul recounted what the Lord had done.

By the way: Make sure you are always interested in God getting the glory and never yourself or someone else.

**They glorified the Lord**; but that's not all James and the elders did:

**Acts 21:20** ...And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law;

**Acts 21:21** but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise *their* children nor to walk according to the customs.

It is estimated that there were anywhere from twenty-five to fifty thousand Jews who had **believed** on Jesus Christ. This **myriad** still kept the rites and rituals of the Law of Moses. Among them rumors had festered that outside of Jerusalem Paul encouraged Jews who believed to abandon the Law of Moses and live more like Gentiles.

Add to this that it was about 57AD and a time of political unrest. Jews – both believing and nonbelieving – were unhappy with Gentile rule. There was great Jewish patriotism and pride.

Regardless the great things God was doing through Paul the believing Jews in Jerusalem were stumbled by these rumors. How sad, really, that even great works of God could not be appreciated because of a narrow vision.

James and the elders had a plan:

**Acts 21:22** What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come.

**Acts 21:23** Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow.

**Acts 21:24** Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave *their* heads, and that all may know that those things of which

they were informed concerning you are nothing, but *that* you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law.

**Acts 21:25** But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written *and* decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from *things* offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality."

Four Jewish believers in Jesus had taken a **vow** that was prescribed by the Law of Moses. The fact they were to **shave their heads** indicated this was a Nazirite vow. The fact they needed to be **purified** indicates they had somehow become ritually defiled during the period of the vow. They would therefore need to offer certain sacrifices in the Temple before they could complete the prescribed period of their vow. It was not unusual for someone to sponsor you by providing the funds for your sacrifices.

The leadership of the church affirmed, in verse twenty-five, that it was not at all necessary to keep the Law of Moses in order to be saved. But if Jews wanted to continue in their rituals they were not discouraged.

James and the elders felt Paul could participate without violating his own conscience or principles. It seemed a win-win to them.

Just when you and I think Paul would rebuke them we read,

**Acts 21:26** Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them.

Paul went along with their plan. Why? What was he thinking?

As I pointed out in the introduction, Paul was thinking what he always thought – about becoming **all things to all men** in order to save or serve them. In this case he was willing to become **as weak** in order to **win the weak**.

Every situation was (and is) a little different. When Paul took Timothy with him to minister among nonbelieving Jews had had Timothy circumcised. He knew that the Jews would be offended since Timothy was half Jewish. They would not listen to the Gospel.

When Jews demanded Titus be circumcised Paul refused to allow it. Titus was a Gentile and the Jews were demanding he be circumcised in order to be saved. But circumcision is not a condition of salvation. You are saved by grace through faith... plus nothing!

You and I will probably not be in such dramatic situations. But you and I must be aware of and ready to embrace this principle of becoming **as weak** in order to save or serve the weak.

It is easier to claim maturity or to demand our rights and privileges. But it is not more spiritual to do so. God forbid we would stumble others needlessly.

There is, then, a becoming **as weak** you might choose. But,

## #2 There Is A Weakness You Should Refuse So You Don't Shackle Others

If you are choosing to remain weak rather than to grow, then weakness is not a good thing. The situation in Jerusalem would have been better helped if the weak Jewish believers would have grown to see the big picture.

Let's go back and see how the leaders of the church might have acted otherwise to encourage growth rather than enable weakness.

**Acts 21:20** And when they heard *it*, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law;

**Acts 21:21** but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise *their* children nor to walk according to the customs.

The word **informed** means *instructed*. It's the word we get *catechism* from, indicating some kind of formal teaching or indoctrination. The teaching was coming from one of two sources:

1. Either James and the elders in Jerusalem were encouraging Jews to continue in the rites and rituals of the Law of Moses; or,
2. James and the elders were allowing others to teach Jews to continue. There were teachers, called Judaizers, who dogged



Paul demanding that Gentiles keep the Law and teaching Jews who became believers they must go on keeping it.

It's one thing to not stumble others who are weak; but it's quite another to allow instruction that keeps them in a weakened state. Either way the leadership at Jerusalem was enabling weakness.

The rumor about Paul was that **you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise *their* children nor to walk according to the customs. **It wasn't true!****

This indicts James and the elders. *They knew it wasn't true but had not put an end to it as rumor or slander.*

Not only did they allow instruction that was contrary to the truth but they withheld instruction that would confirm the truth. It was not good to leave the folks in a weakened state by withholding information.

James and the elders had about twenty years to be both proactive and reactive. Instead the situation festered until Paul arrived and they put the entire burden of resolving it on him.

Their decision shackled Paul. By that I don't mean it was their fault he was bound and imprisoned later in the chapter. I mean that it shackled his ability to minister to the believing Jews in Jerusalem. Instead of holding meetings with the whole church in which he and his party could magnify the glorious works of their Lord, he ended up hanging out with four guys who were finishing off a vow in the Temple. While it revealed a nobleness in Paul it was a waste of his apostolic gift and a sad loss for the Jerusalem Christians.

We can't force weak believers to become strong by flaunting our liberties. It stumbles them. We may, in certain circumstances, choose therefore to become **as weak**.

But neither should we ignore teaching the weak the truth or countering false teaching so that they will grow in their knowledge and understanding.



