

52—Acts 21.15-36—Becoming All Things to All People

I. Introduction

- a. A text that helps us understand Paul's decision-making to take the hard path of suffering shows up in the prison epistle of Philippians.
 - i. (Phil. 1:21-26) ²¹ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. ²⁴ But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.
 - ii. "You cannot defeat an opponent who is not only willing to die, but for whom death means winning." (D.A. Carson, For the Love of God).
- b. The Christian life requires wisdom to make decisions. For example, if this proverb doesn't illustrate this, I'm not sure what will.
 - i. Please turn to (Prov. 26:4-5) ⁴ Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. ⁵ Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.
 1. Wisdom from God must answer which one we should do in everyday life.
- c. Let's see how Paul's actions might help us learn to make wise decision for the Kingdom of God.

II. Main Point

- a. There seems to be no main point unless Paul is simply living this out: (1 Cor. 9:20) ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. 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.

III. Outline

- a. Gladly Received in Jerusalem
- b. Glorified God at the church
- c. *Gracious Actions to win some
- d. Gross religiosity
- e. Good Government Intervention

IV. Exposition

- a. As we left off last week, the wisdom of this trip to Jerusalem was left in the hands of God as they all yielded to the will of the Lord. Well, it was God's will that they go to Jerusalem and they all arrive in Jerusalem. As we will see, there are various responses to their arrival. Among the brothers, they are gladly received.
 - i. The company of disciples from Macedonia and Paul along with Dr. Luke, the author of Acts, make the 65-mile journey from Caesarea up to Jerusalem.
 - ii. The three missionary journeys have taken about ten years. The book of Acts moves pretty quickly for the most part but from Ch. 21 to the end Luke only covers about 2 years.
 - iii. Do you recall where Paul and Barnabus landed on the first missionary journey?
 1. They landed on the island of Cyprus. It seems Paul has come full circle when he lodges at the house of Mnason of Cyprus who is described as one of the early (ancient) disciples.
 2. Accompanied by some of the disciples from Caesarea, they arrive in the Holy City and they are gladly received by the brethren.
 - a. There seems to have been some arrangements made for this stay.
 - b. The mission of God involves the hosting of guests and care for them. They are part of the work.
 - i. This point seems insignificant these days but even arranging accommodations at hotels and other needs for a guest is a sign of love and care those serving and the work they are doing.

- ii. While in Cuba, we were so well taken care of by the pastor and his wife. They had obviously done this many times because they seem to think of everything. We were never an inconvenience to them but they always welcomed us warmly even though we had invaded their home and life and family.
 - 1. I remember telling the pastor's wife that I felt like part of her family because she took such good care of us.
 - 3. I would hate to pass by this and not encourage you to welcome each other warmly. Don't be cold and off-putting...especially to guests and strangers. Let us be a hospitable people. This is part of how the Kingdom advances.
- b. In our next point, we continue with the glad responses. The first scene gave us a picture of Christian hospitality in the home from a longtime believer. The next response we see is from the leaders of the church in Jerusalem. They glorified to the Lord! Let's see why!
 - i. After their overnight stay at the house of Mnason, Paul and his company go to the church. There they are met by James (the brother of Jesus) and all the elders.
 - 1. Again, here's another example of a plurality of pastors in the church.
 - 2. They are all there and they all greet the group.
 - a. It needs to be noted that this group is made up of many Gentiles. And certainly, they are Gentile Christians. They are leaders from their respective churches. They represent many different churches from Macedonia which is a region not a city.
 - i. It would be similar to saying these men are from different churches in the Northwest region of the US.
 - b. There seems to be no indication that any Gentiles were part of the Jerusalem church yet.
 - i. I bring this up because if you have been a part of this church your entire life and have never experienced different cultural norms in other places you probably know how awkward this could feel to these Jewish Christians.
 - 1. Imagine a group of Christians coming here from Mexico to bring a monetary gift to us. Different languages. Different ways of saying things. Different clothes. Different temperatures. Different expectations of how you greet each other. The list goes on.
 - 2. And yet, they welcome them in. This is no small thing.
 - 3. They soon hear a report from Paul about what has happened over the last ten years. He had met with the church in Jerusalem after the first missionary journey and now after two more trips and several years, he's back.
 - a. We've been reading the story that Paul tells. There's no need for us to hear what he has to say. We already know how the gospel has spread and many people have come to faith in Christ.
 - i. We should however notice HOW Paul reports on the work. Notice there in v. 19—"Paul related one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry."
 - 1. How we talk about things matters. Who gets the credit for what happened matters.
 - a. Paul did what Jesus taught: (Matt. 5:16) ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may

see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

- b. When you do it this way, notice what happens when you aren't there to build your platform.
 - i. (Acts 21:20) And when they heard it, they glorified God.
 - ii. (1 Cor. 1:31) "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."
 - iii. "Serving the Lord finds its significance in not what we do for the Lord but what the Lord does through us." (Bret Rogers)
- c. With that said, I think this next section digs into how we ought to let our light shine before others. Let's try to figure out how we can live out the Christian life serving others in gracious and wise ways to win some.
 - i. After hearing the report for which the pastors of the Jerusalem church praised God for, James and the elders have their own report.
 1. The middle of verse 20 says, "And they said to him, 'See brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed.'"
 - a. On the day of Pentecost, some five thousand came to faith there in Jerusalem. Most of them were scattered due to the persecution of a man named Saul of Tarsus. Since then, Saul was converted who we now call Paul and many more have come to faith in Jerusalem.
 - b. The risen Lord Jesus has scattered his church and it has expanded greatly through the witness of his church.
 - c. Unfortunately, there is no story or Acts volume 2 written of the advancement of the gospel in Jerusalem that James and the elders share. We believe their report but that's about all we know. When Paul shared his report, we know details about it.
 - d. The report includes the fact that they are zealous for the law.
 - i. We don't actually know what they mean by this but these Jewish Christians are zealous for the law. And they have been told about Paul and that he teaches all Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses.
 1. They've heard that Paul taught Jews not to circumcise their children or to walk according to their customs.
 - ii. So, there's the report. Obviously, you do not hear a response of praising God for that report.
 1. Unfortunately, serving others...even Christians...involves being misunderstood and even slandered. The Scriptures say to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. That means, it's always under threat. There's a fight to achieve unity but it will never remain in place without constant work.
 2. What these have heard about Paul is not accurate. We have been with Paul throughout his journeys and we haven't heard any of this before. This is a hard issue to untangle.
 - a. The question is asked there in v. 22, "What then is to be done?"
 - i. Those zealous for the law will hear that Paul has come and they expect trouble. I'm sure when Paul heard they were zealous for the law he adjusted to that if he hadn't already.
 1. I wish I could say that I've never been in this type of situation in the church. I know the consequences of certain actions even among Christians.
 - ii. What are they going to do? James doesn't say, "Paul, I think it would be best if you just slip out of town."

- iii. They tell Paul to do this:
 1. Go with these four men who are under a vow and pay their expenses (shaved head and sacrifices).
 2. Paul took them and purified himself with them and went into the temple. He had to speak with the priest giving notification of his days of purification and offered sacrifices for each of the men and himself.
 3. When we see Paul doing these things, he seems to be either inconsistent or he has a far greater purpose for doing this. That's what is confusing about this scene.
 4. I suppose you must be the judge of Paul's actions. Taking what Paul teaches and how he has acted in the past, I have come to the conclusion that he has not abandoned the gospel and is attempting to find salvation in the old covenant.
 5. James and the elders bring up the letter from Acts 15. They had debated this concerning Gentiles: (Acts 15:5) "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses."
 - a. Peter responded: (Acts 15:7-11) "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, ⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."
 6. This issue in this passage is over how Jews live out the gospel which is very challenging. Paul doesn't need to purify himself. He doesn't need to offer sacrifices. He doesn't need to go see the priest.
 7. There seems to be no point in this passage unless Paul has a greater motive!
- b. Part of what we need to see is how Paul responds who is a Jew and a Christian.
 - i. Recall that he just had dear brothers and sisters weeping and pleading with him not to go to Jerusalem.
 1. But here, they tell him what to do and he does it exactly as they say.
 2. He doesn't give them his prepackaged plan.
 3. He doesn't even refute what has been said about him.
 - a. Sometime you answer a fool and sometimes you do not answer a fool.
 - b. Paul has defended himself before but he doesn't here.
 - ii. Let's hear what I believe is Paul's motive that I mentioned earlier.
 1. (1 Cor. 9:19-23) ²⁰ To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. 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.²³ I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

2. The gospel brings liberty! But as F.F. Bruce states, "A truly emancipated spirit such as Paul's is not in bondage to its own emancipation."
 - a. In other words, he's not free if he is in bondage to his own freedom in Christ.
3. Paul doesn't hesitate to be flexible for the sake of the gospel while not binding his conscience over these things. He sees it a wise although risky decision that's worth it.
 - a. Yet it almost seems that Paul has his eye on Rome and this whole scene seems to be his ticket into places he has no access any other way.
 - i. As the rest of Acts plays out, we get to see Paul declare the gospel to kings and even in Caesar's household.
- d. Faith comes by hearing and Paul seeks to make the gospel known to anyone who will listen. But God even uses such things as gross religiosity to accomplish his purposes.
 - i. I say gross religiosity because the supposed people of God are clearly unwise and bring false charges against Paul.
 1. Sometimes it takes seeing how your own tribe acts to open your eyes to the deception you are living in. This scene shows who the people of God are...those who do the will of God. Those who love and go beyond the law or bylaws.
 - ii. The Jews from Asia see Paul in the temple and the whole crowd is stirred up. They lay hands on Paul there in v. 27.
 1. Their claim is this in (Acts 21:28) "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place."
 - a. Part of this statement is factually impossible.
 - b. The other part is based a mere assumption.
 - c. Paul could not have possibly taught everyone everywhere.
 - d. And it says in verse 29 that they had seen Paul with a Gentile in the city which was allowed but assumed he brought him into the temple which was prohibited.
 - i. Gentiles could only go as far as the Gentile court. There was a four and half foot wall separating them from those inside. And there were signs stating that if a Gentile entered the temple, it was under the pains of death.
 - iii. They seize Paul and drag him out of the temple and shut the gate.
 1. They are seeking to kill him.
 2. "What follows the meeting with the elders of the Jerusalem church is full of deliberate irony. Paul is falsely accused of profaning the temple while he is in the process of a Jewish purification ritual, and in fact it is his character which is being desecrated and defamed. The temple is sacred, the crowd is profane, and Paul is purified and remains true to his character." (Witherington, 652)
 - 3.
 - e. Upon seeing the riot, the Roman soldiers rescue Paul with good government intervention.
 - i. There will be more to say about this in the weeks to come.
 - ii. But Luke has shown several situations that the Roman government has acted with good oversight many times. The Jews are the antagonist but the Romans are the protagonist.

- iii. The gospel doesn't advance very easily if Rome is not in power. They do not get into religious matters. They make it possible for people to believe what they want so long as you are not an insurrectionist.
- iv. I can tell you I'd prefer Rome over Jerusalem in this situation for sure.
- v. As the Jews cry, "Away with him," the Romans are actually saving him.

V. Response

- a. (I left this open because there's no way for me to tell you how to be wise in everyday life among all the different scenarios that you encounter on a daily basis from the pulpit. That is learned much better in one on one discipleship. Many issues are challenging to figure out but I would encourage you to seek to walk in godly wisdom and trust in the gracious work of Christ for you salvation.)