
a ***Grace Notes*** course

The Acts of the Apostles

an expositional study
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Lesson 319: **Acts 21:15-26**

ACTS, Lesson 319, Acts 21:15-26

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Acts 21:15-26**Acts 21:15**

And after those days we took our carriages, and went up to Jerusalem.

After those days we took our carriages

This phrase in the King James makes it sound like the disciples had some kind of vehicles to ride in, carriages or carts. The Greek, however, actually is (**episkeusasameno**), which is an old verb meaning to furnish with necessary thing, or “to pack up”. The English word carriage did have an expanded use in that it referred also to things that are carried, such as baggage, furniture.

1 Sam. 17:22. And David left his carriage (baggage) in the hand of the keeper of the carriage, and ran into the army, and came and saluted his brethren.

The disciples got all their baggage ready and made the final leg of their journey.

Acts 21:16

There went with us also certain of the disciples of Caesarea, and brought with them Mnason of Cyprus, an old disciple, with whom we would lodge.

Some believers from Caesarea went along with Paul, Luke, and the other travelers. There’s no indication, however, that Philip himself went to Jerusalem.

Since Mnason is described as an old disciple, he might have been an early convert to Christianity; perhaps he was a disciple during the Lord’s life on earth. He is distinguished here by the fact that he offered hospitality at his home in Jerusalem to the apostles and disciples.

The NASB and NIV state that the disciples were brought to the home of Mnason, rather than that he was brought with them from Caesarea. He could have been in Caesarea, though, and they all went together to his house.

Acts 21:17

And when we arrived at Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly.

Paul and the others had been absent for several years; they had traveled to distant regions and encountered many dangers. The brethren in Jerusalem were very happy to see them return in safety.

Whatever reports may have come to Jerusalem over these years, concerning the ministry of Paul among the Gentiles, there was no sign of coldness, indifference, or resentment, only an enthusiastic reception.

Acts 21:18

And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present.

Paul met with James and the church leaders. We know Luke was with him because the first person plural pronoun “us” is still being used. However, “we” is not used again until Acts 27:1, when Paul leaves Caesarea for Rome. The account of Paul’s time in Jerusalem is so full and detailed, though, that Luke certainly got his information from sources intimate with all that happened.

Since only James is mentioned, it’s likely that all the others of the twelve were out of town on missions of their own.

Luke does not say anything about the gifts from the Gentile churches that they were bringing to the Jerusalem church; we assume that James and the elders appreciated the gifts and distributed them as needed.

Acts 21:19

And when he had saluted them, he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry.

There were three purposes for Paul’s visit at this time: (1) to deliver the monetary gift from the Gentile churches; (2) to strengthen the

bond between Jews and Gentiles by having James and the elders meet Gentile representatives; and (3) to give a report of the growth and influence of Gentile churches.

Acts 21:20,21

And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord, and said unto him, You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law:

And they are informed of you, that you teach all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs.

The church leaders were very happy to hear of all of the converts to Christianity, but they are also concerned to bring to Paul's attention a continuing problem among Jewish believers, that many, or most, of them were still closely bound to their Jewish practices, and that there was a strong group of Judaistic Christians who continued to promote their legalism.

They tell Paul that even he has been accused, during his long absence, of abandoning customary Jewish practices, such as circumcision and other practices of the law of Moses.

This is rather strange, it seems to me, because it was James who was the prime mover in sending the gracious letter to the Antioch church, in which the law, and specifically circumcision, was not required for Gentile believers.

This incident is a powerful illustration of the fact that it took a long time for the doctrines of grace to be understood by the religious Jews who became Christians.

Acts 21:22

What is it therefore? the multitude must come together: for they will hear that you have come.

Of course Paul had never told Jews not to circumcise their sons; nor had he forbidden Jews to follow practices of Jewish law. James wanted to have a demonstration showing that Paul was not opposed to Jewish practices, as such. So James arranged for Paul to participate in one of these practices, that of supporting Jewish men who had taken a vow.

What is it therefore?

That is, what is to be done? What can be done to counteract the effects of the evil report which has been circulated?

Acts 21:23,24

Therefore do this that we say to you: We have four men which have taken a vow;

Take them, and purify yourself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads: and all may know that those things, of which they were informed concerning you, are nothing; but that you also walk orderly, and keep the law.

This is prudent proposal that was put to Paul. Four men had taken a Nazarite vow, prior to the feast of Pentecost; they were not able to pay the expenses involved with fulfilling the vow. It was expensive to take this vow, but it served as an expression of a Jewish man's undivided commitment to God. The Nazarite had to offer three animals, a grain and drink offering, and a basket of bread.

Numbers 6:1-8. Again the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,

“Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘When a man or woman makes a special vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to dedicate himself to the LORD,

he shall abstain from wine and strong drink; he shall drink no vinegar, whether made from wine or strong drink, nor shall he drink any grape juice nor eat fresh or dried grapes.

‘All the days of his separation he shall not eat anything that is produced by the grape vine, from *the* seeds even to *the* skin.

'All the days of his vow of separation no razor shall pass over his head. He shall be holy until the days are fulfilled for which he separated himself to the LORD; he shall let the locks of hair on his head grow long.

'All the days of his separation to the LORD he shall not go near to a dead person.

'He shall not make himself unclean for his father or for his mother, for his brother or for his sister, when they die, because his separation to God is on his head.

'All the days of his separation he is holy to the LORD.

Numbers 6:13-18. Now this is the law of the Nazarite when the days of his separation are fulfilled, he shall bring the offering to the doorway of the tent of meeting.

He shall present his offering to the LORD: one male lamb a year old without defect for a burnt offering and one ewe-lamb a year old without defect for a sin offering and one ram without defect for a peace offering,

and a basket of unleavened cakes of fine flour mixed with oil and unleavened wafers spread with oil, along with their grain offering and their drink offering.

"Then the priest shall present *them* before the LORD and shall offer his sin offering and his burnt offering.

'He shall also offer the ram for a sacrifice of peace offerings to the LORD, together with the basket of unleavened cakes; the priest shall likewise offer its grain offering and its drink offering.

'The Nazarite shall then shave his dedicated head *of hair* at the doorway of the tent of meeting, and take the dedicated hair of his head and put *it* on the fire which is under the sacrifice of peace offerings.

James and the elders advised Paul to join in the purification rites for these four men and pay their expenses. The idea was that by paying the expenses for four Nazarites, by going to the priest with them to set the time for the

sacrifices, and by participating in the purification rites, Paul demonstrated that he was a law-abiding Jew. A discernible display of his integrity as a Jew would be much more effective than an extended explanation. He applied the old adage: "A picture is worth a thousand words." The Christian Jews would be able to see that the slanderous reports they had received about Paul were false.

Acts 21:25

As touching the Gentiles which believe, we have written and concluded that they observe no such thing, save only that they keep themselves from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication.

We have written

Here James restates emphatically that Gentile Christians have no need to follow any Jewish practices, except those few things mentioned which were suggested in the letter from Jerusalem to Antioch.

Acts 15:22-29

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 an offering could be offered for every one of them.

Regarding transactions like this he says:

1 Cor. 9:19,20. For though I am free from all *men*, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.

To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law;

It should also be made clear that whenever some legalistic practice was put forward as necessary for justification and salvation, Paul strenuously opposed it. When it was demanded

that Jewish observance be imposed on the Gentiles, he opposed that also. Otherwise, he made no opposition to it, and participated himself on some occasions, such as this one.

Nazarites

NAZARITE – from [Heb *nāzîr*—‘consecrated one,’ < *nāzar*, ‘to consecrate’; cf. also *nāḏar*—‘to vow’; Gk *nazeiraíos*, plus various words indicating “holiness” or “devotion.” The basic meaning of the different Hebrew and Greek terms is that of “one consecrated, a devotee.”

Origin and Nature

The Nazarites were an ancient order of persons consecrated to God by means of a vow. This order was the Israelite counterpart of the votive persons commonly found in ancient Near Eastern religions. Precisely when the institution originated is unknown, but when the regulations governing the Nazarites were laid down in the time of Moses (Num. 6:1–21) it seems possible that they were intended to normalize a tradition that was already of some antiquity, and bring it firmly within the life of the covenant community.

The role of Nazarite was that of a votary, a sacred person who was consecrated to divine service for a specific period of time as the result of a vow and as an expression of special commitment to God. The nature of this relationship was given formal legal expression in Numbers 6, and was distinctive in character on several counts.

A Nazarite could be one whose vow was made for him without his knowledge or approval, as with Samuel, who was offered to God in a vow made by his mother (1 S. 1:11). It is conceivable that Hannah herself was a Nazarite, since she was familiar with the general prescriptions, but the narrative does not mention her in such a capacity. Another involuntary Nazarite was Samson (Judges 13:3–5), who was proclaimed a person consecrated to God according to Nazarite tradition in an annunciation.

But the Nazarite could also enter into a relationship with God in full awareness of what would be involved. Some scholars have thought of an “early” Nazarite tradition, in which an individual such as Samson or Saul was pledged or pledged himself in a lifelong charismatic dedication, as contrasted with a “late” tradition, represented for them by the Numbers regulations, where the commitment was of a temporary nature.

The Samson narratives do not mention the prohibition about contact with corpses, and Samson had a great deal of such contact in his exploits. Those who assign an early date to the enactments in Numbers find the distinction between “early” and “late” Nazarite traditions unsupported by the text. The nature of the Nazarite vocation was consistently that of a distinctive, holy person who had dedicated himself to divine service and in return received certain spiritual endowments.

Regulations

Basic to the Nazarite’s status was the vow, which when made voluntarily was probably marked by a ceremony of dedication that included a consecrated offering (cf. Nu. 6:2, New King James Version). This marked the point of separation, which itself had two aspects, one “to the Lord,” implying a definite spiritual relationship that may not have been particularly observable in others, while the second separated the Nazarite from certain contemporary customs and attitudes. He was to abstain from the fruit of the vine in any form, a prohibition that worked some hardship in a land where clean water was scarce and fermented drinks were the normal adult beverage. Yet this regulation alone made for distinctiveness in a cultural environment where alcoholism was an extremely serious social problem, and could leave no doubt as to the status of the Nazarite. It also recaptured the stern life-style followed by the desert nomads of the wilderness period, and contrasted it forcibly with the far less rigorous sedentary life

in Canaan, with its attendant moral temptations.

Equally distinctive was the prohibition against shaving or cutting the hair during the period of the vow (Nu. 6:5). The Nazarite's life was to be analogous to that of the unpruned vine (*nāzîr*) of Lev. 25:11; the vine was deliberately left untended for the first few years of its life so that thereafter its fruit would be mature. The Nazarite's entire body, including the hair, belonged to God, and if the hair remained untrimmed it would serve as a witness against any who shaved the head in the service of pagan deities.

The priestly nature of the Nazarite's witness was indicated by regulations forbidding consumption of unclean food (Judges 13:7) and contact with a corpse (Numbers 6:6f), because of its defiling nature. Such a prohibition also applied to Aaron and his descendants (Lev. 21:1), except that they were excused when the deceased was a close relative. The Nazarite, like the high priest of Israel, was to be consecrated to God and serve as an example of a strict, obedient life of the kind demanded by the Sinai covenant. If the Nazarite became accidentally defiled by a dead person, he had to shave his hair off and make an offering to God to remove the defilement. Then if he so desired he could undertake an entirely fresh vow of consecration and separation.

When the period of a voluntary vow had ended, the Nazarite brought an offering to the door of the tabernacle and the sacrifice was performed by the priest. At that time the Nazarite's hair was shorn and burned, signifying publicly the termination of the vow (Nu. 6:13-20).

Nazarites in Scripture

In the Old Testament the only lifelong Nazarites mentioned were Samson and Samuel. Whereas the former was especially designated in this way by an angel from God (Judges 13:7), a commitment that was subsequently acknowledged by Samson himself (Judges 16:17), Samuel was nowhere mentioned in the MT as a Nazarite.

In the New Testament John the Baptist was the most outstanding example of a Nazarite, and may well have begun a fashion that other ascetic Christians emulated. While Jesus was a Nazarene (that is, from Nazareth, Mt. 2:23) He was not a Nazarite, and as such He contrasted Himself to John (Matt. 11:18f). Paul had evidently taken a Nazarite's vow which he began to terminate at Cenchrea by cutting off his hair (Acts 18:18), and which was completed formally in Jerusalem with other Christians under Nazarite vows (Acts 21:23f).

Later Developments

By the New Testament period the Nazarite tradition was probably being encouraged in some areas of Essene life. According to Eusebius (*HE* ii.23.3), James the brother of Christ seemed to belong to a Nazarite group, as did a certain Bannus, tutor of Josephus, who was probably the Buni mentioned in T.B. *Sanhedrin* 43a as a disciple of Jesus. The vow taken by the immoral Bernice, the sister-wife of Herod Agrippa II (Acts 25:13), was apparently Nazarite in character (cf. Josephus BJ ii.15.1 [313f]). Josephus also recorded that on his return from Rome Agrippa was a benefactor to some Nazarites seeking release from their vows (*Ant.* xix.6.1 [294]). In the Mishnah the burning of the hair was recognized as an offering to God (*Nazir* iv.7; this entire tractate deals with the Nazarite vow).