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W. O. Vaught

Ouachita Baptist University

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THE APOSTLE PAUL TOOK A LEGALISTIC VOW IN THE TEMPLE
IN JERUSALEM

A STUDY OF THE BOOK OF ACTS
NUMBER 102
ACTS 21:26

Dr. W. O. Vaught, Jr.
Immanuel Baptist Church
Little Rock, Arkansas

ACTS 21:26 "Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself with them entered into the temple, to signify the accomplishment of the days of purification, until that an offering should be offered for every one of them."

There are three ways to get out of the will of God.

1. The geographical will of God

1 THESSALONIANS 2:13 "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe."

Here in this passage Satan is said to have hindered Paul from doing the will of God geographically.

2. The mental will of God

Here is the principle by which Satan hinders us from the mental and thinking will of God.

EPHESIANS 4:14 "That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive"

3. The operational will of God

JAMES 4:7-8 "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded."

Here is a passage which shows Satan hinders us in the operational will of God.

Paul will fall into all three of these categories in the passage we are to study.

ACTS 18:6 "And when they opposed themselves, and blasphemed, he shook his raiment, and said unto them, Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean: from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles." Here Paul had specifically stated that he was turning from the Jews and was going to minister to the Gentiles.

ACTS 22:21 "And he said unto me, Depart: for I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles." Here the Holy Spirit instructed Paul again that it was the purpose of God for him to minister to the Gentiles.

But when Paul should have been going West he was going East. So we are going to see Paul lower himself into a person of legalism and for seven days he is going to be involved in an act of legalism and for this bad blunder, God will discipline him for four years. Please remember that Paul didn't do anything immoral. This is not a moral issue at all. The sin involved here is a sin of Bible doctrine. Paul is the great apostle of grace and he is going to fall into the trap of legalism.

ACTS 21:26 "Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself with them entered into the temple, to signify the accomplishment of the days of purification, until that an offering should be offered for every one of them." We read "And Paul took". This is a very inadequate translation. The Greek word is far more than the word "take". The word is "para lambano" and it means to take financial responsibility for someone. So Paul is going to take financial responsibility for these men who will enter the temple with him and take a legalistic vow. It is a picture of born again believers out of line in a legalistic way. They will enter the temple and take a vow, and during the time this vow is binding on them, they will follow asceticism and deprive themselves of everything they can. They will eat a certain diet, drink a certain way, let their hair and beard grow and do everything they can to deprive themselves of happiness and fun. At the end of the thirty-day period they will come into the temple and pay their vow. At that time they will allow the priest to shave their

hair and beard and burn it on the altar as the priest mumbles something like, "You are a new person, you are a new person". Before we condemn these men too severely let us remember that many of our vows are about like this. We often make vows we will do certain things or we make certain dedications or decisions and actually they don't mean a thing. The thing we need to do is to learn Bible truth and apply this truth to daily living.

In the true sense of the word no young man can "surrender to preach". A man is called of God to preach and when a man enters the ministry it is not an act of man but an act of God. In reality we cannot surrender to full-time Christian service for every Christian is in full-time Christian service. So in our story here in Acts 21 Paul allows himself to get into a legalistic trap, and he is going to take a vow and also pay for the vows taken by several others.

These Pastors in Jerusalem wouldn't invite Paul to preach in their churches, but instead they said, "Paul, everybody thinks you are against the Law of Moses. You go into the temple and take a legalistic vow and you can prove that all these people are wrong". Let us remember that the whole Book of Hebrews is designed to show why believers don't need one single ritual of the temple program. No born again believer needs to go to some priest, for every born again believer is his own priest. Every believer should be divorced from religion both overtly and mentally. The temple was a fantastic temptation to these believers in Jerusalem and every time they went by the Temple they felt they had to go in and take part in some ritualistic service. Walking by that temple was as great a temptation to them as it is for an alcoholic to smell a bottle. Now what was so wrong about these born again believers going into the Temple? Just this, in that Temple they had a specialized priesthood and the day for that kind of activity was over. Christ had come, had fulfilled the Levitical offerings and from the cross onward there was no reason for anyone to offer a sacrifice on an altar. The time of this incident in the life of Paul was about 58 A.D. That means that the old dispensation of a specialized priesthood was over and the dispensation of the church had been in existence for twenty-eight years. Since Pentecost every believer was a priest and there was no need for a specialized priesthood. Everything in the Temple was just a training aid pointing to Christ, but was not to be used in direct worship. In reality, no believer belonged in that Temple. But the Jerusalem pastors were all mixed up and they were encouraging their members to go in and take vows and become involved in legalism. Jerusalem was the center of legalistic religion and even the many believers since Pentecost had done nothing to change that condition.

A Correction

Let us correct a translation here so we can properly understand this verse. The English translation says, "Purifying himself" but the Greek says Paul "received purification". The word is "Agnizo" and is a passive participle which means Paul received this purification at the hands of one of the priests in the Temple. If this verb had been in the middle voice we could translate it as we have it here, purifying himself. But this verb is in the passive voice and it means he received purification. Here is the apostle of grace, one of the greatest Christians that ever lived, but he is receiving purification rites. This is a monstrous sin. Since his conversion on the Damascus Road this is the lowest point of all his Christian life. When Jesus evaluated these legalistic Jerusalem Pharisees he called them "whitewashed tombstones" and said that they were filled with dead men's bones. So Paul is in the Temple receiving purification at their hands. It is a picture of the blind leading the blind. This is the remnant of the Levitical priesthood and it came to a screaming halt in 30 A.D. on the Day of Pentecost and forty years after Pentecost this priesthood is going to be wiped out and will remain under discipline until the Second Coming of Christ. In today's world the Jews cannot tell whether a Jew is a descendant of Aaron or not. His name may be Levi, suggesting he is a descendant from the Tribe of Levi,

or his name may be "Cohn" which means priest, but the Jew doesn't know who the rightful priests are. God eliminated them and they are out under discipline now and will be until Christ returns. The Bible speaks in sharp terms of anyone who would dare usurp the office of a priest. But in the Church Age every believer is a priest. Every believer is in full-time Christian service and every believer is an ambassador for Christ. Every Christian needs doctrine to teach him how to function. Every Christian is an ambassador, God's representative on earth. As a priest, you represent yourself before God. Now, no one on earth understood that truth better than Paul. The three men on the earth that understood that doctrine better than all others were Paul, John and Simon Peter. But under a moment of extreme emotional pressure Paul forgot his grace standing and received purification in the Jerusalem Temple. Let me repeat, it was a monstrous sin.

The translation of this sentence may be about as mixed up as any in all the New Testament. Paul entered the Temple before he did any of the other things mentioned in this verse. The main verb here is "entering the Temple" and this came first. He took responsibility for these men, sponsored them, paid their vows, and they all received purification. Now look closely at this--Paul didn't need any purifying from a priest and from that Temple. Paul had countless times needed help and guidance, and he had always gotten it by going directly to God. But Paul's zeal for those Jerusalem Jews, and his desire to get them to listen to him, temporarily blinded him and he did these strange things in order to try to get them to listen to his message. But no one can ever compromise like this and hope to gain an advantage from it.

"To signify" means to give public announcement to the content of the vow. So they got inside the Temple and said something like this--"I vow I will not cut my hair or shave my beard for thirty days, I will not eat such and such, I will refrain from pleasure, etc. and I will pay a vow amounting to such and such". Now this is about the way people made vows in those days. At the end of thirty days, Paul agreed to pay not only his vow but the vow of these others also. At the end of that thirty days, they would return, pay their vows and have their head and beard cut. The priest would place the cut hair on the altar and pronounce them clean. And they would go out renewed and ready to work for God with new vigor. The most terrible thing about all of this is that here Paul received purification from a priesthood that was out of existence, and was completely erased as the Church Age began. Now Paul had no right to do what he did. The law of expediency would not give him license to do a thing like this. Paul was living under the law of liberty.

GALATIANS 5:1 "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage." Paul had written those very words seven years before this time and now he violates what he had written. His action can't be excused under the law of expediency, for none of these laws ever violate Bible doctrine. Paul is here violating everything he ever wrote in the Book of Galatians and this is the worst sin ever committed by any believer in the New Testament. It involved mental attitude sin and for the Apostle of Grace to do a thing like this was the worst thing he could have done. If Paul had gone through the streets of Jerusalem on a thirty-day drunk, it would not have been as bad as the thing he did here. This act of Paul was a total compromise of the plan of God for born again believers.

A Careful Analysis Of This Monstrous Sin

1. This sin was a compromise with legalism.
 - "Grace" equals God doing the work, which is divine good, and man merely receives the result of what God has done.
 - "Legalism" equals man doing the work and God is supposed to receive the credit of what man has done. Under legalism man gets the credit, and under grace God gets the credit.

2. Paul had no ministry in Jerusalem because he abandoned grace. He was used in other places but not in Jerusalem. Paul was doing exactly what Hebrews 6:6 says. He was crucifying the Son of God afresh and putting him to an open shame.
3. This event happened in the year 58 A.D. Paul will be in prison two years at Caesarea and two years in Rome. For this act of legalism God will give Paul four years of discipline. While in the prison God will turn cursing into blessing and Paul will write Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon. Ephesians is the greatest doctrinal book Paul ever wrote and is a letter showing the plan of God and the grace of God. While in prison in Caesarea, Paul will witness to some very important people. He will witness to Felix and Drusilla. Drusilla was the great granddaughter of Herod the Great. Paul will also witness to Festus, one of the greatest men of the Roman Empire. He will also witness to Agrippa and Bernice. Bernice was one of the most beautiful women that ever lived and she just missed by an eyelash being empress of the Roman Empire. Titus, when he became Emperor of Rome, wanted to marry Bernice but the Roman Senate told him no. So Paul had a fabulous opportunity to witness to these great people. Indeed God turned cursing to blessing.
4. Paul had a chance to teach Jerusalem about the grace of God but he blew his opportunity completely. They will have one more chance before their destruction in 70 A.D. and that chance will come through the Epistle to the Hebrews, written in 67 A.D. This was their very last chance. Hebrews took up the slack and said what Paul should have said to them, but didn't.
5. Paul did not take a grace stand. He compromised grace.
6. Therefore, Paul did not have a grace ministry in Jerusalem. No grace stand, no grace ministry. You must not only understand grace, but you must live by grace. In the verses coming up we will see the discipline God used on Paul. Paul's life is going to be saved because the Roman Government didn't tolerate mobs and violence. In our next study we will see the legalistic vows in the Temple and we will see eventually how God saved Paul from the mob because Paul was not under the sin unto death.