**Paul Meets Up with the James Gang**

(Acts 21:18-30)

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

Did you hear that one of the actors who played James Bond died rather suddenly and unexpectedly recently? His family was shaken, but not stirred.

Speaking of men named James, here in our text in Acts 21, the Apostle Paul has finally arrived in Jerusalem, and he’s about to meet up with the Apostle James and his gang of Jewish elders. Let’s begin in verse 17 to get the context.

**“And when we were come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly.**

**“And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present” (Acts 21:17,18).**

Now as you can kind of tell from reading that, James is the head of the Jewish kingdom church in Jerusalem. And that begs the question—*what happened to Peter?* Before the Lord Jesus died, rose again, and ascended into heaven, He made *Peter* the head of the 12 apostles, and the head of the Jewish kingdom church. So what’s James doing running the show here?

Well, what we’re seeing here is another example of the *breakdown* of the kingdom program in general, and the unraveling of the Jewish kingdom church in particular. After the unbelieving Jews rejected the kingdom of heaven on earth that Peter offered them back in Acts 3, the kingdom program began to break down, and eventually the Jews were no longer filled with the Holy Spirit as they were at Pentecost in Acts 2.

And because of that, they began to make decisions that they wouldn’t have made if they were *still* filled with the Spirit, and replacing Peter with James was one of them. I mean, James wasn’t even one of the 12 apostles, and suddenly he was the *head* of the 12 apostles. And you’ll notice that none of the 12 are even mentioned when Paul went in to see James. It appears that he was running the show *completely on his own,* with only the Jewish elders of the kingdom church serving with him in what was probably limited to an advisory capacity..

And all the Biblical evidence points to the thought that the only reason James was able to replace Peter was that he was the Lord’s brother in the flesh, one of the children that Mary had after the Lord was born. He probably even *looked* like the Lord.

But does that sound like a good reason to make a man the head of the Jewish kingdom church? I know that kind of thing goes on all the time among unbelievers, but it certainly shouldn’t happen among God’s people. I mean, if I were to die suddenly and unexpectedly, it wouldn’t be a good idea to make my brother the new pastor of my church. He’s a great guy, but he’d be the first to tell you that that’s no reason to make him the pastor in my place.

But God still *loved* the Jewish kingdom church, so He decided to *honor* their decision, and recognize James as their new leader. We know this to be so, for He let James pen one of the books of the Bible, The Book of James. And as a matter of fact, I think we can even prove that God saw this coming, and pictured it in the Old Testament.

You see, the name *James* is the Latin form of the Hebrew name *Jacob,* the way the English name *Peter* is *Pedro* in Spanish. And in the Old Testament, there was a guy named Jacob who was the father of the 12 tribes of Israel. In other words, he was the patriarchal *head* of the 12 tribes, just as his namesake James was the new head of the 12 apostles.

And what did Jacob’s brother say about him in Genesis 27:36?

**“...he said, Is not he *rightly* named Jacob? for he hath *supplanted* me these two times: he took away my birthright; and, behold, now he hath taken away my blessing...”**

The name Jacob means *supplanter,* and the word “supplant” means to replace someone using questionable methods! That fits Jacob to a T! He took advantage of his brother’s hunger to get his birthright, and he got his brother’s blessing by tricking their old man. But after his brother complained about it, their father said,

**“I...have blessed him...*yea,* *and he shall be blessed”* (Genesis 27:33).**

Somehow, Jacob’s father realized that even though he’d been *duped* into blessing Jacob that God still accepted that Jacob would be the head of Israel’s 12 tribes. And that’s a type, or an Old Testament picture, of how God would accept Jacob’s namesake James as the head of the 12 apostles, even though he supplanted Peter in a questionable way to become the head of the 12 by taking advantage of his physical relationship with the Lord.

You know, any old God can get His will done by using perfect, Spirit-filled men, like the 12 apostles at Pentecost. Only the God of the Bible can use men who make poor decisions to accomplish His will, like the 12—*and us!* Doesn’t it make you feel better about all the poor decisions you make in life?

But the bottom line is, you don’t have to wonder if the Book of James belongs in the Bible, just because it was written by a supplanter. God can work through failing men as easily and as effectively as He can work through the best of men.

Well, now it’s time for Paul to report in with James and tell him what he’s been up to since he became a believer:

**“And when he had saluted them, he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry” (Acts 21:19).**

Even though Paul was not a whit behind James in apostolic authority (IICor.11:5), he respectfully reported in with James, and informed him about all the churches he had established among the Gentiles, as we’ve been reading about in our study of Acts.

As you can imagine, James and all the Jewish elders were glad to hear this report, as we see as we read on:

**“And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord, and said unto him, Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law” (Acts 21:20).**

But now here, did you notice how quickly James shifted gears, and went from praising God for what *Paul* had accomplished among the Gentiles to boasting about what *he* had accomplished among the Jews? It’s almost as if he was saying, “Yeah, yeah, Paul, you did good—but look what *I* did!” I personally think that what we are seeing here is an example of what today we would call *one-upmanship.* “I’ll see you Gentiles, and raise you thousands of Jews!” It’s a *pride* thing. It’s an *ego* thing. And it’s more proof that these Jews were no longer filled with the Spirit.

I don’t even think James *wanted* to hear about what Paul was doing among the Gentiles. I know he didn’t *summon* Paul to appear before him, because of the way verse 18 is worded. Take another look at it:

**“And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present” (Acts 21:18).**

It sure looks to me like James *actually* summoned *Luke,* who wrote the Book of Acts, and Luke says *Paul* went with him and his gang in to see James. If James had summoned *Paul,* it would say that *Luke* went with *Paul,* but it doesn’t.

And listen, James knew Paul was in Jerusalem. He’d heard all about the money that Paul’s been giving those poor saints at Jerusalem, as we saw in our last study. And you’d think he would summon Paul to hear more *about* those Gentile churches that were giving his Jews all that relief money. Instead, he *snubbed* Paul and summoned Luke to report in with him, and now he’s engaging in one-upmanship.

So how can God possibly accept James as the leader of the Jewish kingdom church if he’s acting like such a petty, egotistical *bozo?* Well, I believe He can use *our* leaders today, despite the fact that *they* sometimes act like petty, egotistical bozos. Have you never heard two preachers engaging in one-upmanship? “Yeah, yeah, what you’ve been doing is nice, but come see the thousands of people in *my* church!”

I don’t know that any of our *grace* pastors and leaders are that proud, for I don’t know their hearts, of course. But I can tell you this. I’m glad God doesn’t need perfect, Spirit-filled men to accomplish His will, how about you?

Do you know how James *started* the Bible epistle he wrote? He said,

**“James, *a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,* to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting” (James 1:1).**

James describes himself as a servant of God and Christ, and God would not have let him write that *unless it was true.* Remember, he wrote that *by the inspiration of God* (IITim.3:16). That means *God* considered James His servant. And despite all your faults, failures and shortcomings, He considers *you* His servant as well.

But now, the reason James adds that his thousands of Jews were all zealous of the law is that he’s heard that *Paul* was out there telling Jews *not* to be zealous of the law! Speaking of those thousands of Jews, we read:

**“And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest 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” (Acts 21:21).**

Now what James is doing here is kind of sneaky. He’s telling Paul, *“I’m* not questioning what you are teaching, Paul. It’s all these *other* Jews! *They’re* wondering what you’ve been up to, not me! I believe in you!” But I can assure you that James had heard those things about Paul as well, and was just as curious to learn if those things were so as anyone else in Jerusalem.

But James was really putting Paul on the spot here, because *some* of what he heard was true, and some of it wasn’t. Paul was *not* out there telling Jews to “forsake” Moses or his law. He was telling Jews that Christ is the *answer* to the law! Do you remember what he told some Jews back in Acts 13:38,39?

**“...*through this Man* is preached unto you *the forgiveness of sins:* And by Him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could *not* be justified by the law of Moses”**

Now if you’re wondering why the law *needed* an answer, it’s because under the law the Jews said,

**“...*it shall be our righteousness,* if we observe to do *all* these commandments before the LORD our God, as He hath commanded us” (Deuteronomy 6:25).**

The problem with the law is that nobody can keep *“all”* of it! Shucks, we can’t even keep *10* of the law’s commandments, let alone all the other ones in the law. Jews who got *saved* under the law got saved by believing that the animals they sacrificed were the *answer* to the law. Paul was just out there giving Jews God’s *new* answer to the law, as we see in Romans 10:4, where he wrote,

**“Christ is the *end* of the law for righteousness to every one that *believeth.”***

And he meant everyone that believeth in *Christ’s* sacrifice for our sins, and *not* animal sacrifices.

So the James gang had heard that part wrong. Paul was *not* telling Jews to forsake Moses, he was telling them that Christ was the *answer* to the law. We might compare this to what we read in Hebrews 6:

**“Therefore *leaving* the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of...the doctrine of baptisms...*and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment”* (Hebrews 6:1,2).**

The writer didn’t mean that his readers should *forsake* the doctrines of resurrection and eternal judgment. He was encouraging them to leave them in the sense of how you left grammar school to enter high school. You didn’t forsake what you learned in grammar school, you built on it. And Paul didn’t tell Jews to forsake Moses, where we find the doctrines of baptisms, resurrection, and eternal judgment. He told them to let the law teach them their need of a Savior.

But after Paul told Jews to believe on Christ, he *did* tell them not to circumcise their children, and not walk after the customs of the law. He told them plainly they were not under the law but under grace (Rom. 6:14,15). So Paul was really on the spot here. How was he supposed to answer a false charge that had some truth in it? He couldn’t say yes, and he couldn’t say no.

It’s kind of like that old trick question, “Have you stopped beating your wife?” You can’t say yes, because you never *started* beating your wife. But you can’t say no either, because that would sound like you *haven’t* stopped beating your wife. You simply cannot answer a question that’s true and untrue—*and Paul couldn’t either.* I’m sure he didn’t know *what* to do. But *James* knew what *he* thought Paul should do, and wasn’t shy about telling him in the next three verses of our text:

**“What is it therefore? the multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that thou art come.**

**“Do therefore this that we say to thee: We have four men which have a vow on them;**

**“Them take, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads: and all may know that those things, whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law” (Acts 21:22-24).**

James is saying, “Just take this vow and it will prove that none of what we heard about you is true!” And the vow he’s talking about is the Nazarite vow described in Numbers 6, the one where you shaved your head to prove your zeal for God and His law. And, as James went on to say, there just so happened to be 4 men who just took that vow, and if Paul joined them, everyone would know he kept the law zealously.

But before Paul has the chance to answer, James wants to make something clear in verse 25, where he said,

**“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 strangled, and from fornication” (Acts 21:25).**

James tells Paul, as it were, “I’m not talking about the *Gentiles* you lead to the Lord, Paul. We decided back at the Jerusalem Council that *they’re* not under the law. I’m talking about the *Jews* you lead to Christ!”

You see, they hadn’t talked about *that* at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, so James doesn’t

know that James was doing nothing wrong in telling Jews they are not under the law.

But just like the guy who has to do something when asked if he stopped beating his wife, *Paul* had to do something to answer what *he’d* been charged with. And what he decided to do is found in verse 26 of our text, where Luke writes,

**“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” (Acts 21:26).**

And that “offering” there was the offering of *an animal sacrifice.* The priest would offer it “for”them, for that’s what the Bible means when it says that a Jew would offer a sacrifice. He’d give it to the priest would offer it for him. And those “charges” that we read about earlier were the charges Jews would incur to *pay* for those animals.

But the reason they *offered* those animals was *to pay for their sins!* And we now know that those sacrifices were just *types,* or symbols of the sacrifice that *Christ* made to pay for our sins. So to sacrifice an animal *today* wouldn’t be something God would want us to do, and He *certainly* didn’t want *the Apostle Paul* to offer one.

And I think God *proved* it by allowing a *riot* to break out in the next 4 verse of our text, where it says,

**“And when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews which were of Asia, when they saw him in the temple, stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him,**

**“Crying out, Men of Israel, help: This is the man, that teacheth all men every where against the people, and the law, and this place: and further brought Greeks also into the temple, and hath polluted this holy place.**

**“(For they had seen before with him in the city Trophimus an Ephesian, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.)**

**“And all the city was moved, and the people ran together: and they took Paul, and drew him out of the temple: and forthwith the doors were shut” (Acts 21:27-30).**

It sure looks to me like God allowed this riot to break out to keep Paul from offering that sacrifice.

Now here I have to add that God only did stuff like that back during the transition period from law to grace that we’ve been reading about in Acts. If *you* go to do something that God doesn’t want *you* to do, He’s not going to let a riot break out to stop you. He’s not even going to read you the riot act and threaten to kill you if you don’t behave, which is what England’s riot act *said* when it was instituted back in 1714. There has been a dispensational change since the time the transition period ended. When you’re tempted to do something wrong, you just have to remember that the Lord Jesus Christ had to *pay* for your wrongs *with His blood.* And you have to let the love He showed in dying for you make you think twice before presuming on His grace—and then think three, four, five or more times after that.

So now we have to ask why Paul wanted to *take* this vow, if he had to offer that sacrifice to do it. Surely he knew the vow required a sacrifice. The answer to that question is found in what he told the Corinthians in I Corinthians 9:20:

**“And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, *that I might gain the Jews;* to them that are under the law, as under the law, *that I might gain them that are under the law.”***

Paul was willing to take that vow to act like a Jew so he could *gain* the Jews—get them to believe on Christ. So he certainly *meant well* in taking that vow. But offering a sacrifice was just taking things a little too far, so God *stopped him* with this riot.

Now when it comes to this riot, we’ve seen how unsaved Jews were *always* giving Paul grief *throughout* the Book of Acts. But these Jews *of Asia,* who incited this riot, *really* had it in for Paul, because of what happened in Asia when

**“...*he went into the synagogue,* and spake boldly...but when divers were hardened, and believed not, *but spake evil of that way before the multitude,* he departed from them...disputing daily in the school of one Tyrannus. And this continued by the space of two years; *so that all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks”* (Acts 19:8-10).**

Paul established *a Bible school* in Asia, a Bible school that eventually reached all of Asia for Christ! And when *that* happened, *this* happened:

**“...salvation is come unto the Gentiles, *for to provoke them to jealousy”* (Romans 11:11).**

When Paul got all those Gentiles saved in Asia, it provoked those Asian *Jews* to jealousy. You see, it was *their* job to tell all Asia about Israel’s God, and when *Paul* did their job, they got jealous—and I’m talking crazy, *let’s-push-Paul-off-a-cliff* jealous. Only they were too smart to kill Paul themselves. They knew if they made some false accusations against Paul that *other* Jews would kill Paul *for* them—so they made some! Let’s read verse 28 again:

“**Crying out, Men of Israel, help: This is the man, that teacheth all men every where against the people, and the law, and this place: and further brought Greeks also into the temple, and hath polluted this holy place.”**

Now none of those things were true! All Paul ever said about “the people” of Israel is what he told the Romans when he wrote,

**“Rejoice, ye Gentiles, *with* His people” (Romans 15:10).**

That is, Paul wasn’t going around putting the people of Israel *down,* he was just lifting Gentiles *up!* And all he ever said about the law was that Christ was the answer to it, as we’ve seen. And he certainly knew better than to bring a Gentile into the temple, for Lamentations 1:8,10 says,

**“Jerusalem hath grievously sinned...*the heathen entered into her sanctuary,* whom Thou didst command that they should *not* enter into Thy congregation.”**

So there was simply no way Paul would have brought Gentiles in the temple. He had far too much respect for Jews to even think about doing that.

So why would anyone believe that he had polluted the temple by doing it? Well, what did we read in verse 29?

**“(For they had seen before with him in the city Trophimus an Ephesian, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.)”**

Now there’s some flimsy evidence! Paul had been *seen* with a Gentile, so naturally that proved that he must have brought that Gentile into the temple!

What was actually happening here is that those Asian Jews saw this as their chance to get Paul into some *real* hot water. You see, Trophimus wasn’t just *any* Gentile. Verse 29 goes out of its way to mention that he was an *Ephesian* Gentile. And what were the Ephesians famous for? Acts 19:35 says,

**“...*what man is there that knoweth not* how that the city of the Ephesians *is a worshipper of the great goddess Diana,* and of the image which fell down from Jupiter?”**

In those days, every man on the planet knew that Ephesus was the *epicenter of idolatry* in all Asia. *That’s* the kind of Gentile they charged Paul with bringing into the temple—a pagan of pagans, a heathen of heathens! And that’s why it says in the final verse of our text,

**“And all the city was moved, and the people ran together: and they took Paul, and drew him out of the temple: and forthwith the doors were shut” (Acts 21:30).**

Now here you have to wonder why they closed the temple doors. I mean, it wasn’t likely Paul would try to sneak a Gentile into the temple under their very noses. No, they were fixing to *kill* Paul, as a glance at verse 31 makes perfectly clear. And because of that, I believe they were afraid Paul would do what a guy named Adonijah did back in I Kings 1:50:

**“...Adonijah feared because of Solomon, and arose, and went, and *caught hold on the horns of the altar.”***

If you know the story there, you know that King David was dying and leaving the throne of Israel to his son Solomon. But Adonijah decided that he would make a *much* better king, so he started acting like *he* was king, figuring he could weasel his way to the throne that way. When Solomon got wind of it, Adonijah was afraid that Solomon would *kill* him, so he ran into the temple and grabbed on to the horns of the altar, thinking the king wouldn’t kill him there in God’s house, as he clung to the very altar of God.

And he figured right! Solomon spared him. And here in Acts 21, these Jews closed the temple door to keep *Paul* from running into the temple and grabbing those very same horns, to try to claim the very same mercy Adonijah got.

But did you ever hear the expression, “This door swings both ways?” In closing the temple doors *to Paul,* they were also closing those doors *to themselves.* So they weren’t just keeping *him* from the mercy of God, they were also symbolically keeping *themselves* from His mercy.

And as we’ve seen in our lessons, Acts is a book of symbols. And closing those temple doors there was a symbol of how they were pounding yet another nail the coffin of the nation Israel, pounding the coffin shut themselves by their actions. And it was just another sign that God was slowing closing *the book* on Israel—especially since there was *another* guy who ran to the horns of the altar for refuge, as we see in I Kings 2:28,29:

**“And *Joab* fled unto the tabernacle of the LORD, *and caught hold on the horns of the altar.* And it was told king Solomon....Then Solomon sent Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, saying, Go, *fall upon him.”***

And *falling* on a man in the Bible meant falling on him *with a sword, and killing him!*

So how come hanging on to the altar saved Adonijah and not Joab? The answer is that Joab had *killed* a couple of men, Little Abner and Amasa, just like *Israel* had killed a couple of men, the Lord Jesus Christ and His prophet Stephen. And God’s law had *no mercy* when it came to murder. Murderers were to surely be put to death. Israel’s only hope was the Christ whom Paul preached.

He’s *our* only hope as well. If you haven’t believed on Him, why not do so *right now,* before it’s eternally too late.