

Key:

Purple – Introduction, Conclusion, Main Points, and Sermon Thread

Blue – Explanation/Exposition

Red – Application

Green – Illustration

Brown – Quotation

Yellow – Sermon Notes

Yielding for the Sake of Unity

Acts 21:17–36

Let's take our Bibles together and turn to Acts 21. Last time, we saw the Apostle Paul demonstrate an unyielding, uncompromising conviction concerning Jerusalem. It was inspiring! His friends tried to talk him out of going there, because persecution was (literally!) foreseeable. But Paul said, "I'm going. God wants me there, despite the fact that suffering is inevitable." Paul was unyielding.

And yet, in the very next passage that we're going to look at today (Acts 21:17–36), Paul yields in a significant matter for the sake of unity. This is something that has come up periodically through the book of Acts. When do you hold fast to your convictions despite the pleas of others? And when do you yield to the pleas of others for the sake of unity? **Let me frame it this way—To yield or not to yield, that is the question.**

In Acts 21:1–16, when Paul's friend essentially said, "Paul we love you and we don't want you to suffer and die in Jerusalem!" Paul responded, "I'm sorry. I'm going." In today's passage (Acts 21:17–36), Paul's friends say, "Paul, we love you and we don't want you to rock the boat!" Paul responds, "Okay, I'll comply with that." To which, we might ask, what gives, Paul? Why this and then that? Why that and then this?

Well, let's explore that. Today, I'll give you five observations from the text, and then we'll use those to build four implications for our lives from this Scripture. All of this is in your notes and you can follow along as we go.

Here's the first observation, the first scene of this passage. Write this down as #1.

1) A Warm **Reception** (21:17–20a)

Paul finally gets to Jerusalem, and Luke, who was there with him, writes:

¹⁷ When we had come to Jerusalem,¹ the brothers received us gladly.²

"Hey! Paul! Good to see you! I thought you'd be dead by now." They welcomed Paul. They *received* him with greetings and kisses in the way that Jewish folks greet old friends after not seeing them for a while.

And this is not surprising for us. This is what happens wherever Paul goes. There is this joy of fellowship and camaraderie of spirit that is true of all the churches in Paul's day. **Because Christians share Christ. They share the Holy Spirit. And they share the gospel that saves their souls.**

Look at **verse 18**.

¹⁸ On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.³

Now quick review. Who is James? James is the half-brother of Jesus. He didn't believe in Jesus until after his death and resurrection. And now he's become a rock-solid leader in the church in Jerusalem. Peter and

¹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 867: "Paul has arrived in Jerusalem, in time for the Feast of Pentecost (May 29, AD 57)—his fifth visit after his conversion, six years after his previous visit in AD 51."

² Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 871: "The last opportunity to inform the Jerusalem church of his missionary work was four years earlier, when he had returned from Macedonia and Achaia (18:18–22) and the planting of churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth."

³ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 871: "Their presence may suggest that the meeting took place on the occasion of one of the larger congregational gatherings of the Jerusalem believers—perhaps one of the assemblies in Solomon's Portico in the temple precincts (cf. 3:11; 5:12)."

John are probably off elsewhere preaching the gospel as missionaries.⁴ But James stays in Jerusalem, along with these elders, and leads the church.

And **verse 19** says,

¹⁹After greeting them,

More greetings, more kisses, more **“good to see you, Paul.”**

[Paul] related one by one⁵ the things that God had done⁶ among the Gentiles through his ministry.⁷

Now Paul does a lot of this everywhere he goes. **Keep in mind, there’s no email in the first century world. There’s no U.S. postal service. There’s no missionary newsletter.** So this is Paul’s chance to inform the Jerusalem church about all that God has done in the Gentile regions.

And Paul’s been away from Jerusalem for something like five years. And he’s been as far away as Athens and Corinth preaching the gospel. That’s on the other side of the world as far as these Jerusalem Jewish believers are concerned. I’m sure they were mesmerized as Paul told them these stories.⁸

Paul’s like “Yeah, I preached the gospel in Philippi. People got saved there, and then the people of the city wanted to kill me.” “Then I preached the gospel in Corinth. People got saved there, and then the people of the city wanted to kill me.” “Then I preached the gospel in Ephesus. People got saved there, and then ...”

“Wait, let me guess, Paul. People wanted to kill you.”

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

I bet Paul and Luke told them the story of Eutychus falling out of the window while Paul was preaching. I’m sure they all had a good laugh at that story. I’m sure they were like, “Yeah, Paul you always were a little long-winded.”

Look at **verse 20**.

²⁰And when they heard it [when they heard all these wonderful stories of God’s glory and God’s grace among the Gentiles],⁹ they glorified God.¹⁰

**“Hallelujah! That’s awesome, Paul! Gentiles got saved all around the world. Praise the Lord!”¹¹
“That’s just what Jesus told us to do—Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the end of the earth.”**

⁴ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 248: “The mention of James and all the elders marks a significant change in that leadership. When the church at Jerusalem began, it was ruled by the apostles (2:42; 4:35–37; 5:2). As the church grew, the apostles recognized the need for assistance with the administrative details, and seven men were chosen to serve under them (6:2–6). Elders are first mentioned in 11:30, and by the time of the Jerusalem Council they had assumed a prominent role (15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4). Now Paul and the others found the church led by the elders alone; the apostles are not mentioned. At least one was already dead—James the brother of John (Acts 12:2). The others had turned over the leadership responsibilities to the elders and left the city to engage in missionary work. Elder rule was thus being established as the New Testament pattern of church government (cf. Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1, 5).”

⁵ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 248: “He did not couch his report in vague generalities or tedious statistics. Instead, he told them one by one (cf. Acts 11:4) of specific incidents in his missionary journeys.”

⁶ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 248: “As in his previous reports (14:27; 15:4, 12), Paul humbly gave all the credit and glory to God. He saw himself only as an instrument God graciously called to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (cf. Rom. 15:18; Eph. 3:8; 1 Thess. 2:4).”

⁷ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 645: “Paul tells his hosts of all that has happened with the Gentiles in his ministry. Such summaries appear elsewhere in Acts (14:27; 15:3–4, 12).”

⁸ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 35: “He also presented samples of his work: ‘Exhibit A’ — Trophimus of Asia; ‘Exhibit B’ — Secundus of the Thessalonians.”

⁹ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 441: “In his various missionary journeys, Paul had always gone to the Jews first and had brought many Jewish individuals to the Lord. Nevertheless, he was most famous for his Gentile evangelism.”

¹⁰ CHRYSOSTOM: “Again Paul describes to them in detail the things relating to the Gentiles. He does this not to indulge in vainglory, God forbid, but because he wishes to show the mercy of God and fill them with great joy. Look at the result: ‘When they heard it, they glorified God.’ It was not upon Paul that they bestowed their praise and admiration. For he described everything in such a way as to refer it all to [God].” Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 263.

¹¹ JOHANN SPANGENBERG: “Because they heard what great acts God accomplished through Paul, they praised the Lord. Listen to that. They did not praise Paul but the Lord. And this is indeed the true form and manner to honor the dear saints and children of God, namely, whenever we hear the wonders and mighty deeds that God accomplishes through his dear saints, we should not introduce them as gods, pray and call to them and rob God of his proper honor and grant it to [his] creatures. Instead, we should praise God who works in them.” Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 297.

And there's something to that connection that you feel with people in other parts of the world who love Jesus and believe the gospel. That's powerful. **We sense that in our day when we hear about revivals and God's work among other people around the world.**

So just to summarize, they greeted Paul with a warm reception. They glorified God together for all that he had done. And we know from elsewhere that Paul had been collecting money for the saints in Jerusalem, because of the drought.¹² So I'm sure they were thankful to receive this offering from the Gentiles that blessed the Jewish brothers in Jerusalem. This was a happy occasion.

But here's where the story takes a sour turn. Watch this in **verse 20**.

²⁰ And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to [Paul], "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law,"¹³

Hmmm. That's an odd statement right there—"They are all zealous for the law."¹⁴ Shouldn't they be zealous for the gospel? Shouldn't they be "zealous for Christ" not "zealous for the law?" Where are they going with this?

Look at **verse 21**.

²¹ and they have been told about you [Paul] that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children¹⁵ or walk according to our customs.¹⁶ ²² What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.¹⁷

Now what is this?¹⁸ What's going on with this statement in **verse 21** especially? I mean, all the pleasantries have disappeared. The warm welcome has faded a bit. And now the Jerusalem church is getting down to brass tacks dealing with a serious issue.¹⁹

"Paul, some of our Jewish believers have heard that you are anti-Jewish with your beliefs now. Is that true? Some of our young converts have been told that you teach Jews in foreign lands to forsake Moses and our customs. What's up with that, Paul? What are we going to do about this? They're going to

¹² Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 646: "Luke seems to know about the collection (Acts 24:17) but chooses not to note it here."

¹³ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 646: "The phrase 'zealous of the law' (ζηλωται τοῦ νόμου, *zēlōtai tou nomou*) has a rich background, as it was used in 1 Maccabees of faithful Jews who stood up against the increasing hellenization of Judaism (1 Macc. 2:42; 2 Macc. 4:2)." Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 873: "The term translated as 'zealous' (ζηλωται) does not refer to the members of the militant 'Zealot party' that came to power in the mid-60s of the first century AD, about ten years after the events of Acts 21. Josephus uses the term in the sense of 'someone who is ardent for a cause' and designates a political, revolutionary party as 'Zealots' only when he describes the outbreak of the Jewish rebellion against Rome in AD 66 (*J.W.* 4:160–161)."

¹⁴ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 442: "The Jewish believers of Jerusalem were zealots and largely committed to keeping the Law of Moses. This was no longer mandatory, so why did they keep it? There are two possible reasons. First, they may have done so voluntarily, for freedom from the law also means one is free to keep it if he so desires. But second, and more likely as known from the overall context, they were still spiritually immature, and in their immaturity, they felt they were obligated to keep the law. They were not sinning by keeping the law. They were only wrong in making it mandatory for other believers."

¹⁵ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 447–8: "Would Paul have urged Jews to abandon this 'sign of the covenant'? There is certainly no question that he argued strongly against seeing circumcision as a guarantee of salvation. It could be no substitute for faith in Christ, for becoming a new creation in the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:6; 6:15). Consequently, he adamantly opposed circumcision of his Gentile converts. But there is no evidence that he ever encouraged Jewish Christians to abandon the practice and considerable indication to the contrary (cf. Acts 16:3; 1 Cor 7:18f)."

¹⁶ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 250: "Nowhere in the New Testament are Jewish believers condemned for observing them. In fact, Paul commands tolerance for such 'weaker brothers' (Rom. 14:1ff.; 1 Cor. 8–10) until they grow to understand their freedom and can use it with clear consciences."

¹⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 874: "A Jew who stops keeping the commandments of the law lives like a Gentile and thus has become a Gentile."

¹⁸ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 124: "Many Jews believe that Paul teaches antinomianism—that he wants to abolish the Law of Moses (v 21). The elders in Jerusalem understand that a misunderstanding of Paul's teaching could lead to a fissure in the already fragile bonds between Jews and Gentiles. Thus, they ask in verse 22, 'What then is to be done?'"

¹⁹ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 447: "On the one hand, they had supported Paul's witness to the Gentiles at the Jerusalem Conference. Now they found Paul a persona non grata and his mission discredited not only among the Jewish populace, which they were seeking to reach, but also among their more recent converts. They did not want to reject Paul. Indeed, they praised God for his successes. Still they had their own mission to the Jews to consider, and for that Paul was a distinct liability."

find out that you're in town, and when they do, it has the potential to divide our church. What are we going to do about this?"²⁰

Now let's just call this what it is. This is a false accusation.²¹ Write that down as #2.

2) A False **Accusation** (21:20b-22)²²

Now *there is* a measure of truth in what they are saying about Paul.²³ **And by the way, most false accusations have a measure of truth. The best accusations... the best slanders are half-truths, not total fabrications. That tactic is as old as Genesis 3 and the Garden of Eden.**

Paul was certainly against the idea that following the Mosaic law was necessary for salvation. He wrote a whole letter, the book of **Galatians** in our Bible, demolishing the idea that anything other than Christ alone is necessary for salvation. But Paul never said that Jews must forsake their cultural Jewishness in order to follow Christ.²⁴ He said specifically about circumcision that "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation" (**Gal 6:15**).

So this statement about Paul that is circulating among Christian Jews is a half-truth. It's a misrepresentation of the facts. It's a slanderous, false accusation.²⁵ And the best evidence of this is that Paul was hustling like crazy to get to Jerusalem for Pentecost, which was a Jewish feast!²⁶ So obviously Paul was not anti-Jewish.²⁷

And so when James and the elders in Jerusalem say in **verse 22**...

What then is to be done? ...

I think the answer is quite simple. You go to those Jewish Christians who are believing these false accusations and you tell them, **"It's not true! Stop circulating this junk! What other people are saying about Paul is slander. Don't believe it! Stop spreading it!"**

If it was up to me, I'd say let's deal with it head on and just address the issue. And that's because, most of the time, I'm a pretty direct person. I don't like beating around the bush or soft-peddling difficult things. I'd rather just deal with issue head on. And for the most part that's how Paul is too. But let's face it. Not every issue needs to be handled that way. And there are different ways to utilize diplomacy and tact to get to a place of resolution.²⁸

²⁰ JOHN CALVIN: "Although many spiteful and wicked people, one after the other, daily loaded Paul with odium, yet, because James and his colleagues were fully convinced of his integrity, they were not hostile to him. Therefore, they now receive him as a servant of Christ in a brotherly and courteous fashion and make it plain that his coming gives them pleasure... Satan knows that nothing will suit better for overthrowing the kingdom of Christ than the disagreements and jealousies of the faithful, he does not cease spreading indirect rumors, which make them suspicious of each other. Therefore, we must close our ears to accusations, so as not to believe anything about faithful ministers of Christ except on good information." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 297.

²¹ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 251: "Believers should be slow to accept accusations against other Christians (particularly leaders, 1 Tim. 5:19), especially when such charges originate with opponents of the Christian faith."

²² Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 874-5: "These charges were false. Paul argues against circumcision with regard to Gentile believers, but there is no evidence that he discouraged Jewish believers from circumcising their children... At the same time, these rumors that describe Paul's reputation among diaspora Jews were not entirely without foundation. Paul could speak and write about the believers' freedom from the law in terms that could be misunderstood to imply the removal of any obligation to keep the law, as the parenthetical qualification in 1 Cor 9:20 suggests."

²³ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 448: "There may have been a grain of truth in the rumor that Paul was encouraging Jews of the Diaspora to abandon the Torah. It would not have been Paul's having actually urged the Jews to do so but rather the social situation of Paul's Diaspora churches."

²⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 448: "There is no evidence that he urged Jewish Christians to abandon their ancestral law, and Acts would indicate that he himself remained true to the Torah in his own dealings with Jews (cf. 18:18; 20:6; 23:5)... Being in Christ neither required that the Gentile become a Jew nor that the Jew cease to be a Jew (cf. 1 Cor 9:19f.)."

²⁵ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 35: "The church had heard and propagated slanderous hearsay about Paul — misinformation — lies, whether intentional or unintentional."

²⁶ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 259: "Originally a celebration of the first fruits of the harvest, in Paul's day Pentecost had come to be a celebration of the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. Charging Paul at this time with teaching against the law was sure to infuriate the crowds."

²⁷ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 646: "Justin Martyr (*Dial.* 47) describes Jews who keep the law without having a problem from their Gentile brothers."

²⁸ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 648-9: "In sum, what we see here is Paul being asked to act with cultural sensitivity to the Jewish context he now finds himself in, without compromising the gospel. He is quite willing to do so for the sake of the unity it may create. Oftentimes

Let me say it this way, **“There’s more than one way to skin a cat!”** Let me say it this way, **“If you only have a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail!”**

So instead of addressing this issue head on, the elders in Jerusalem instead try a different approach. And what follows in **verse 23** is... I’ll just call it this... a curious suggestion for resolving this issue.

Write that down as a third observation:

3) A Curious **Suggestion** (21:23–25)

Here’s the suggestion.²⁹ Look at **verse 23**.

²³ Do³⁰ therefore what we tell you [Paul].

Again, this is James and the elders in Jerusalem talking. So there is authority behind this.³¹

We have four men who are under a vow; ²⁴ take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law.

That’s their suggestion. I told you it was *curious*.

This is their plan for correcting the misinformation that has been spread about Paul.³² **How do you feel about that, church? What do you think of their plan?**

Now before you answer, notice what they say in **verse 25**, because this is important.

²⁵ But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.”

So James and the other elders make clear that they aren’t requiring Gentiles to be more Jewish. The letter that he references is what took place in **Acts 15** with the Jerusalem Council five years earlier. And conceivable they’ve sent more correspondence since then to other churches.

The four things they prohibited (idolatry, food with blood, strangled meats, and sexual immorality) weren’t necessary for salvation. They were evidences of salvation. They were evidences that a person had broken from pagan Gentile practice.

And it removed barriers and stumbling blocks for Jews who couldn’t abide that practice in the church. So they are making clear that just because they want Paul to appear faithful to Jewish custom, they aren’t expecting Gentiles in Gentile churches to do the same. That’s important.³³

And so they come up with this elaborate scheme to appease the Jewish Christians and guard against a potential schism in the church. The elders ask Paul to shave his head as part of a vow with these other men. And that’ll restore his Jewish *bona-fides* with the Jewish population.³⁴

Let me ask again, how do you feel about this plan? Do you think this was a good way to go about rectifying this issue? You might say, “Well, Pastor Tony sometimes elders do things that I don’t understand, but I trust them anyway.” That’s a good answer right there!³⁵

we may be asked, in ministry or in a given community, to engage in neutral practices that are culturally driven, not because we have to but because it may prevent unnecessary static from getting in the way of sharing the gospel or doing damage to the unity of the church. This represents a curb of freedoms. Still, it can be well advised, especially when one is visiting another context.”

²⁹ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 252: “The elders feared a confrontation between the apostle to the Gentiles and the misinformed zealots for the law. To head that off, they suggested a compromise—not a sacrifice of truth for expediency but an act of self-sacrificial humility to promote unity and understanding.”

³⁰ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 875: “The use of the imperative (ποιήσον) indicates that translations such as ‘our suggestion is’ are too weak; while perhaps not an outright command, it clearly expresses a request.”

³¹ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 648: “The hope is that by his acting in accordance with the law, the remarks made that Paul has taught against the law will be refuted. There is no ambush of Paul here as some more skeptical readings about James’s request suggest.”

³² Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 444: “The leaders believed that by doing some things voluntarily under the Mosaic Law, Paul would show that he was not against the keeping of the law and that he himself had an orderly walk. In this way, Paul would alleviate the fears of Jewish believers, for he would publicly show respect for Jewish customs.”

³³ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 877: “The elders and the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and Judea are not asking the Gentile Christians to become Jews—that was precisely the unanimous decision at the council. They are asking that Jewish Christians should not be made Gentile Christians, which would happen if they were asked to abandon circumcision and renounce other ritual stipulations of the law.”

³⁴ JOHN CALVIN: “We see how the elders conducted themselves with moderation in fostering harmony, when they quickly anticipate the displeasure of the people, except that they are perhaps too indulgent to their weakness in requiring a vow from Paul.” Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 298.

You might say, “I don’t know Tony, but I trust that God leads elders to make tough decisions, and he disciplines them when they make mistakes. That was true in Jerusalem two-thousand years ago. That’s true in San Antonio, Texas today.” Touché.

Maybe there are some who agree with their non-confrontational approach to this issue. Maybe you disagree with it. I guess the bigger question is this: why does God record this matter—this episode in the life of Paul—in the Bible? What does God want to teach us from this passage? That’s the question that we’ve got to wrestle with.

Let me tell you what I think. I don’t agree with the way that these elders handle this situation. But I’ve never had to shepherd a flock of Jewish converts to Christianity. So I’m going to give the benefit of the doubt to this group of elders who knew their flock.

And by the way, just a little historical background here. This was a volatile time in Jerusalem’s history.³⁶ This wasn’t the same Jerusalem of **Acts 2**, twenty-five years earlier. This wasn’t the same Jerusalem as Passion Week when Jews and Gentiles conspired together to execute Jesus. The relationship between Jews and the Roman Empire had grown increasingly hostile and explosive over the years.³⁷ And there was a lot of nationalist fervor in Israel. In a little over a decade, the entire city of Jerusalem would be destroyed including the temple.

Also there was a famine in the land that was impoverishing the people. It was a tense time. So there were probably a number of different factors that led these elders to suggest that Paul make a humble demonstration of his Jewishness.³⁸

And let me just clarify what they’re suggesting here. They told Paul to take four men who were under a vow, probably some variation of a Nazirite vow from the OT, which included a voluntary abstention of wine and fermented drink. With a Nazirite vow, you would grow your hair out for 30 days and then you would shave it off and offer it as an offering before the Lord. Samson was a lifelong Nazirite according to the OT (**Judg 13:5–7**). So he wasn’t supposed to shave his hair ever. But most Nazirite vows were only for a short period.³⁹

So they wanted Paul to participate in this ancient Jewish ceremony, and they wanted him to pay the expenses of these other four men which was a pretty costly thing. So this was a significant time and money commitment for Paul.⁴⁰ Why do they want him to do this? To prove his Jewishness. To prove to his naysayers that he wasn’t opposed to Moses and the observance of the law.⁴¹ That’s their plan.

³⁵ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 35: “We need to be gracious when our brothers and sisters make what we consider wrong or mistaken decisions, considering not only their actions but their motivations.”

³⁶ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 447: “Paul’s arrival in Jerusalem probably was in spring of A.D. 56 or 57 during the procuratorship of Felix. Josephus described this period of the mid-50s as a time of intense Jewish nationalism and political unrest. One insurrection after another rose to challenge the Roman overlords, and Felix brutally suppressed them all.”

³⁷ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 643: “Paul’s arrival can be dated to a period around AD 57, when Jerusalem is tense with rising Jewish nationalism, political unrest, and the presence of Rome in a ruler, Felix, who was said to have the ‘instincts of a slave’ (Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.9).”

³⁸ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 246: “All of the revelations he received, along with his knowledge and accomplishments, could have made Paul proud, boastful, egotistical, and arrogant. Instead, like the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 11:29), he was a gentle, gracious, humble man (2 Cor. 10:1; 1 Tim. 1:12–17). His humility can be seen clearly in this section.”

³⁹ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 35: “They wanted to portray him as a more scrupulous Jew than he actually was. This was a case of religious politicking!”

⁴⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 449: “Paul’s role in the matter is not altogether clear. He obviously did not join in the vow because the minimum period for a Nazirite was thirty days, and only seven were involved here (v. 27). Also it could not have been a matter of a Nazirite ‘purification’ ceremony in which he participated. There was such a purification ceremony in connection with Nazirite vows, but it was not a regular part of the Nazirite commitment; rather, it was a special provision in case the one under the vow came into contact with a corpse or became otherwise defiled (Num 6:9–12). That could not be the situation here because the Nazirite who underwent the purification rite had to begin the minimum thirty-day period of the vow all over again (Num 6:12). The most likely solution is that Paul was the one who underwent purification. Often a Jew on returning to the Holy Land after a sojourn in Gentile territory would undergo ritual purification. The period involved was seven days (cf. Num 19:12), which fits the present picture (v. 27). Paul thus underwent ritual purification to qualify for participation in the completion ceremony of the four Nazirites which took place within the sacred precincts of the temple.”

⁴¹ AUGUSTINE: “There was no more fitting way for him to repel the injustice of this false charge than by performing personally the ceremonies that he was supposed to condemn as sacrilegious. In this way [Paul] would prove two things: that the Jews were not to be prevented from observing these obligations as if they were wrong and that the Gentiles were not to be forced to observe them as if they were necessary.” Quoted in Martin and Smith, eds., *Acts*, ACCS, 264.

Now given what we know of Paul—how hard-nosed and opinionated he could be—I would have expected him to put the kibosh on this whole idea before it even got off the ground. Paul could very easily have said, **“There’s no way I’m going to do that! I’m an Apostle. I’ve been a faithful witness to Jews and Gentiles alike. My credentials are as good as they come. I don’t have to do this to prove myself to these people or vindicate myself. God is my witness; he will vindicate me!”** Couldn’t Paul have said that?

That’s probably what I would have said if I was in Paul’s position. That’s maybe what a younger, more fiery, Paul might have said. But this older, shrewder, more measured Paul does something different. He says, **“Okay, I’ll do it.”**

Here’s the fourth observation from the text:

4) A Humble **Submission** (21:26–29)

Look at **verse 26.**

²⁶ Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.

Paul acquiesces to the decision of the elders.⁴² Paul consents to this diplomatic solution that involves him purifying himself according to Jewish custom and taking part in this Nazirite vow.⁴³

And he goes up to the temple! The temple, which for all intents and purposes, is meaningless now that Christ has risen from the dead. The veil has been torn in the temple. Like I said already, this temple would be destroyed completely in just **over** a decade, in AD 70.⁴⁴ Jesus, if you remember, predicted its destruction during the lifetime of his disciples (**Matt 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 21:6**). Nevertheless Paul submits himself to participate in this Jewish custom in order to build bridges with the Jewish community and not be a stumbling block to the gospel.

Let me just say that there are implications galore for us in this text, as we examine what Paul is doing. Here what I think Paul is doing. Paul is bowing to tradition, in order to preserve church unity. He’s bowing to social custom, in order to advance the gospel. He’s yielding for the sake of unity.

The verse that comes to mind is this. Paul wrote this just a few years before the events of **Acts 21**. “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 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. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings” (**1 Cor 9:19–23**).⁴⁵

I think there are some implications for our lives here, but I’m going to wait until the end of the passage before I talk application. Paul voluntarily submitted himself to the request of these church elders. And participated in an antiquated OT custom in order to build bridges for the gospel and in order to preserve church unity. That’s a remarkable thing, right there. That is a wonderful testimony to us twenty centuries later.

⁴² Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 442: “Being a Jew and being a Christian were not mutually exclusive. This was what Paul was attempting to demonstrate by his participation in the Nazirite vow in the temple when the mob rose against him (21:23–27). His demonstration was primarily for the Jewish Christians, to make a further point—that Paul’s law-free Gentile mission was not incompatible with a Jewish Christianity ‘zealous for the law’ (21:20).”

⁴³ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 35: “Paul was not against Nazirite vows per se, for he seems to have taken one himself in Cenchræa (18:18). So the request does not appear unreasonable.”

⁴⁴ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 450: “As Jewish nationalism increased, the Gentile mission became more and more of a liability to Jewish Christianity. In the aftermath of the Jewish War with Rome and the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Jewish Christianity was declared heretical by official Judaism; and it was no longer possible for a Christian Jew to remain in the Jewish community. James had seen the problem well and sought to present himself as a strict, Torah-abiding Jew, doubtless to strengthen the credibility of his witness to his fellow Jews. Ultimately, he gave his life for his Christian witness, being put to death at the order of the high priest Ananus in A.D. 62.”

⁴⁵ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 879: “The religious relativism and polytheism of Gentile society make it impossible for Paul—or any other Christian—to live ‘as a Gentile’ in every respect.”

Now you might be thinking, **“O Paul, what a good guy! Surely God is going to protect him from any harm after this show of humility. Surely God is going to guard him from persecution. Maybe God will even reverse his plan to have Paul arrested.”**

In fact, I think this might have even been part of the reason that these elders suggested this course of action. In other words, they may have been thinking, “If we can just appease the unbelieving Jews as well as the believing Jews, maybe we can take some heat off Paul. Maybe we can protect him!”

I don’t know if it was part of their plan. If it was, it didn’t work. Look at **verse 27**.

²⁷ *When the seven days were almost completed,*

This is the last seven days of that Nazirite vow.

the Jews from Asia, seeing [Paul] in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd

That word “stirred up” is the same one that was used to describe Ephesus when the Gentile crowd there started a mob. Remember “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” (**Acts 19:28, 34**). The Greek word connotes the idea of “mob violence” and “confused agitation.”⁴⁶

In this case, it was the Asian Jews—maybe they were even from Ephesus since Ephesus is the largest city in Asia—who stir up the crowds...

and laid hands on him, ²⁸ crying out, “Men of Israel, help!

Now remember, it’s Pentecost. So the crowds were huge in Jerusalem at this time. And there were a lot of people from out of town who had pilgrimaged to Jerusalem for this Jewish feast. These Asian Jews may have even seen Paul in Ephesus. So they grab him and they cry out “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 temple⁴⁷ and has defiled⁴⁸ this holy place.”⁴⁹

Now two things about this. **1)** First of all, notice how this is the same accusation that the church was dealing with. **“Paul is anti-Jewish. He teaches against the law.”** The rumor-mill had spread lies about Paul all around the city. **2)** And secondly, these guys add another false accusation to Paul. **By the way, if you are thinking about getting into ministry, let me just warn you ahead of time—false accusations will come. Just get ready for it.** Here’s their false accusation against Paul—**“He brought Greeks into the temple.”** That was a big no-no in Jewish circles.⁵⁰

But Luke tells us in **verse 29** that it’s not even true.⁵¹

²⁹ *For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city,*

So Trophimus was in the city, but he wasn’t in the temple. They extrapolated a falsehood from this.

If you remember, there was a posse of seven men that Paul had brought with him to Jerusalem from the Gentile churches to deliver a love offering to the church in Jerusalem.⁵² These guys all had really cool names: Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, Timothy, Tychicus, and Trophimus (**Acts 20:4**).⁵³

⁴⁶ BDAG, συγγέω, 953.

⁴⁷ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 447: “Gentiles were allowed into the Court of the Gentiles or the outer court, but they were not allowed into the inner court, the Court of the Women, also called the Court of Israel. Gentiles who entered the inner court could be executed, even if they were Roman citizens. This was the one exception Rome allowed; therefore, there was an inscription at the entrance to the inner court that read: ‘No alien may enter within the barrier and wall around the Temple. Whoever is caught is alone responsible for the death which follows.’”

⁴⁸ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 651: “The reference to defiling is intensive, as a perfect tense (κεκοίνωκεν, *kekoinōken*) is used; the effect of his action is that the sacred space stands desecrated... The reference to defiling is intensive, as a perfect tense (κεκοίνωκεν, *kekoinōken*) is used; the effect of his action is that the sacred space stands desecrated.”

⁴⁹ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 259: “Jesus (Mark 14:57–58) and Stephen (Acts 6:13) were also falsely accused of speaking against the temple—accusations that helped lead to their deaths. Paul’s accusers undoubtedly hoped for a similar outcome in his case.”

⁵⁰ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 452: “There was a stone barrier that separated the court of the Gentiles from the first courtyard of the temple proper, the court of the women. According to Josephus, there were warning stones set at regular intervals along this barrier, some in Greek and some in Latin, forbidding non-Jews access beyond this point. Two of these have been excavated, both with a Greek text and both with a message to the effect that any foreigner proceeding beyond the barrier did so on pain of death.”

⁵¹ Polhill, *Acts*, NAC, 453: “He had not taken Trophimus there. On an occasion when he was trying to establish his Jewishness, it was the last thing he would have done! It was an instance of sheer irony. In the temple for his own purification, Paul was accused of having defiled it.”

⁵² Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 35: “Paul hoped that the love offering would build solidarity between Jewish and Gentile believers.”

So of course Trophimus was in the city with Paul. There was no restriction against Jews coming to the city of Jerusalem. But Gentiles couldn't go into the inner courts of the temple. They had to stay in the court of the Gentiles.

But look at the end of **verse 29**.

and they **supposed** that Paul had brought him into the temple.

Here's another half-truth that becomes a false accusation. **By the way, human beings are really good at this. We are really good at extrapolating falsehoods from only half the facts.**⁵⁴

And look at the result of this. Look at **verse 30**.

³⁰ Then all the city was stirred up,

I told you this was a volatile time in Jerusalem.

and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut.

Let me be clear about what's going on here. They dragged Paul outside the temple, because they didn't want to shed blood there. And they shut the temple gates.⁵⁵ In other words, they were going to kill him.⁵⁶

³¹ And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune⁵⁷ of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. ³² He at once⁵⁸

This tribune's name is Claudius as we find out later (**Acts 23:26**). And a tribune was a senior officer in the Roman army. He was higher in rank than a centurion, but lower than a legionnaire. He was in charge of roughly 600 troops.

So this tribune...

took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.

"Nothing to see here, officer! Just a few guys working through a disagreement."

³³ Then the tribune came up and arrested [Paul] ...

That's kind of a curious move right there. Shouldn't they arrest the people beating up Paul? But this is actually a good thing for Paul. Their arrest of him probably saved his life.

Look again at **verse 33**.

³³ ... the tribune came up and arrested [Paul] and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. ³⁴ Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another.

This is like Ephesus all over again. I guess Jews and Gentiles have more in common than we realize. They both want to kill Paul. And they both can't get their story straight in the middle of mob violence.

And as he [**the Tribune**] could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. ³⁵ And when [Paul] came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, ³⁶ for the mob of the people followed, crying out, "Away with him!"

What does that sound like? That sounds like Jesus in Jerusalem, doesn't it? **"Away with him, crucify him!"** (see **Luke 23:18; John 19:15**).⁵⁹

Actually where Paul was at this moment, outside of the temple, wasn't that far from the spot where Jesus was arrested, sentenced, and executed. In the same vicinity of his Savior's suffering, Paul is now sharing in Christ's suffering some twenty-five years later.

⁵³ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 123: "Paul's travel companions were Christians from Asia Minor and thus were Gentiles. For them to be welcomed by these Jewish believers reveals the impact of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 and the unifying power of the gospel."

⁵⁴ JOHN CALVIN: "The audacity of those who are driven by a preconceived opinion is usually preposterous like that. Let us learn from such examples to beware of uncontrolled passions and not to give free reign to unfounded and prejudiced opinions, so as not to rush blindly in an assault on the innocent." Quoted in Chung-Kim et al., eds., *Acts*, RCS, 299.

⁵⁵ Fruchtenbaum, *The Book of Acts*, 448: "By Jewish law, no man's blood was to be shed in the inner court."

⁵⁶ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 260: "The temple guards shoved the frenzied mob outside (so Paul's death would not defile the temple; cf. 2 Kings 11:15)... Too impatient to drag him out of the city and stone him (as had been done with Stephen), they intended to beat the apostle to death on the spot. They would have succeeded, but God providentially intervened to protect His servant. Help arrived in the form of Roman soldiers."

⁵⁷ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 260: "During major religious celebrations, such as Pentecost, the Romans were especially watchful. Thus, it did not take the alert sentries long to spot the riot breaking out below them."

⁵⁸ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 126: "The soldiers' speedy response to the uproar was due to the location of their watch tower. Herod the Great had built the Tower of Antonia at the northwest corner of the temple to keep careful watch over the crowds."

⁵⁹ MacArthur, *Acts*, vol 2, MNTC, 261: "In mindless, faceless fury, losing all sense of fear for Roman soldiers, the crowd pushed and shoved, trying desperately to get at him. All the while they kept crying out, 'Away with him!'—that is, 'kill him' (cf. Luke 23:18; John 19:15; Acts 22:22)."

Here's the fifth observation from the text. Write this down.

- 1) A Warm Reception (21:17–20a)
 - 2) A False Accusation (21:20b–22)
 - 3) A Curious Suggestion (21:23–25)
 - 4) A Humble Submission (21:26–29)
 - 5) A Fateful **Conclusion** (21:30–36)
-

Now next time, we'll see how Paul uses even this fateful set of circumstances to preach the gospel and tell people about Jesus. God actually uses this suffering as another opportunity to preach the gospel.

But we're going to stop here for today. Because I want us to spend the rest of our time now thinking through why God put this passage in the Bible. What is God wanting to convey to us practically and applicationally in **Acts 21:17–36**?

What is God teaching us in this passage? Here's my answer to that. Four Applications. Here's #1.

- 1) When God says something is going to happen, **believe** it

God prophesied to Paul that he was going to get arrested in Jerusalem, and sure enough, he gets arrested in Jerusalem. God used Agabus to prophesy that Paul would be bound with chains in Jerusalem. Sure enough, Paul gets bound with chains.

Similar things happened, by the way, in the life of Jesus. The OT prophesied the coming of a Savior that would take away the sins of the world. Jesus himself prophesied his death and resurrection three times on the road to Jerusalem (**Luke 9:22, 44–45; 18:31–34**). And all of those things came to fruition. **When God says something's going to happen, it's going to happen.**

What do we take away from all that? We could look at these predictions that come true and we can feel bad for Jesus and Paul. But I don't think that's how God wants us to respond. I think God would want us to say instead, "He's got the whole world in his hands. God knows everything that going to happen and his promises are true."

So if God predicted Jesus's suffering and Paul's suffering, what does that tell us about God's predictions concerning us? What does that tell us about God's promises to us about life after death? What does that tell us about God's promise that all our suffering will be rewarded in the end?

I believe that even though this is a difficult section of Scripture that involves the suffering of the Apostle Paul, it's a passage of Scripture that inspires hope. God knows the beginning from the end and he is orchestrating everything in this world for his perfect purpose.

And here's a second application. Write this down.

- 2) Obedience and humility don't shield a Christian from **suffering**

I wish they did shield us from suffering in this world. They don't. Paul was obedient to what God wanted him to do. He was constrained by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem. He went. And he suffered there. He got beaten and almost killed there outside of the temple.

And also, Paul was incredibly humble when he got to Jerusalem. He submitted to the will of the church elders in Jerusalem, despite the curiousness of their suggestion. But that didn't protect him from suffering. **Humble people and obedient people suffer all the time. All the time!**

I know you've heard me say before **"Choose to sin; Choose to suffer."** And that's true. **There is a kind of suffering that is self-inflicted. But there is also a suffering that is not self-inflicted. There is a type of suffering that God allows even in the midst of great faithfulness.**

And that suffering is not evidence that you've done wrong or that you've failed God. It's not evidence that God doesn't love you. In fact it's the opposite.

The Bible says in **1 Peter 4:12–13**, "Do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed."

The Bible says in **James 1:12**, "Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him."

The Bible says in **1 Peter 5:10**, "And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you."

Suffering is part of your lot in life as a follower of Christ. And I don't tell you that just so that you will grit your teeth and endure it. I don't think that's how Paul or Peter or any of the disciples responded to suffering. As they suffered, they learned to love God more and trust him in deeper ways. And that made the suffering meaningful. All suffering for the believer is meaningful.

I know that not every person in this room is experiencing a season of deep suffering right now. But some of you are. And you needed to hear that. You need to hear that God loves you, and he's proud of you for your faithfulness. And he will stand by you and help you through it. And he'll reward you for your faithfulness in eternity. So if that's you this morning, be encouraged. God loves you. God has a purpose for what he's having you endure. All suffering for the believer is meaningful.

And if you're not suffering right now... I don't think any of us are suffering to the extent that Paul was... just be thankful and praise God and get ready. Get spiritually geared up so that when it comes, you'll be ready.

What else is God teaching us in this passage? Write this down as #3.

3) Love for **people** sometimes means sacrificing personal **freedom**

I think the essence of this text, Acts 21:17–36, is found in 1 Corinthians 9:19, “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews” (9:19–20a). Paul also says in verse 22, “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings” (9:22–23).⁶⁰

Now let me be clear about something. Paul did not write those verses in order to encourage people to sin in order to win sinners to Christ. Don't think to yourself, “Oh, I'm going to become an alcoholic in order to win alcoholics for Jesus. I'm going to become materialistic in order to win materialistic people to Christ.” That's not what Paul means. And by the way, that doesn't work. You don't win people to Christ by becoming more worldly. You win people to Christ by giving them an alternative to the worldliness they are already drowning in.⁶¹

But for non-moral issues... and non-sin issues... And for issues where your conscience and your convictions aren't compromised... it is appropriate and it is beneficial to sacrifice your personal freedom in order to win people to Christ.

Remember last week we saw that Paul wasn't willing to budge on going to Jerusalem. That's because there was a Holy Spirit conviction inside of him. That was a convictional issue that he couldn't compromise. But with issues that are non-moral and non-convictional, we need to be willing to budge and lay down our personal freedoms for those who are weaker brothers among us.

You might say, “Pastor Tony I have the freedom to eat whatever I want to eat. I have the freedom to drink whatever I want to drink. I have the freedom to watch what I want, and to go wherever I want to go, and do whatever I want to do... as long as it's not sinful... I have freedom in Christ.”

Yes, you do. Paul did as well in Acts 21. He didn't have to go through this Jewish custom to establish a rapport with the Jewish Christians. But he did it anyway because he loved people. He did it because he wanted to see the gospel advanced.⁶² He did it to protect the unity of the church. Here's a quote from F.F. Bruce that I think really drives this point home: “A truly emancipated spirit such as Paul's is not in bondage to its own emancipation.”⁶³

⁶⁰ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 35: “Why did Paul go along with the Jerusalem elders' advice? The answer is to his credit: he loved the Jewish nation... Why did Paul go along with the Jerusalem elders' advice? The answer is to his credit: he loved the Jewish nation.”

⁶¹ Schnabel, *Acts*, ZECNT, 879: “Paul never says that he becomes ‘a pagan to the pagans’). Paul cannot ‘live like a Gentile’ and worship in a pagan temple or visit prostitutes or despise the slaves, and this is what he teaches the Gentile converts.”

⁶² Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 125–6: “Believers, however, can let freedom assume the status of an idol and, consequently, enslave themselves to freedom. We can easily entrench ourselves in our own freedom and thus paralyze our ability to serve others. True freedom, as Paul demonstrates, means we can dispense with our own preferences, wants, and needs. True freedom is a freedom from self. Freed from selfishness, Christians can lay down their own desires as a sacrifice on the altar of Christian love. Paul, though free from the law, made himself a servant of the law in order to love his brothers and sisters in Christ. That is true Christian liberty.”

⁶³ Quoted in Bock, *Acts*, BECNT, 649.

Love for people sometimes means you sacrifice your personal freedom. But also, #4.

4) Love for unity sometimes means surrendering personal **preferences**

In a church like ours there are a ton of issues that *can* become divisive. And there are a number of battle lines that we can draw. I could very easily see Paul draw a battle line when James asked him to participate in this Jewish custom. **“No! I will not sanction these vows and take a vow myself just to appease these weak-minded Christians in the church.”** Paul could’ve said that. But he didn’t. He sought unity.⁶⁴

I’ve said this before, it’s a good time to reiterate: **“In essentials unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.”** Sometimes for non-essentials we need to allow for liberty and differences of opinion. And sometimes for non-essentials, we need to lay down our liberty and our preferences for the sake of unity.

Some people want to fight over everything. They have the same energy for fighting over personal preferences and personal convictions, that they do for the deity of Christ! That’s out of whack. **Choose your battles wisely. Choose the right battles.**

Some people think, and I’ve read commentaries that state, that Paul made a mistake here. Some people think that Paul should have stood his ground and fought this battle against those who were circumventing the gospel with their Jewish practice. I personally don’t think that’s the case. But I will say this. If Paul did make a mistake here, he did it with good motives. He desired to win more people to Christ, and he desired to protect the unity of the church. **R. Kent Hughes** said about this passage, **“Paul may have erred in this situation, but if so, it was an error of judgment, not of the heart.”**⁶⁵

I’ll close with this. Several years ago I had a professor at Moody who told a story about these very religious Dutch ladies back in Holland in the early 1900s. **These elderly Dutch women had granddaughters who had immigrated to America. And they heard that these young women had started to wear makeup. And that was a huge no-no in Holland. And these pious old ladies were so troubled by this development that they started to cry. They got together and cried together. And they wept so bitterly that their tears started welling up and streaming down their cheeks. And as it passed their cheeks, it went right past the cigarettes that they were smoking in their mouths. And these tears dripped down their faces to their chins and dropped right into the beers that they were drinking together.**

Now would it be wise for a Christian in that era to avoid wearing makeup in front of those ladies in order to avoid offense? I think so. And would it be wise for Christians to avoid drinking and smoking in some settings to avoid offending someone or making another brother stumble? I think so.

And I don’t tell you that story so as to advocate for a relativistic ethic in the church. I’m not in favor of that. But it is true that different cultures develop different mores, even in the church. Anyone who has traveled abroad and been to other churches in other countries knows that. And some things are worth fight for and crying over. Other things are not. And it’s not wrong, I don’t think, to accommodate those cultures as best we can in order to protect unity and spread the gospel.

Paul gives us an example of that here. He yielded his own personal freedom and personal preference, in deference to the elders in Jerusalem, for the sake of unity.

And what happens next? What’s going to happen to Paul after he gets arrested in Jerusalem? Come back next week and I’ll tell you.

⁶⁴ Mohler, *Acts 13–28 for You*, 125: “Paul could have denied the request of the elders. However, in humility he submitted himself to the elders’ request because he highly prioritized maintaining the character of the gospel while also promoting the unity of the church. He did not want to leave an obstacle between the gospel and the Jews in the city.”

⁶⁵ Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Kindle Edition, chapter 35. Hughes adds, “We need, like Paul, to have hearts that because of a passion for souls and for God’s glory are willing to run the risk of unwise decisions. Some hearts never risk anything. They strive neither for sin nor for sainthood. They desire a temperate zone free from the storms of sin and from the tempests that accompany a life of service. Never burn for the souls of others, and you will avoid rejection. Never suggest a plan to reach the community or the world, and you will never be criticized for it. Never give counsel to someone undergoing the pain of separation or divorce, and you will never give errant advice. But just think of all the heavenly checks you will never cash for yourself or others. O Lord, give us each a heart like Paul’s!”