

Acts Series Part 59

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[0 : 0 0] What shall we do? How often are these words spoken by all of us, certainly thought by all of us on many, many different occasions. What shall we do? Life is full of what shall we do's.

Indeed, church life is also full of what shall we do's. At a general assembly or at a meeting of the Kirk Session or the deacon's court in the running of a Sunday school, teens fellowship, little lambs, in addressing a difficulty of one kind or another that emerges as they always do, what shall we do is the question that is often posed. There's a problem, a quandary, a situation arises. What shall we do? Well, this was the case in Jerusalem with the arrival of Paul, as we were noticing last week, compelled by the Spirit. And he arrives in Jerusalem, and immediately there arises a situation that evokes this question, what shall we do?

We notice there in verse 22 of the passage that we read, Acts chapter 21 and verse 22, what shall we do? James is speaking to Paul and in representation of the other elders, and indeed, Paul in a sense is included in this situation. And this is the question posed, what shall we do?

I want this problem, if we can call it a problem, that evokes the question, what shall we do, to serve as the focal point around which we consider the passage that we've read and the incident that is described? And there are a number of questions that we can pose revolving around this question that is addressed or that is presented, what shall we do, and the problem that lies behind it.

And the questions I want us to think about briefly this evening are, first of all, what is the problem? What is the problem that leads them to pose this question, what shall we do? And then to ask, why has this problem, having identified what the problem is, why has this problem arisen in the first place? I also want to ask the question, why is it likely that the problem will be addressed?

[2 : 3 6] Yes, it is addressed. But I just want to consider why it was that it was addressed. What were the circumstances that were favorable to it being addressed? Hopefully, when we reach the question, it will become a bit clearer. Also, what is the solution proposed? What shall we do? Well, there is an answer. There is a solution that is placed on the table, as it were, and we want to consider what that solution is. Then we want to ask the question, why does Paul go along with this proposal? The proposal involves him in doing something, as we've read and as we'll see in a moment. And we just want to ask, why is it that Paul was willing to go along with it? And indeed, was he right to do so? And then finally, ask the question, was the problem actually resolved? Well, as you can see, there's a lot of questions. So, what shall we do? Well, we'll try answering them as best we can. First of all, then, what is the problem? What is the problem that evokes this question, what shall we do, there in verse 22? Well, verses 20 and 21 present the problem for us.

When they heard this, that is Paul's report of how God was growing and blessing greatly the Gentile mission, and many were coming to faith, when James and the elders in Jerusalem, these are the Jewish believers in Jerusalem, when they heard about this, they praised God. This is clearly very genuine and spontaneous. They are genuinely delighted to hear of what God is doing. They genuinely join with Paul in rejoicing over what they hear and indeed what they see, because Paul was accompanied by Gentile believers. His companions were different Gentile believers from different places where he had been ministering, and so it's not just a verbal report. They can see with their own eyes the fruit of the Gentile mission, and so they praised God. But then they said to Paul, you see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed. So, in Jerusalem also, things were going well. Many were believing. Many were putting their trust in Jesus as the Messiah. And all of them, all of these many thousands of Jews, all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed, that is, many of these new believers, they have been informed that you, Paul, teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles, that is, the Jewish diaspora in the different places where Paul had been ministering, you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. This is the

problem. The problem is the very real possibility that Paul will not be favorably received by many of the believers. Evidently, it's not all of the believers who take this view. James and the elders have received him gladly. They themselves don't agree with this accusation that has been made.

They don't give it credence. But they're saying many of the believers do have this concern, that you are teaching Jews. And let's be very clear, the accusation is that Paul was teaching the Jews of the diaspora, that they should turn away from Moses, that they shouldn't circumcise their children, that they shouldn't take part in Jewish customs. The issue isn't here about imposing anything on Gentiles. It's about what Paul supposedly was teaching the Jews in Gentile lands. And many of the believers have been persuaded by these reports. They've been informed that this is happening. And so, the danger is that they won't receive Paul favorably. They are in disagreement with what Paul supposedly is doing, and so the danger is that they will reject Paul.

Now, this problem, unresolved, could, in a worst-case scenario, split the church in two. You could have the church in Jerusalem, under the leadership of James and the elders, largely a Jewish church, and you could have the Gentile church. Gentile Christians in the other lands, of course, Jews among them, but largely a Gentile church. And unresolved, this issue, this problem, could. It had the potential to split the church in two. And this makes it a big problem. Now, even just at this point, if we just take a step back and pause, there's something very interesting here and worth noting. Even if it is the case that the issue that James is bringing to Paul's attention was, by any reasonable measure, a minor issue. It was a minor issue in that, well, it wasn't true in the first place. It was a false report, and it concerned not a fundamental attack on the gospel.

Here, the accusation wasn't about the Gentiles being obliged to engage in Jewish practices. No, it was simply about what Jews could do, whether Jews would continue with their Jewish customs, or whether they were free to leave them to one side if they so chose. So, I think by any measure, you wouldn't say it was a huge issue, but it could become or be the cause of a big problem.

[8 : 30] And of course, that's often the case. There isn't necessarily a correlation between how big an issue is and how big the problem that can be the result of it. A very small issue can create a very big problem, just as on occasions a very big issue need not necessarily generate a very big problem.

So, this issue needed to be dealt with because it potentially would cause so much damage. It was already a problem. It could become a very much bigger problem. This is the problem that James and the elders are looking to confront and are hoping to secure the agreement of Paul to do what they are going to propose that we are going to notice in a moment. The next question that I said we should consider and answer is, why has this problem arisen? Well, in verse 21, we're told why this problem had arisen. We're told they have been informed. These believers, it's not the leadership of the church, they're persuaded that this is not true, but among the believers, and they were told many thousands, and it would appear that a significant number of them had been informed. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews to do these things, to turn their backs on Moses, to not circumcise their children, and so on and so forth. This is the principal reason for the problem, but I think there are also contributory factors. The stated reason is false information. We could say lies, lies that are being spoken, that are being spread about Paul. They have been informed. There were those within the church stirring up dissent. It begs the question, we're not given clearly the answer whether this was malicious and cynical. Was it those within the church who deliberately were misleading others? Did they know what they were saying was false, were lies, but they proceeded and continued, none regardless because of the agenda that they had? Were they deliberately fabricating these accounts that Paul was telling the Jews who lived out with Jerusalem to turn away from Moses? Was this fabrication? Well, we don't know. It might well have appeared to those who observed, perhaps a visitor to Ephesus or to Corinth, it might have appeared to them, a Jewish visitor to Ephesus, seeing what's going on in Ephesus, it might have appeared that this is indeed what Paul was doing, because they could have seen what was before them. They could have seen in Ephesus Jewish believers, and in all probability, many of them following Paul's example, not his teaching in the sense of them being obliged to, but following his example of leaving aside certain Jewish customs, they too were leaving them aside, as they were free to do so. And so, an observer would say, well, here we have Jews, they're no longer following these Jewish customs. Who is teaching them?

It's Paul. Therefore, two plus two equals five. Paul is teaching them. He's obliging them. He's telling them that they mustn't do these things. Paul was doing no such thing. But it might have appeared

as if Paul was teaching in this manner. And so, it may be that some of those who informed the new believers there in Jerusalem were not deliberately fabricating lies or untruths, but this was their impression.

They'd heard reports, perhaps from others, that this was going on, and they carelessly repeat what they have heard, causing dissension and concern and fear among the believers in Jerusalem.

[12 : 28] Now, whether they were malicious in what they were doing, or whether they were simply careless or naive, it remains the case that the accusers of Paul were still morally responsible and culpable for lying.

What they said was not true. They were lies. They chose not to verify the reports. If we're trying to be charitable and saying, well, they weren't fabricating these things, they weren't deliberately trying to undermine Paul, even if that's so, they were still guilty of lying. Because, as I say, they simply took at face value reports that they'd heard, perhaps second-hand reports. They ignored the wiser judgment of James and the elders, who evidently did not believe these accusations to be true. So, among their leaders, they could easily have sought counsel and said, well, look, this is what they're saying. What do you think, James? And James would have said, no, that's nonsense. I know that's not true. I know that Paul isn't teaching the Jews in that way. That's simply not true. But they chose to ignore wiser voices. And so, they were guilty of lying. I think there there's a practical application and a word of caution for us. Things are not always as they appear. How often we're guilty, not of deliberately lying, but we hear a report. Did you hear what's happening in such and such a church? Do you hear what such and such a minister is saying? Do you hear what they're doing there? Oh, isn't that shocking?

Isn't that terrible? And we hear the report, and it seems to be credible. The source seems to be reliable. And then we very carelessly repeat what we have heard, doing damage to the cause of Christ and being guilty of lying, telling untruths. We weren't deliberately lying, weren't deliberately fabricating anything, but we were carelessly picking up on something we'd heard, going on superficial appearances without really knowing the bottom of the matter, and guilty perhaps of what some of these men in Jerusalem were doing on this charitable reading of events. So, I say to myself and I say to you, from this, take this lesson. Think before you speak, and think very often before you accuse. Perhaps if some of those in Jerusalem had been more careful, this problem need never have arisen. So, this is the main reason why the problem has arisen. These reports that are being peddled in Jerusalem, the believers have been informed that Paul is doing such and such and such, though that was not the case.

But I think there are also, though that's the main reason, there's perhaps other contributory factors we could suggest. We don't know for sure, but I think it's reasonable to suggest other contributory factors. One factor was that this church in Jerusalem was a young church, the report of James of thousands believing. That in itself is quite a remarkable statement that James makes. Those who have studied the architecture and the archaeological finds of Jerusalem at that time calculate, and obviously this is not an exact science, but they reckon the population of Jerusalem at this time would have been perhaps between 30,000 and 60,000 people. And James is speaking of thousands coming to faith. So, you can just imagine what a significant and visible movement this must have been. Nobody in Jerusalem could have been unaware of what was going on as thousands come to faith. Such is the scale of what has been said. Some wonder whether James was perhaps guilty of some hyperbole in his account, but we have no reason to doubt the validity and the accuracy of what he says. But the point is that many of these were new believers. They weren't well grounded as yet in their faith, so they were easy prey to those who would come and make these accusations seemingly with evidence to back up what they said. I think it's also true that it is genuinely difficult to distinguish between what is of the essence of the faith and what is a matter indifferent, which is part of the problem here. You know, it would have been difficult for a new believer to say, well, is this okay or is it not okay? Is it right that Paul's teaching this, if indeed he is or not? They would have had difficulty in coming to a judgment on some of these things. But perhaps another contributory factor, and I hope not to be too harsh on James and the elders in Jerusalem, but it seems reasonable to conclude that the leadership in Jerusalem was not sufficiently vigorous in nipping this problem in the bud. And I say that because it does appear that they they wait until Paul arrives to actually do something about it. See, while Paul isn't there, in a sense, they can just ignore it. It's not such a big issue. Some of the believers think that

Paul is teaching these things. We know he's not, but well, Paul is far away. You know, we don't really need to be too concerned about it. But suddenly they hear Paul's about to arrive, and suddenly it's a crisis. Now what do we do? Because Paul's going to hear what people are saying and what many are believing and what do we do? And so they have to have a crisis meeting, as it were, and say, well, what will we do? And so they come up with the proposal that we're going to see in a moment.

[18 : 01] Now, as I say, this is maybe unfair on James and the elders, but it certainly gives the impression that they could have been more vigorous in nipping this problem in the bud before it spread, as seemingly it had done, to the point that many, many of the believers in Jerusalem had been deluded, had been deceived into thinking that Paul was doing what, in fact, he was not doing.

That too is a word of caution for us to take seriously error whenever it rears its ugly head. Maybe at the beginning it doesn't seem so dangerous. It doesn't seem such a big issue, and why offend people?

Why maybe sound harsh by saying, well, that's not right, or that isn't in accordance with God's Word? Let's just let it lie. It's not such a big deal. And then before you know it, it grows and becomes a big deal. The next question that I suggested we could pose as we think about this problem that led James and the elders there to ask this question, what shall we do? The next question is, why is it likely that the problem will be addressed? It was addressed, possibly later than it might have been, but it was addressed. There is a will to confront the problem. My question is, why was that?

Well, I think we can say at least three things that we can draw lessons from. First of all, there was a shared passion for the gospel and its advance. Paul and his companions, his Gentile companions, James and the Jewish elders that surrounded him, had this in common. They would have won mind in their passion for the gospel and its advance. We've read of how when Paul brings the report of what God was doing among the Gentiles. We read, when they heard this, they praised God. They rejoice. And no doubt, when Paul hears of the many thousands in Jerusalem who are trusting in Jesus, he too rejoiced and his Gentile companions rejoiced. They share this passion for the gospel. And because they share this passion for the gospel, they are of the opinion that nothing could be allowed to prejudice gospel advance.

And this problem had the potential to prejudice the advance of the gospel, and so it needed to be confronted. And I think it is undoubtedly true, and I think experience and history would verify this, that where in a congregation, in a church, in a denomination, there is a passion for the gospel and its advance, then there is so much more energy in dealing with any problem that could prejudice that advance. However, if there is very little passion for the gospel, if we are lukewarm in our allegiance to Jesus Christ, then we don't give the same importance to dealing with the problems that arise, to dealing with those things that could prejudice the advance of the gospel. This then contributes favorably to the problem being addressed, this shared passion for the gospel. And a second thing we can say, and it's very connected with that first, is that there is a united leadership. Paul and his companions, James and the other elders in Jerusalem, are of one mind. They are agreed. They aren't divided as to the nature of the problem. They're not divided in terms of believing or not believing these reports. They all are agreed that these reports are not true. Among the congregation, as it were, among the church at large in

[21 : 37] Jerusalem, many have believed these reports. But as a leadership, they are united and so are able to confront and address the problem. And there is, and this may be a very obvious thing to say, but evidently there is a will to tackle the problem. What shall we do? The posing of the question itself illustrates that there is this will to tackle the problem. And as I say, that seems so obvious, and yet often the problems that we can have in our congregations and ministries that we're involved in, often the problem is that we choose not to ask the question, what shall we do? We prefer to avoid the issue. We prefer to avoid the problem. We prefer to avoid the discomfort perhaps of having to tackle something awkward or uncomfortable or where there's a potential for different opinions. And so we remain silent rather than asking the question, what shall we do? And that's true, of course, not only in church.

That can be true in family. There's a problem in your home, in your family, in your marriage, but nobody says anything. Nobody is willing to say, well, look, there's a problem here. What shall we do?

What shall we do? You see, asking that question is the beginning of the solution. While the question remains unasked, the problem grows and deepens and becomes much more intractable. So clearly here, there is a will to tackle the problem. I've suggested that it's possible that James and the leaders there in Jerusalem might have tackled it earlier. I don't know that for sure. But if they were guilty of being rather slow in doing so, nonetheless, the point has been reached where they do and they are willing to tackle the problem. Which moves us on to the heart of the matter in a sense, in terms of the solution.

What is the solution proposed? Well, we have it in our passage in verse 23. We read, So do what we tell you. This is James addressing Paul. Do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites, and pay their expenses so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everybody will know that there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. What is proposed is what we might call a symbolic gesture to prove Paul's Jewish credentials, his loyalty to Jewish customs and ceremonies, and in such a way to demonstrate the fallacy of the accusations that are being leveled against him, that he is teaching the Jews to turn their backs on Moses. If Paul involves himself in a ceremony that comes from the very law of Moses, then of course that would pull the carpet from under his accusers who are saying that he was teaching in a contrary manner. It's not crystal clear what it is Paul is being asked to do. We have it before us. At one level it's fairly clear, but as you dig a little deeper to try and work out exactly what it is he's being asked to do, it's not altogether clear. But I think the following is a reasonable summary, while recognizing that there are different ways in which these verses are understood. What is clear is that four of the Jewish believers, as we've read, have taken a vow, and given the reference to the cutting of their hair, it would appear to be what was known as a Nazarite vow. We don't have time now, but if you look in Numbers chapter 6, you can find that vow described. And indeed, interestingly, in Acts chapter 18, and verse 18, Paul himself, it would seem, had taken this same vow, certainly a vow that involved the cutting of his hair. In Acts chapter 18 and verse 18, we read there, Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila.

[25 : 45] Before he sailed, he had his hair taken off at Cancrea because of a vow he had taken. So, four of the believers in Jerusalem have taken this vow. It would seem it was a vow that was taken, perhaps, as an opportunity to give thanks to God for some blessing received, or perhaps a vow that was taken at a time when a believer was looking for guidance from God in some important or difficult situation. This Nazarite vow was an option that could be taken. And four of the Jews, the Jewish believers, Jewish Christian believers had taken this vow very well. Now, Paul was to associate with them. Now, the idea seems to be not that he would also take the vow, the Nazarite vow, but that he would associate with them by paying their expenses. There were expenses associated with the vow, and very particularly with the sacrifices that were offered at the closing of the period that the vow had been taken for, when the hair that had not been cut during the duration of the vow was cut and was offered as a sacrifice, but together with other animal sacrifices. And so, the idea would seem to be that Paul would pay the expenses for this and would accompany these men in this ceremony, if you want to describe it in that way. Now, in order to associate with them, Paul himself required to purify himself ceremonially, not because of that Nazarite vow. He wasn't taking it under the Nazarite vow, but simply to associate with these men. This would have been a requirement. This at least seems a reasonable way of understanding what it is that he is being asked to do. And of course, this public gesture will allay fears and resolve the problem that has arisen. This is what is proposed. The next question is, why does Paul go along with the proposal, and was he right to do so? As we begin to explore that, or try to answer that question, we should introduce it by saying that this clearly was not Paul's idea.

Everything would suggest that it was presented to him as a fait accompli. He wasn't involved in any discussion. You know, we read, certainly, if what we have before us is the totality of the conversation, which it may not be. But if it is, then notice how it goes. What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you. There are four men. Do what we tell you. It seems quite vigorous. You know, Paul isn't consulted. They don't say, what do you think, Paul? Do you think this is a good idea? We've thought of this, but what do you think? No, they say, Paul, look, do this. Okay, do this. This is, we've decided. You know, we've thought about this. There's an issue. There's a problem. We reckon this is the way to resolve it. It's not Paul's idea. I suspect I don't know this, and all are perfectly entitled to their own opinion on this, but I suspect that

this would probably not have been the solution that Paul himself would have been proposed, would have proposed had he been asked, which it would seem he wasn't.

But let's not go down that road because time doesn't allow. The fact of the matter is that he does go along with their proposal, and the question is why. Why does he do so? We could maybe suggest the following reasons. First of all, I think there was the element of simply a respect for the leadership of the church in Jerusalem. You know, it had its leadership, James in particular.

[29 : 14] And it would seem that the other apostles, Peter and John, were no longer in Jerusalem. They were engaged in missionary activity elsewhere. So, James is very much at the head of this church in Jerusalem, surrounded, of course, by the elders that are mentioned here. And Paul is a visitor. You know, Paul hasn't been in Jerusalem for years. He is visiting the church in Jerusalem.

Yes, he's an apostle. Yes, he enjoys authority as such. Nonetheless, he is respectful of the leadership in Jerusalem. And if they think that this is the way to go, then he's willing to go along with it, out of respect for them. Secondly, we can say, and perhaps more importantly, it would appear that no doctrinal or moral principle is at stake. Let's be very clear, there is no suggestion here that Gentiles should be forced to observe Jewish customs, nothing serious like that that would attack the very heart of the gospel. No, this isn't what is being asked of Paul. Paul is simply being asked as a Jew to engage in a Jewish custom or to associate himself in this Jewish custom to dispel the rumors. And so, as I say, no doctrinal, significant doctrinal or moral principle is at stake.

And so, for the sake of unity, Paul is prepared to bend over backward in applying his stated policy that we read in 1 Corinthians 9 from verse 19. I say bend over backwards because really this policy that he enunciates there in 1 Corinthians 9 doesn't, strictly speaking, apply to this situation. I won't read again the whole passage, but there where he speaks of how to the Jew I became a Jew, that I might win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law, so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law, so as to win those not having the law. This principle, which I think does apply or is being applied in this situation, is only possible to apply at a stretch. Why? Because really this principle was about reaching unbelievers. It was about what Paul was prepared to do to bring Jewish unbelievers to faith in Jesus Christ. What Paul was prepared to do to bring Gentile unbelievers to faith in Jesus Christ. Whereas the problem here isn't about the unbelievers, it's about appeasing the believers. That's why I say that Paul is bending over backwards in applying this principle in order to accommodate the leadership in Jerusalem, in order to reach a solution that everybody wishes to be reached. But he is to be commended, I think, for that willingness, as it were, to bend over backwards. If and when, as was the case here, that didn't involve compromising a fundamental doctrinal or moral principle. The question could be asked, and we will pose it, but we won't dwell on it, but the question could be asked, and many do ask the question, was he right to go along with the proposal?

So, there is a sense in that this is not a right or wrong issue. Unlike what we were considering last week where there was a prophetic word very clearly indicating what Paul should do, he should go to Jerusalem, in this matter it would appear there wasn't a clear prophetic word giving direction as to what should be done. Hence, I say it's not really a right or wrong issue. Paul had to think on his feet and take a decision. It's possible, some would argue, and again, I leave it to you to have your own opinions on this, some would argue that this was not the wisest course. Notice that the passage we have here is descriptive, it describes what happened. Not prescriptive, it's not saying this is the way it had to be, it's Lucas saying this is what happened, this is what happened, he describes it.

If we were to go down that road, and we can't really do so in any meaningful way or in any depth of asking, well, perhaps this wasn't the wisest course, why not? Well, it seems to me a difficulty that this Nazarite vow does conclude with animal sacrifices. Now, they weren't sin offerings, and yet the very idea of animal sacrifices following Jesus Christ and His ultimate and final sacrifices is one that at the very least generates difficulties. Now, it's true that in God's providence, there was what we might call an overlap period between the worship at the temple and all that was associated with temple worship and the establishment of the New Testament church, where, as I say, there was an overlap where the believers would be involved in both. They would actively participate in temple worship and also, as faithful believers in Jesus Christ, participate in in the nascent New Testament church. Now, that time of overlap came to an end, really, with the destruction of the temple. And so, we don't, it's not right for us to be too critical of what, from our standpoint, you know, 2,000 years on, we say, well, that can't be right, surely. But nonetheless, it generates a question mark. But perhaps more importantly, and sticking to the text, Paul going along with this proposal, and the

suggestion that maybe it wasn't the wisest course does have some substance to it in that there was a very real danger that what Paul was doing might prove too much. If we quote James, what James says there in Acts chapter 20, I think it's quite interesting and quite revealing. Because there in Acts, sorry, Acts chapter 21, when James is presenting the proposal, notice what he says.

[35 : 16] There at the second half of verse 24, he's saying, Paul, if you do this, if you do what we're proposing, we're telling you to do it, but if you do it, then everybody will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. Now, here James clearly is referring not simply to the moral law, but to the ceremonial law. It's precisely an aspect of the ceremonial law that Paul was being asked to engage in. And so, I suggest that maybe Paul in doing this, the danger was that he proved too much, because Paul could have said, well, no, I'm not living under the law in the manner that James is suggesting. Again, I throw it out for your consideration.

But I think the bottom line here, it seems to me, is that Paul had to take a decision on the spot as to what he should do. There wasn't a right or a wrong answer. It wasn't a black or white issue. He did what he considered to be right, and I don't think we have reason to question certainly his integrity in so doing so.

But as we fast forward a couple of thousand years from a circumstance that seems maybe so alien to us, so complex to us, and we might say, well, what has that got to do with us? When we are presented with situations where the question is, what shall we do? Isn't it often the case for us, as Christians, as believers, that sometimes we just don't know? Sometimes it isn't absolutely clear to us what God would have us do. We seek to apply the principles of Scripture, and yet even as we do so, we're still left uncertain, unclear as to what we should do. Maybe there are a number of possibilities, and none of them necessarily are right or wrong. They're all possibilities, and we have to decide among maybe a selection what to do when things aren't clear, as perhaps was the case here.

Or perhaps what we can do is simply, I say simply but importantly, pray for wisdom to get it right, and for God's overruling providence when we perhaps often get it wrong. Finally, the final question that that it will be useful to pose an answer is, was the problem actually resolved, this problem that they're seeking to confront? Well, we're not told. There's a sense in which circumstances overtake the events. You know, we haven't read the passage as it continues with Paul's arrest, but Paul's permanence in Jerusalem was to be short-lived because he's arrested precisely as he goes to participate in this ceremony, and eventually, well, he ends up in Rome. But even though we're not explicitly told, I think we can maybe say the following. Certainly, it would have been the case that Jewish believers would have been disabused of their false impression that Paul was guilty of turning the Jewish believers out with Jerusalem and the diaspora away from Moses. They would have been witnesses to what he did.

Yes, it ended up resulting in him being arrested and all that follows, but nonetheless, they would have known that he did indeed do what James suggested he do, and so any reasonable Jewish believer would have been corrected of any false impression that they had. So, in that sense, the problem probably was resolved. And it's also true that in God's providence, his action of participating, as James suggests that he do, does afford the opportunity for the fulfilling of the prophetic words concerning his arrest that had been delivered along the way on his journey to Jerusalem, and as I've just commented, does set in motion a train of events that would take Paul to Rome, as clearly it was God's intention and will that he arrived there in due course. Drawing things to a close and concluding by posing finally again that question, what shall we do when we are faced with problems, with quandaries, with situations where we have to do something, we don't know what to do, what shall we do?

[39 : 38] Well, there may be some lessons that we can draw together and remind ourselves of as we close. First of all, let's have the courage to ask the question. The question so often needs to be posed, and often we're cowards and we choose not to pose the question, and we're, you know, that's right from the start where we're going down the wrong route. So, have the courage to ask the question. See the big picture. You know, Paul saw the big picture of gospel advance, and he said, well, if this is going to help to advance the gospel, then I'll do it. You know, that's so much more important than maybe quibbling over whether it's the wisest thing to do or whether I should be doing this or shouldn't be doing this.

The big picture helped inform Paul in his decision making. Be prepared where it is legitimate and where it is possible to compromise, to do something maybe you would prefer not to do, that you're maybe somewhat uncomfortable with, but where the compromise doesn't involve compromising the integrity of the gospel itself, then we should be prepared to compromise. Apply the principles of God's Word. And finally, act, do something, act in good conscience, and trust in God to bless what you do and the decisions that you take or we take when it concerns perhaps us as a congregation or as a group of believers in a given circumstance. Oh, may God help us then when we face in our lives, and as you face maybe even tomorrow, one of these what shall we do scenarios that God would guide and direct you. Let us pray.