

Paul Keeps the Law (Acts 21:15-26)¹

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-57:23

1. Context



b

- Paul is working his way back to Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey (blue lines above).
- Arriving in Tyre, warned by believers, through the Spirit, that he would encounter trouble in Jerusalem.
- Traveled south through Ptolemais to Caesarea to stay with Philip the evangelist.
- A prophet named Agabus, coming down from Jerusalem, prophesied that Paul would be bound by the Jews in Jerusalem and delivered into the hands of the Gentiles (Romans).
- We looked at the nature of the Spirit-inspired predictions and the fulfillment, and how the passage is utilized by those who argue that NT prophets and prophecy differ in quality from

the OT: that NT prophecy can contain error.

- Paul resolves to go to Jerusalem, regardless of the danger.
- This passage often catches NT readers off-guard: what on earth is Paul, the apostle of freedom *from* the law, doing *keeping* the law?

2. Passage (Acts 21:15-26)²

¹⁵ *And after those days we packed and went up to Jerusalem.* 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.* ¹⁷ *And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly.* ¹⁸ *On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.* ¹⁹ *When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.* 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; 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."* 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. (Acts 21:15-26)*

3. Paul's ministry among the Gentiles

¹⁸ *On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.*
¹⁹ *When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.* ²⁰ *And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. . . . (Acts 21:18-20a)*

- A report from Paul's most recent (third) missionary journey (Acts 18-21, A.D. 52-55).
- Departed from Antioch, through modern Turkey to Ephesus, then north to Macedonia, and down to Athens. Back to Troas (near the *Hellespont*, now the *Dardanelles*), back along the coast of modern Turkey, then sailing south of Cyprus landing in Tyre. Then down to Caesarea and inland to Jerusalem.

- Upon return, brought a gift-offering from the Gentiles (Acts 24:17), not mentioned here.

4. Paul's ministry among the Jews

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; 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 21:20b-21)

- Zealous for the law - but in what way?
- Forsake Moses - is that what Paul taught?
 - *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 Romans (Acts 28:17)*
- What did Paul teach?
 - Gentiles do not need to keep the law: neither Gentiles or Jews are saved by keeping the law.
 - ¹⁴ . . . I said to Peter before them all, "If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews? ¹⁵ "We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, ¹⁶ "knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified. (Gal. 2:14b-16)
 - The law cannot be kept in a way that earns salvation (perfectly)—only Jesus achieved this!
 - ¹⁰ For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them." (Gal. 3:10)
 - ⁴ Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? (Gal. 4:21)
 - Hence, salvation is by grace (*unearned* favor) through faith, for both Jew and Gentile.
 - ¹¹ But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for "the just shall live by faith." (Gal. 3:11)
 - This does not mean, however, that Jews cannot keep the law, only that keeping the law of Moses does not *contribute* to one's salvation.³

5. Actions speak louder than words

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. (Acts 21:23-24)*

- Do what we tell you — *demonstrate* that you are not against fellow-Jews following the law of Moses.
- Pay their expenses — demonstrate in a way that *costs you* — "put your money where your mouth is!"
- Evidently these men were completing a Nazirite vow (cf. Num. 6:13–17).
- Paul himself had made a Nazirite vow which ended part-way through his missionary journey.
 - . . . *Had his hair cut off in Cenchrea for he had taken a vow.* (Acts 18:18)
 - The end of his vow, based on Numbers 6:5.
 - See previous presentation *Paul Takes a Vow (Acts 18:18-22)*^c
- Paul "walks orderly and keeps the law."
- Arnold Fruchtenbaum summarizes:

The biblical basis for this freedom to keep the law can be seen in the actions of Paul, the greatest exponent of freedom from the law. His vow in Acts 18:18 is based on Num. 6:2,5,9,18. His desire to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost in Acts 20:16 is based on Deu. 16:16. The strongest passage is Acts 21:17-26, where we see Paul himself, the apostle of freedom from the law, keeping the law. The believer is free from the law, but he is also free to keep parts of it. Thus, if a Jewish believer feels the need to refrain from eating pork, he is free to do so. The same is true for all the other commandments of the Law of Moses. One danger is the idea that by doing so he is contributing to his own justification and sanctification. This is false and should be avoided. The second danger is in one's expecting others to keep the same commandments he has decided to keep. This is equally wrong and crosses into legalism. The one who exercises his freedom to keep the law must recognized and respect another's freedom not to keep it.⁴

6. Gentile believers and the Law of Moses

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 21:25)*

- The "big question" dealt with extensively within the book of Galatians: *Must Gentiles keep the law of Moses to be saved?*
- ¹ *And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are*

circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." ² *Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.* (Acts 15:1-2)

- ²⁴ *Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, "You must be circumcised and keep the law" —to whom we gave no such commandment . . .* ²⁸ *For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things:* ²⁹ *that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.* (Acts 15:24-29)
- The Jerusalem Council established that Gentiles were not required to keep the law of Moses —and gave guidelines for living based on basic moral principles and maintaining fellowship with Jewish believers.
- See the previous presentation, [Guidelines for Fellowship \(Acts 15:12-13\)](#)^d

7. Summary of the Law

Since the 'law' is based upon the Mosaic Covenant, it is important to understand the relationship between the different covenants of the Old Testament and their application to Israel and to believers who are 'sons of Abraham' by faith (Gal. 3:7).

- (1) The Old (Mosaic) Covenant was conditional and was broken by Israel. (Jer. 31:32).
- (2) The covenants given to Israel which remain in effect include the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3; 15), the three covenants which spring forth from it: the Land Covenant (Ex. 6:4; Deu. 29:1-12); the Davidic Covenant (2S. 7:8-17; 1Chr. 17:9-16; Ps. 89:19-51; 132:10; Luke 1:32-33); and the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-40; Mat. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:14-20; Rom. 11:26-27); and the oft-neglected Priestly Covenant (Num. 25:10-13; 1Chr. 23:13; Ps. 106:30-31; Jer. 33:18-21; Eze. 37:26-28; 40:46; 43:19; 44:15; 48:11).
- (3) Gentiles were *strangers* from the covenants (plural), having *no hope and without God*. Christ abolished in His flesh the law of commandments (the Mosaic Covenant, which separated Jews from Gentiles) creating *one new man* — the Church (Eph. 2:12-15).
- (4) Salvation is by faith based on participation in the Abrahamic Covenant — which preceded the Mosaic Covenant and was not annulled by it (Gal. 3:7-18). Gentiles participate in the blessing of Abraham (Gen. 12:3) via faith in Christ (Gal. 3:8,14) who fulfilled the law (Mat. 5:17). The Abrahamic Covenant is not abolished by the passing away of the Mosaic Covenant (Gal. 3:17).
- (5) Although the New Covenant was initially made with the same people (Israel) as the Mosaic Covenant (Jer. 31:32-33), all believers participate by virtue of their position as 'sons of Abraham,' through faith in Christ, the mediator of the New Covenant (1Cor. 5:17-21; 11:25; 2Cor. 3:6; Heb. 9:15; 12:24).
- (6) The Old Covenant is obsolete and vanishing (Heb. 8:13). People of faith are no longer under it (Heb. 9:10; Gal. 3:25; 5:18).
- (7) The law was meant to expose our sin (Rom. 3:19; 5:20; 7:7), guide us, and point us to

Christ (Gal. 3:19-25).

- (8) The law is an all-or-nothing proposition. Those who would seek to be justified by the law have become *estranged from Christ* (Gal. 3:10; 5:3-4; Jas. 2:10).
- (9) No one is justified (declared righteous) by the law (Gal. 3:11). Justification has always been by faith in God based on the work of Christ (Gen. 15:6; Gal. 3:6).
- (10) Believers are not lawless, but subject to the *law of Christ*, the *law of the Spirit* (Rom. 8:2; 1Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2; Jas. 1:25; 2:12).

8. Application

- **Ethnic Distinctions Continue beyond the Cross** - Neither "Jew nor Greek . . . in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28 cf. Col. 3:11) does not mean all Jewish/Gentile ethnic and cultural distinctions have been erased among believers. Just as male/female distinctions continue to exist among believers (Eph. 5:22-29; 1Pe. 3:1-7). What Paul is saying in Galatians and Colossians is that there are no differences in access, standing, or worth before God based upon one's gender, ethnicity, or station in society.
- **Jewish Believers and the Law** - Jewish believers are free, as individuals, to practice the law if they choose to do so.
- **Law is Optional** - Even so, the law is not an end in itself, but foreshadows greater realities and must not be imposed upon other believers—whether Jewish or Gentile.
- **Danger of Emphasizing Works** - Beware of the danger of emphasizing works.

¹⁶ *So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths,* ¹⁷ *which are a shadow of things to come, but **the substance is of Christ.***
¹⁸ *Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind,* ¹⁹ *and **not holding fast to the Head**, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.* ²⁰ *Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you **subject yourselves to regulations**—* ²¹ *"Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,"* ²² *which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men?* ²³ *These things indeed have an **appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.*** (Col. 2:16-23)

- **Christianity, Performance, and Righteousness** - If we over-emphasize performance, we can unintentionally misrepresent Christianity as "just another religion" where man earns God's acceptance by "being good."

¹ *Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved.*
² *For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to*

knowledge.³ For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.⁴ For **Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.** (Rom. 10:1-4)

9. Closing Prayer

Sat Mar 8 15:03:00 2025



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Endnotes:

1. https://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/74_Acts_21_15-26/index.htm
2. 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.
3. By "keep" here, I mean to practice aspects of the law.
4. [Ref-1217](#), 118-119

Sources:

Ref-1217 Christopher Cone, ed., *Practical Aspects of Pastoral Authority*, 1st ed. (Fort Worth, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2009). ISBN:[978-0-9814791-5-6](#)^g.

Links Mentioned Above

- a - See www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm.
- b - See [paul_missionary_journeys_end_of_third_modified-from-20200513194415.png](#).
- c - See [../64_Acts_18_18-22/index.htm](#).
- d - See [../51_Acts_15_12-31/index.htm](#).
- e - See <https://www.spiritandtruth.org>.
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