

“NOW WHAT?”
Numbers 6:133-21, I Corinthians 7:17-24, Acts 21:17-26
July 21 & 22, 2025

“Sometimes the solutions we seek from God are quiet unexpected. He may tell us to do something that doesn’t make sense or that contradicts our natural reactions or responses.

“We’ve all seen movies where people get stuck in quicksand. Quicksand is, very simply, sand and water. The problem is that the water loosens up the sand so that the sand is not compact and there is nothing to stand on. Compacted sand is a surface that can support a person and give them something to move on. Once you mix that same sand with water, all of a sudden there’s no traction left. [And then a person sinks.]

But “the problem is, when a person gets stuck in quicksand, the harder they try to get out, the deeper and faster they go under. The harder they try, the worse things get because the nature of quicksand is to pull them down the more they try and move.

“Now, the person who gets stuck in quicksand who knows how to handle it doesn’t fight to stay up. What they do is slowly paddle underneath, moving an inch here and an inch there, until hopefully they can get to a solid bank.

Likewise, “the nature of some problems is that the harder you try to get out of it, the deeper you’re going to wind up in it. Sometimes the answer to a problem is not a commonly prescribed approach to it.”¹ Sometimes we need to use alternative means to accomplish a better result to the problem we face. Sometimes the rational human reaction needs to be replaced by God’s solution to that problem, and that may be way outside of our comfort zone.

Like finding yourself in a work environment that has become very difficult. The harder you try to settle the differences, the greater those differences become and the greater the friction develops. You can strive to make a difference with all your person, yet, like quicksand, the

¹ (Tony Evans, *tony Evans’ Book of Illustrations*, [Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009] pg. 239, #734)

harder you try, the deeper you get and the worse off you become. An alternate mindset, or another position might be the avenue to alleviate that problem.

But there are times in our lives that we will have no control over the situation, just like quicksand. It's at these times when everything we do fails, that we need to let God be the One who guides the whole situation and provides a surprising result.

That's where we find Paul and his companions today in our study of Acts. After three missionary journeys throughout the regions of the Northeastern Mediterranean Sea, the Apostle Paul and his traveling companions finally reach Jerusalem. They shared the Good News of Jesus Christ to both Jews and Gentiles, and many have become converted to following Jesus Christ.

So when word reached Paul that Judea was in a severe famine, and that many of the Christians in Jerusalem were severely impacted, he implored the new Christians to help out. The new Christian believers throughout Asia and Macedonia collected an offering for the support of the Christians in Jerusalem. The new Christian Churches that had been established under Paul and other evangelist workers decided to help their brothers and sisters in Christ and gave sacrificially in order to support them.

As Paul and the others returned to Judea, they brought this offering to Jerusalem to share it with those suffering in the famine. And the Christians in Jerusalem rejoiced in the great working of the Holy Spirit that filled the hearts and lives of men and women all over Asia and Macedonia, for the sake of the Christian Church in Jesus Christ. But listen to what takes place. This is Acts 21:17-26. (READ Acts 21:17-26)

The meeting with James and the other elders of the Christian Church in Jerusalem initially brings great joy to everyone. As the accounts of God's work in all of the cities and regions that Paul and his co-workers had reached were told to the leaders of the Jerusalem

Church, it brought great rejoicing, for it told how the Gospel of Jesus Christ was expanding all over the known world. Everyone was able to hear the effects of Paul's teaching and preaching.

But "the solidarity between Jewish and Gentile churches was once again threatened. On a previous occasion (chapter 15 of Acts), the question had been how far, and under what conditions, Gentiles could be admitted to the church without at the same time becoming full Jewish proselytes. But this had been settled by a decree (which was mentioned again here). The new cause of dissension was the question of the proper conduct of Jews who had become Christians. How far was it right for them to abandon the strict Jewish way of life in order to live in close community with their Gentile fellow-Christians? How far was the full observance of the Jewish Law binding upon them, now that they had come to place their confidence, no longer in the old Jewish observances, but in Christ? We know for certain that Paul was deeply involved in this question: he grappled with it as a matter of principle in the Letters to the Romans and Galatians; and there had been a serious dispute about the practical implication of it in Antioch (Galatians 2:11-14 and Acts 15:1-29). In its crudest form, the objection of strict Jewish Christians against him could well have been expressed in these words: "*you teach all the Jews in the Gentile world to turn their backs on Moses*".²

In this council meeting, however, there was no confrontation as in the earlier council meeting when Paul had come from Antioch after his first missionary journey. But there was concern about the Jews from Asia claiming that he taught "*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*" (Acts 21:21). They were spreading lies, the likes of quicksand, which had begun to drag the success of Paul's journeys into the miry sand and muck of doubt and disbelief.

² (A.E. Harvey, *Companion to the New Testament*, [Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1979] pg. 483-484)

So rather than celebrating the thousands of Jews who had become believers in Jesus, and the many more thousands of Gentiles that were finding Salvation in Christ, the concern was about how Paul would be received back in Jerusalem because of the accusation that he taught the Jews to abandon their ancient traditions. Though the issue had already been settled for the Gentiles, to “*abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality*” (Acts 15:29 and 21:25), the concern now came about what Paul was teaching the Jewish Christians. Paul addressed that in his letter to the Corinthians that we heard today in I Cor. 7:17-24.

It wasn't the rite of circumcision that changed the hearts of men and made them fitted for heaven - Jesus did that. It wasn't observing the Laws of Moses that brought Salvation - belief in and obedience to Jesus accomplished that. The Laws of Moses were there to guide the hearts and lives of the people, whether Jews or Gentiles. But it was through the death and resurrection of Jesus that brought the Salvation of the Lord to all people who confessed Him as Savior and Lord. The Laws of Moses were the foundation of the faith, but strict obedience to them was no longer what brought a person into the presence of the Lord God Almighty. Trust in Jesus as our Messiah and Savior now became the focus point of the faith. People were now saved by grace.

So there was a major shift-of-focus in Paul's teachings with regards to the Laws of Moses. God had fulfilled His promises of a Messiah who would save His people from their sins - that was in Jesus Christ. So the rites of offering sacrifices to the Lord God Almighty for forgiveness of sins were no longer needed, since Jesus had accomplished the ultimate Salvation on the cross at Calvary. And with His resurrection from the dead, Jesus provided the hope of eternal life with Him as we put our trust and faith in Him as our Savior. Paul was by no means negating the Laws of Moses, but since God supplied the long awaited Messiah, changes were

necessary to fulfill the Law and bring righteousness through the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The presence of the Messiah completed everything the Law once held as necessary for Salvation. But the Jews who were zealous for the Law were not to be so quickly convinced. They only saw it as Paul teaching that their traditional laws had no more relevance.

So instead of taking the next step and finding all of the Laws fulfilled in Jesus, they remained confined by those Laws and rejected the leap of faith essential to see the Salvation only through the Messiah. Being young Christians, or Rebellious Jews who refused to receive Jesus as the Messiah, they did not understand the basics of what Jesus had done to bring about a new covenant with all the people.

So the plan that the Elders of the Jerusalem Christian Church came up with was for Paul and four other men, who had made the vows of a Nazarite, to undergo the purification rites fulfilling those vows according to the Laws of Moses. That would certainly demonstrate that Paul was not against the Laws of Moses, but was obliged to fulfill them, too. And Paul was to pay their expenses for the sacrifices that were involved, completing their ritual with having their heads shaved as a sign of their completing their vows.

Our Old Testament lesson of Numbers 6:13-21 gives us a look at the sacrifices needed to complete the purification rites for those making the vows of the Nazarite - *“a year-old male lamb without defect for a burnt offering, a year-old ewe lamb without defect for a sin offering, a ram without defect for a fellowship offering, together with their grain offerings and drink offerings and a basket of bread made with the finest flour and without yeast - thick loaves with olive oil mixed in, and thin loaves brushed with olive oil”* (Num. 6:14-15).

Having presented these offerings to the priests, each man was to have their hair shaved off and that hair was put into the fire under the fellowship offerings, burned as a sign of their

fulfillment of their vow. Having completed the offerings of the sacrifices, the Nazarite could then drink wine and participate in the fruit of the vine once again.

James and the other elders of the Christian Church thought by fulfilling these purification rites according to the Law of Moses, the Jewish Christians would see that Paul was still abiding by the ancient laws given to the people. However, all of this demonstration of faithfulness to the Laws of Moses was quickly demolished at the accusation of some Jews from Asia. We'll address that next week.

But Paul had conceded to the plan and had made arrangements for the four other men and himself to undergo these purification rites and sacrifices. And I'm pretty sure that it would have come into Paul's mind, "What more do I need to do to prove my faithfulness to the Lord God Almighty?"

He had been raised in a Jewish family, had become a Pharisee under the tutelage of Gamaliel, was zealous for the faith, had even persecuted the followers of Jesus at one time, and had been given permission by the high priest and the Council of the Sanhedrin to go to Damascus to begin working to eliminate those who were followers of Jesus. But then, He had an encounter with Jesus, Himself, and was converted to understand the fulfillment of the Scriptures by the Messiah whom God sent, His only Begotten Son, Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 22:3-21). That is what he had been preaching to all the Jews and Gentiles throughout Asia and Macedonia and Phrygia and Galatia. His message was the fulfillment of God's promises of a Messiah through Jesus. What more did he need to do?

Well, it seemed that the harder he tried to convince the Jews, the deeper he sank into struggles and trials with them because of their hard hearts and unwillingness to perceive and believe in Jesus as the long prophesied Messiah. He had done everything he could think of to get

them out of the quicksand of disbelief, but the harder he tried, the deeper they sank, and the deeper he got into the troubles between the Jewish and Gentile Christians.

That had been the reason why he had followed God's guidance to go to the Gentiles in the first place. But his love for his own people was still deeply ingrained within him, and he wanted to help all of the Jews come to understand what God had done through Jesus so that they could find Salvation for their sins and eternal life for their souls through Him. What more did he have to do to get their attention and help them to follow Jesus? They weren't listening to him anymore, but were insistent upon rejecting Jesus as the Savior of the world. They were so set upon the letter of the Law that they failed to see how God had satisfied every word of His Law.

So that was the time for Paul to stop flailing around, working desperately to try to win his fellow Jews to Jesus, and to simply follow God's guidance. So He submitted to the request of the Elders of the Jerusalem Church and began the purification rituals.

This is relevant in our own world today, because we can quickly find ourselves in a similar situation, working our hardest to bring life to others through the grace of God in Jesus, but finding ourselves stuck in the quicksand of disbelief and disobedience.

In our world today, things have been shifted around, such that those of us who are striving to keep the Commands and teachings of Jesus are now called "haters" and "dividers" because we will not concede to the new movement of love and acceptance of any other kind of thinking. We're finding ourselves in similar situations of Paul, being accused of manipulating the Scriptures to exclude the desires and preferences of others who have deviated from faith in Jesus Christ.

We who strive to help others find the Salvation of Jesus Christ through His death on the cross and His resurrection from the dead so that they might find real life as they profess Him as

their Savior and Lord, are finding ourselves accused of preventing folks from being true “children of God,” as they take up ideologies and theologies contrary to God’s Word as being the real truth of God’s grace and love in Jesus. And then, the more we insist upon adhering to the Scriptures as being the true source of God’s will for our lives, we quickly become stuck in the quicksand of foolishness and lies. And sometimes the harder we work to free ourselves from the muck of our society, the more we are overcome by it.

So WHAT NOW? What more do we have to do to help folks come to believe in Jesus as the Savior, and to have them follow His teachings as they are found in the Scriptures?

Like Paul, we must present ourselves before the Lord Jesus and purify our own hearts and lives so that we might be found faithful in all that we do. We must follow the words of Isaiah, *“seek the LORD while He may be found; call on Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the LORD, and He will have mercy on them, and to our God, for He will freely pardon”* (Isaiah 55:6-7).

As we come before the Lord and become pleasing in His sight by our faith in Jesus Christ, others will notice it. Surely some will accuse us of even more garbage, but as we strive to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, He will let us shine out like the sun into our dark and dangerous world. Stop fighting the world on your own terms, and follow the guidance of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit so that you might be found righteous and holy before the Lord.

Let’s pray. Father, thank You for Your Son Jesus, and Your servant Paul who help us to see that it is not through ourselves that we bring life, but through You. Help us to confidently keep our eyes and hearts focused on You so that we might be found faithful in all we do and say. When the quicksand of this world surrounds us and strives to take us down to death, give us the courage to give our all to Jesus, who will lead us to eternal life. Let the world do what it wants to us, but help us to always be found faithful to You and Your word, so that we may always be Your ambassadors for Christ Jesus our Lord. In His Name we pray. Amen.