# Paul in Jerusalem

Acts 21:1-40

## Introduction

This narrative falls into two parts. In the first part, Paul continues on his journey to Jerusalem and says goodbye to a lot of the Christians he has previously encountered. He stops off at various places and receives warning after warning of what awaits him in Jerusalem. Despite these warnings Paul restates his intention of going there and enduring everything that is to happen because he knows that this is what he must do. ‘Bound in spirit’ he continues on his journey.

In the second part of the narrative, we see him arrive in Jerusalem, and despite his willingness to go along with all that he is asked to do so as not to cause trouble, he is still spotted by his enemies and a near riot ensues.

In Jerusalem, he encounters three sets of people and receives a different welcome with each. First, he goes to the house of a Cypriot Christian named Mnason, where he is received ‘warmly’ (v.16-17). Second, he is taken to see James and the elders where, despite their celebration of the good things God has done through Paul on his mission to the Gentiles, they are a little more cautious concerning his presence. Finally, he encounters Asian Jews, the same kind who opposed him in Ephesus, who accuse him unjustly of defiling the temple and start a riot resulting in Paul being arrested by the Romans for his own sake.

This morning, I want to pick out one issue and major on it because I believe it is much misunderstood by Christians and there was certainly much confusion about it in the Early Church, and that is our relationship to the Law (*Torah*).

## Christians and the Torah

This is the key issue in this passage and in everything that follows from here on in. In v.20, Paul is told by James that thousands of people in Jerusalem have believed and are ‘zealous for the Law’. In contrast, in 2:42, the new believers were devoted to the ‘Apostles doctrine’ – there is no mention of the Law there. However, it seems that these Jewish Christians were living in a fusion of the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. They had faith in Jesus, but were seeking to live their lives through obedience to the Torah. Even a cursory look at the writings of Paul would tell us how much he opposed such a position.

The issue with the crowds and with the Asian Jews is that they perceive he has violated the Torah by bringing Gentiles into the Temple, which he hasn’t. The issue in Galatians was the relationship between Gentile believers and the Law, such that Jewish believers were effectively telling Gentiles that they had to become Jews in order to be saved rather than rely on the grace of God which comes through faith in the completed work of Jesus Christ. This issue of the relationship between faith and the Law was the biggest issue confronting the church in those early days, and without Paul, we would all need to be circumcised (well the men anyway) in order to become Christians.

So is this just a historical issue or are there implications for us today? I believe it is still a live issue as there are still those who try to import elements of the Law into our way of living as Christians. What we need to understand is that there are principles in the Law that may be useful to guide us, but that we no longer have to live in adherence to the Law. In doing so, over many years, Christians have placed a burden on the shoulders of new believers which they were never meant to carry. So let us understand what our relationship with the Law actually is now.

The covenant with the Jewish people was established by God with Abraham. It was a covenant of grace – Abraham did nothing to deserve it, but God chose him anyway. The covenant was sealed through circumcision and, on God’s part, he promised to multiply and bless Abraham’s offspring. Ultimately, all the nations of the world would be blessed through him. Thus, the boundary marker of being in the covenant was twofold: being a descendent of Abraham, and being circumcised.

When Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt, he gave them the Law (*Torah*). This was given to help the people know how to live in obedience to God within the covenant. It was not the means of coming into the covenant as that was through genetic descent confirmed through circumcision.

The Law also came with benefits – God said, ‘if you do these things you will be blessed in the Land I am giving you’. However, the downside was that if they did not adhere to the Law, they would be removed from the Land.

In the centuries that followed, we see how they singularly failed to keep the Law and were eventually removed from the Land and taken into exile. Although they should have been the solution to the issue of human disobedience, they demonstrated that they, too, were part of the problem. However, in the midst of their disobedience, God promised that he would make a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31 & Ezekiel 36:26-27) in which the law would be written on the hearts of the people.

Effectively, by New Testament times, the people of Israel were still in exile – many had not returned, they were still under the rule of foreign conquerors, and the Lord had not returned to his Temple. As a result, they were looking for a Messiah who would bring about national salvation and make Israel great again as the people of God.

In Matthew 5:17, Jesus said he did not come to abolish the Law but to fulfil it – to bring it to completion. Everything in the Law was fulfilled in Jesus. In his life he fulfilled all the righteousness required by the Law; in his death he fulfilled and brought to an end the sacrificial system of the Law. In other words, Jesus brought the Law to its conclusion and inaugurated the New Covenant promised through Jeremiah – the new agreement between God and humanity, not based on Torah, but based on something better.

The writer to the Hebrews says, in 8:13, that the old covenant is now ‘obsolete’, and Paul says the same thing in Romans 7:6.

In the Old Covenant mindset, there were four key elements: Torah, Temple, Land and People. These four elements were central to what it meant to be Jewish and to live in the covenant. Taking these in reverse order:

We, the church, are now the people of God. Peter makes that clear in 1 Peter 2:9. We are ‘a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God’. All the epithets previously attributed to the Jewish people are now given to the church made up of both Jews and gentiles. The purposes of God are now being worked out in the world through his New Covenant people. This is one reason why our disunity is such a scandal – we are supposed to be modelling something different to the world based on the Royal Law – “love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 15).

In the new covenant, the Land is now the world. That is why Jesus sent the disciples to go out to all nations to make known the love and grace of God. Paul says in Romans 4 and Galatians 3, that the promise to Abraham to bless all nations through him was fulfilled, not through Israel, but through Jesus, the single seed of Abraham, and it is through his New Covenant people that this blessing flows.

The temple is no longer the physical building in Jerusalem but is the church of Jesus Christ. We are the temple of the living God. It is in us, not in a physical building, that the presence of God now resides. It is by coming amongst the gathered people of God that the world can encounter the presence of the living God. It is here that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is proclaimed that can make all people right with God. It is here that the blessings of God are manifested. This is why our gathering together is so important.

*Torah* is no longer on physical stones but is now written on our hearts. Paul makes it clear in Romans 7 & 8 that we won’t please God by trying to obey a load of Laws and rules. We please God by following the leading of His Spirit and doing what is right based on that. That is not to say that the written word has no value – it can help us to discern right from wrong. But obedience has to flow from the heart – a heart which is given over to God to serve him completely. We have the Holy Spirit, who was not given before, to guide us and to help us know right from wrong, and as we surrender to the guidance of the Spirit, so the fruit of the Spirit will grow in our lives and we will become more and more like Christ.

The boundary marker of being in is no longer circumcision but is baptism (Colossians 2:12) and that is open to all – Jew and Gentile, slave or free, male and female (Galatians 3:28). And through faith and baptism, we are grafted into the covenant of Abraham – we are made alive with Christ and we are inheritors of the promises through the grace and mercy of our wonderful God.

## Implications

There are a number of implications that flow out of all of this, both for Israel and for us.

Firstly Israel. Does this mean that God has given up on them? Paul makes it very clear in Romans 9-11 that, although they are outside of the New Covenant, God still has a purpose for them and will bring it about ultimately. I believe the prophecy of Zechariah 12:10 will be fulfilled. They will look on him whom they have pierced and come to national repentance.

For us, what we must not do is try and import the Law into our way of being Christians. As we said before, the old covenant is obsolete – the old way of living in obedience to rules and regulations and observing special days has been proved not to work and is no longer the way to try.

So what commandments should we now follow? Jesus left us with only two:

Matthew 12:28-34

One of the scribes, when he came forward and heard them disputing and saw how well he had answered them, asked him, “Which is the first of all the commandments?” Jesus replied, “The first is this: ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

The first command tells us that we should love God with everything we are.

To love God with our heart = to love him with our emotions

To love God with our soul = to love him in our motives and will

To love God with our mind = to set our minds on things above and allow him to transform our minds

To love God with our strength = to love him with our actions

Nothing is excluded here. Everything we are and everything we do should flow out of that primary love of God in our hearts. Our love for him is a response to his love for us. It was his love that sought us out and rescued us. It was his love that brought us into relationship with him. It was his love that dealt with all that separated us from him through the cross. It is his love that sustains us and gives us hope and a future.

If we truly appreciate all that he has done for us, we will set the love of God and a desire to serve him in response to that love as the first priority of our lives. By so doing, we will behave in a manner that pleases him.

To love one’s neighbour as oneself is to put the needs of others above our own needs – to seek to express the love of God to those we encounter day by day. When Jesus was quizzed about this, he responded with the story of the Good Samaritan. In so doing, he identified that this love was not just for friends or for people in the church, but even for our enemies. This is when it gets hard.

If we submit ourselves to these two commandments, we will please God and our values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours will line up with those of the Kingdom

Galatians 5:1 tells us, ‘For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.’ We do need to live lives of obedience but not through imposing the Law on people but through connecting them with the Holy Spirit and with the Word of God, especially the words of Jesus and the writings of Paul. Paul does give us some indicators in various places of what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate behaviour for Christians but he is keen that this is lived out in response to the grace and love of God and not to earn it. Behaviour needs to follow belief and is the confirmation that the love of God has really been encountered in the life of the believer.

## Paul & Conclusion

This brings us back to Paul. In every place he had fought against Christians being brought back under the Law, but here, back in Jerusalem, to keep the peace, Paul submitted himself to the instructions of James and the Elders and carried out some rituals of the Law. It was this very act that backfired on him and led to the riot and his arrest.

The Jewish authorities knew Paul’s history very well and knew that all he was seeking to do was a threat to the status quo and to their understanding of the covenant. It is not so surprising that this led to such a violent reaction. Where there is legalism, there is always intolerance.

I believe the lesson from Paul is that we seek to bring all people into the freedom that belongs to the people of God, instructing them in these two commandments of Jesus and in the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that are appropriate for disciples of Christ but not bringing them back into slavery to the Law.