

Paul Takes a Vow (Acts 18:18-22)^a

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Context

1. **Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Luke on what will become known as Paul's 2nd Missionary Journey**
2. **Travelled through Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey)**
3. **Crossed the Aegean Sea to Thessalonica in Greece**
4. **Then South through Berea, Athens, and on to Corinth**
5. **An extended period (18 months) teaching in the Greek city of Corinth**
6. **Today: end of 2nd Missionary Journey: returning from Greece via Ephesus on to Jerusalem and back to Antioch—their original point of departure (Acts 18:22)**

Passage (Acts 18:18-22)

[18] So Paul still remained a good while. Then he took leave of the brethren and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila [were] with him. He had [his] hair cut off at Cenchrea, for he had taken a vow. **[19]** And he came to Ephesus, and left them there; but he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. **[20]** When they asked [him] to stay a longer time with them, he did not consent, **[21]** but took leave of them, saying, "I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem; but I will return again to you, God willing." And he sailed from Ephesus. **[22]** And when he had landed at Caesarea, and gone up and greeted the church, he went down to Antioch.¹

Summarize missionary journeys

1. First

- A. Chapters = Acts 13 - Acts 14
- B. Dates = 45 - 48 A. D.²
- C. Region = Cypress, Asia Minor (south-eastern modern-day Turkey)
- D. Miles = 1200³

2. Second

- A. Chapters = Acts 15 - Acts 18
- B. Dates = 49-51 A.D.⁴
- C. Region = Asia Minor (across modern-day Turkey), Macedonia (modern-day Greece) , back to Asia Minor (region of 7 churches or Revelation)
- D. Miles = 2700⁵

3. Third

- A. Chapters = Acts 18 - Acts 21
- B. Dates = 52 - 55 A. D.⁶
- C. Region = revisiting same areas as 2nd journey, route slightly differed
- D. Miles = 2500⁷

4. “Fourth” - taken captive and sent to Rome on a “missionary journey” to rulers (Felix, Festus, Agrippa, and Caesar Nero)

- A. Chapters = Acts 21-28
- B. Dates = 55-58⁸

Paul, the Law, and the Temple

1. Taking vows, keeping feasts - what is Paul doing?! Is Paul stuck in Old Testament Judaism?

- A. While in Cenchrea, Paul had his hair cut off because he had taken a vow (v. 18)
- B. Later, he turned down an invitation to remain at Ephesus so he could depart and keep an upcoming feast in Jerusalem (v. 21)

2. Paul’s actions in relation to the Jewish Law and Temple puzzles many Christians

- A. Paul hastened to Jerusalem in order to observance the Jewish feast of Unleavened Bread, also known as Passover (Acts 18:21 and Acts 20:6)¹⁰
- B. Religious Vow (Acts 18:18)
 - I. May have been in response to the Lord’s promise of divine protection while at Corinth (Acts 18:9-10)—especially in view of his vindication before the proconsul, Gallio.

II. A Nazirite Vow (Num. 6)?

[1] Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, [2] “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When either a man or woman consecrates an offering to take the vow of a Nazirite, to separate himself to the LORD, [3] ‘he shall separate himself from wine and [similar] drink; he shall drink neither vinegar made from wine nor vinegar made from [similar] drink; neither shall he drink any grape juice, nor eat fresh grapes or raisins. [4] ‘All the days of his separation he shall eat nothing that is produced by the grapevine, from seed to skin. [5] ‘All the days of the vow of his separation no razor shall come upon his head; until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the LORD, he shall be holy. [Then] he shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow.”¹¹

- a. Different from being a Nazirite from the womb (for life) as were Samson (Jdg. 13:5); Samuel (1S. 1:11), and John the Baptist (Luke 1:15).

III. Against Nazirite Vow¹³

- a. At the end of the time of separation, or if desecrated during the time of the vow, must undergo elaborate cleansing process, including offering sacrifices (Num. 6:10-21)
- b. This process was to take place at the tabernacle or temple — not available to Paul at Cenchrea in Greece

IV. Special provisions when traveling?

In Paul’s day, if someone made the vow while away from Jerusalem, at the termination of his vow he would shave his head, as Paul did, and afterwards present the shorn hair at the temple within 30 days.¹⁴

Now that he was at the end of the vow, he got his hair cut at Cenchrea, close to Athens, before leaving for Jerusalem to offer his hair and the prescribed sacrifices on the altar in the temple.¹⁵

- a. Carried shorn hair back to Jerusalem where the rest of the procedure was subsequently completed.
- C. Participated in purification rites at the Temple while financially sponsoring four proselytes (Acts 21:22-26; 24:16)¹⁷
 - D. Offering sacrifices at the temple (Acts 21:26; 24:17)
 - E. Continued to offer prayer and worship at the temple (Acts 22:17; 24:11)
 - F. Expressed regard for the priesthood (Acts 23:5)
 - G. Paid temple tax (Acts 24:17)

H. Professed ceremonial purity (Acts 24:18)

I. Paul was careful not to violate the customs of the Jewish fathers (Acts 28:17)

And it came to pass after three days that Paul called the leaders of the Jews together. So when they had come together, he said to them: “Men and brethren, though I have done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans¹⁸

3. The Temple

A. All of this after the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ

I. Jesus had prophesied the destruction of the Temple (Mat. 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 21:6)

II. The veil separating the holy of holies in the Temple had already been torn in two from top to bottom (Mat. 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45)

III. If the NT temple of the believer/church is all that will ever be, why the continued respect for the physical temple?²⁰

IV. Even after the destruction of Herod’s Temple (which stood in the time of Jesus), God is not done with physical temples

a. The Tribulation Temple

i. As Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica, the man of sin, the son of perdition, will yet sit in the Temple of God (2Th. 2:4)²²

ii. Jesus warned the Jews of Judea at that time to flee when they see the “abomination of desolation” standing in the holy place (Mat. 24:15)

- Notice the place is still referred to as “holy” — this is a place and an act which God will pay great attention to

iii. In John’s vision while on Patmos, (Revelation 11)

Then I was given a reed like a measuring rod. And the angel stood, saying, “Rise and measure the temple of God, the altar, and those who worship there. But leave out the court which is outside the temple, and do not measure it, for it has been given to the Gentiles. And they will tread the holy city underfoot [for] forty-two months.”²³

- Measurement by angel indicates Gods ongoing interest and attention
- What takes place there may not be in accord with the New Testament gospel, but it *is* consistent with God’s ongoing plan for Israel and in relation to future Temples

- b. The Millennial Temple - which stands during the thousand year period described in Revelation 20 and elsewhere
 - i. Passages in Ezekiel and Zechariah reveal some surprising aspects of this future Temple
 - A continuing Levitical priesthood (Eze. 43:19; 44:10,15; 5:5; 48:11-13,22)
 - This is in accord with the priestly covenant which is intermingled with the Davidic covenant in Jeremiah's prophecy. What some fail to appreciate is that Jesus can only fulfill the Davidic portion, but not the Levitical since He is not in the line of Levi (Jer. 33:17-21)²⁵
 - Atoning sacrifices (Eze. 20:40; 37:26-28; 40:38-46; 43; 44; 45; 46)
 - Yes: the resumption of animal sacrifices which neither contradict Christ's work on the cross nor the book of Hebrews

B. Paul's ongoing respect, beyond the cross, for the Temple is consistent with these future realities

4. The Law

A. What about Paul's practices related to the Law of Moses?

B. Paul vociferously opposed adding anything to the gospel: salvation by grace *alone* through faith *alone*

I. Galatians - some Jews from Jerusalem attempted to make circumcision a requirement for salvation

[1] Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. [2] Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing. [3] And I testify again to every man who becomes circumcised that he is a debtor to keep the whole law. [4] You have become estranged from Christ, you who [attempt to] be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. [5] For we through the Spirit eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness by faith. [6] For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.²⁶

a. Paul is writing, in the main, to Gentiles

b. Those who are estranged are those who attempt to be justified by law

c. Opposed circumcision of Gentiles

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation.²⁷

The circumcising of Gentile converts as a kind of insurance policy, lest faith in Christ should be insufficient in itself, he denounced as a

departure from the purity of the gospel (Gal. 5:2-4).²⁸

C. Freedom to practice the law, especially by Jews who were accustomed to doing so

I. Jerusalem counsel (Acts 15) - guidelines given to Gentile believers, not Jewish believers

a. Guidelines

Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, [from] sexual immorality, [from] things strangled, and [from] blood.²⁹

b. Instructions from Elders at Jerusalem to Paul (Acts 21:20-25)

[20] And when they heard [about Paul's ministry among the Gentiles], 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; **[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. **[22]** What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come. **[23]** Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. **[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. **[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."³⁰

- i. Believing Jews were zealous for the law
- ii. Incorrectly reported that Paul was teaching that Jews should
 - Not circumcise their children
 - Not walk according to the customs
- iii. To show that Paul was not opposed to *practicing* the law
 - Sponsor and be purified with others who had taken a Nazirite vow
 - So 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)
- iv. BUT concerning the Gentiles who believe . . . just follow the instructions of the Jerusalem council
 - Practicing the law was an acceptable way for Jews to live³²
 - Guidelines for Gentiles relate, in the main, to avoiding offense to the practicing Jews — to facilitate fellowship
 - Neither practicing nor not practicing the law relate to salvation

- Gentile believers have freedom from observing the Law of Moses whereas Jewish believers have freedom to observe the Laws of Moses
- Opposed circumcision of Gentiles - seen as an addition or contribution to faith
- Remember, though, that Paul had Timothy circumcised
 - Timothy had a Gentile father and a Jewish mother (Acts 16:1)
 - Why?

Paul wanted to have him go on with him. And he took [him] and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek.

(Acts 16:3)

The Jews to whom Paul would be preaching the gospel would be offended if a man with a Jewish mother was uncircumcised. So Timothy was circumcised. Apparently he had been uncircumcised because of his father's influence.³³

- If anyone understood the serious nature of 1 Corinthians 9:20, it was Timothy!

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.³⁴

5. In closing: how are we to handle these surprises we come across in Scripture?

A. *FIRST* - Pay close attention to Scripture

- I. Forsake the simplistic path which oversimplifies scriptural teaching
- II. Many things taught in the Bible are nuanced
- III. Not necessarily *complex*, but *nuanced* — there are details to be noticed and understood
- IV. Enemies of the cross are ignorant of the subtleties and, consequently, misrepresent and misunderstand what the Bible teaches
- V. Could it be, as believers—even when desiring to follow Christ—that we could wind up doing the same? “May it never be!”

B. *SECOND* - Understand the need for balance

- I. Legalism vs. licentiousness

- a. Legalism - acquiescing to the flesh and a performance-based approach to God, often imposed upon others
 - b. Licentiousness - assuming that the law has little to say to us today and that we can live like the world
- II. Salvation vs. sanctification - differentiating the means of salvation from practices related to our subsequent growth in holiness
- C. *THIRD* - Apply grace, grace, and more grace

I. Grace for *other believers* who may see things differently

For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats [only] vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him.³⁵

- II. Grace for *ourselves* - we don't always get it right, especially as new Christians (especially if our zeal eclipses our knowledge)

6. Let's hear from J. Vernon McGee

There are a great many folk who find fault with Paul because he made a vow. They say that this is the man who preached that we are not under Law but we are under grace, and so he should not have made a vow. Anyone who says this about Paul is actually making a little law for Paul. Such folk are saying that Paul is to do things their way. Under grace, friend, if you want to make a vow, you can make it. And if you do not want to make a vow, you don't have to. Paul didn't force anyone else to make a vow. In fact, he said emphatically that no one has to do that. But if Paul wants to make a vow, that is his business. That is the marvelous freedom that we have in the grace of God today. There are some super-saints who form little cliques and make laws for the Christian. They say we can't do this and we can't do that. May I say to you very candidly that our relationship is to the Lord Jesus Christ, and it is a love affair. If we love Him, of course we will not do anything that will break our fellowship with Him. Don't insist that I go through your little wicket gate; I am to follow Him. He shows me what I can and cannot do in order to maintain fellowship with Him. If one wishes to eat meat, there is freedom to eat meat. If one wishes to observe a certain day, there is freedom to observe it. "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). The important thing is to do all to the glory of God. Eating meat will not commend you to God and neither will abstaining from meat commend you to God. Let's not find fault with Paul here. Poor Gallio and Paul surely do get in trouble with their critics right in this particular passage. I want to defend both of them.³⁶

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Endnotes:

1. NKJV, Acts 18:18-22
2. Ref-1307, 342-345
3. <http://www.biblecharts.org/newtestament/paulsfirstmissionaryjourney.pdf>
4. Ref-1307, 342-345
5. <http://www.biblecharts.org/newtestament/paulssecondmissionaryjourney.pdf>
6. Ref-1307, 342-345
7. <http://www.biblecharts.org/newtestament/paulsthirdmissionaryjourney.pdf>
8. Ref-1307, 342-345
9. Ref-0653, 356
10. Passover in A. D. 52 was in early April⁹
11. NKJV, Num. 6:1-5
12. Ref-0653, 355
13. F.F. Bruce argues against the view that Paul took a Nazirite vow: "Before setting sail, he had his hair cut: he had allowed it to grow long for the duration of a vow which he had undertaken. This was probably not a formal Nazirite vow, which could not properly be undertaken outside the Holy Land, but a private vow, the fulfillment of which was an act of thanksgiving—possibly for the divine promise of verse 10, which has been confirmed by his preservation from harm throughout his Corinthian ministry."¹²
14. Ref-0089, 1667
15. Ref-1411, 1716
16. Ref-0653, 406-407
17. ". . . Paul would have to be purified: he had just returned from a long residence in Gentile lands, and the ritual defilement which inevitably attached to him on that account had to be removed before he could take part in such a solemn ceremony. But his purification should be distinguished from the Nazirites' purification. In the LXX the same Greek term does duty both for general purification from ritual defilement (as in Num. 19:12) and for the various forms of abstinence which Nazirites had to practice throughout the period of their vow (as in Num. 6:6); and Luke here uses that term in both senses. If the two kinds of purification be distinguished, it will not be necessary to suppose either that Paul had a Nazirite vow of his own to discharge on this occasion or that the four Nazirites had inadvertently contracted some defilement during the period of their vow and had now to be purified from it."¹⁶
18. NKJV, Acts 28:17
19. Ref-1326, 97
20. "Paul observed the feasts according to the temple calendar (Acts 20:6). He made religious vows (a Nazirite vow) (Acts 18:18). He participated in ritual purification rites—in one case involving four other proselytes (Acts 21:23-26; 24:18). He made payment of ceremonial expenses, which accounted as a mitzvah, "a legally obligated good deed" (Acts 21:24). He offered sacrifices at the temple (Acts 21:26; 24:17). He prayed and worshiped at the temple (Acts 22:17; 24:11). He had regard for the priesthood (Acts 23:5). He paid the temple tax (Acts 24:17). He sought to prove to the elders in the Jerusalem church that he was as devout as any Jew toward the temple; he assisted others in performing their temple obligations (Acts 21:23-26). He insisted on regulating his life by the temple calendar (the feast days), even interrupting his own missionary work (Acts 20:16; 1Cor. 16:8). When he was tried before the Jewish authorities, he defended himself by affirming his ceremonial purity in relation to the temple (Acts 25:8; 28:17). When he uses the analogy of the temple in his letters, he does so on the basis of the temple's sanctity, relating it with the sanctification of the individual believer's body, and the collective body of believers (1Cor. 3:16-17; 2Cor. 6:16-17; Eph. 2:21-22)."¹⁹
21. Ref-0146, 491
22. "John Townsend stated in his Harvard dissertation on this point: 'Since Paul sets the desecration of the Temple beside the ultimate blasphemy of proclaiming oneself to be God [2Th. 2:4] and since he regards these acts as the climax of the evil which is to precede the parousia [Christ's second coming], there can be no doubt of Paul's veneration for this Temple.'²¹

23. [NKJV](#), Rev. 11:1-2
24. [NKJV](#), Jer. 33:17-21
25. “[17] “For thus says the LORD: 'David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel; [18] 'nor shall the priests, the Levites, lack a man to offer burnt offerings before Me, to kindle grain offerings, and to sacrifice continually.” [19] And the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah, saying, [20] “Thus says the LORD: 'If you can break My covenant with the day and My covenant with the night, so that there will not be day and night in their season, [21] 'then My covenant may also be broken with David My servant, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and with the Levites, the priests, My ministers.””²⁴
26. [NKJV](#), Gal. 5:1-6
27. [NKJV](#), Gal. 6:15
28. [Ref-0653](#), 405
29. [NKJV](#), Acts 15:19-20
30. [NKJV](#), Acts 21:20-25
31. [Ref-0653](#), 405-406
32. “If a Jewish father, after he became a follower of Jesus, wished to have his son circumcised in accordance with the ancestral custom, Paul had no objection.”³¹
33. [Ref-0038](#), 398
34. [NKJV](#), 1Cor. 9:20
35. [NKJV](#), Rom. 14:2-3
36. [Ref-0465](#), 4:594

Sources:

- NKJV** Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture references are from the *New King James Version*, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- Ref-0038** John Walvoord and Roy. B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: SP Publications, 1983).
- Ref-0089** John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997).
- Ref-0146** Randall Price, *The Coming Last Days Temple* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1999).
- Ref-0465** McGee, J. V. (1997, c1981). *Thru the Bible commentary* (electronic ed.). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
- Ref-0653** F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988).
- Ref-1307** Andrew E. Steinmann, *From Abraham to Paul* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing, 2011). ISBN:978-0-7586-2799-5^d.
- Ref-1326** Randall Price, *Rose Guide to the Temple* (Torrance, CA: Rose Publishing, 2012). ISBN:978-0-59636-468-4^e.
- Ref-1411** Michael A. Rydelnik, J. Spencer, eds. *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2014).

Links Mentioned Above

- a - See http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/64_Acts_18_18-22/index.htm.
- b - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
- c - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.
- d - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/isbn.htm?978-0-7586-2799-5>.
- e - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/isbn.htm?978-0-59636-468-4>.