

The Spirit's Leading to Jerusalem

Acts 21:1–16

Studies in Acts #26

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We hear a lot today from professing Christians about their being “led by the Spirit” or “feeling led” to do something. Usually it’s something the person wanted in the first place. How many do you know who felt led to go somewhere to be persecuted, arrested, imprisoned, and eventually martyred?

Probably not many!

That’s what we have here. After three momentous missionary journeys, Paul now endeavors to go to Jerusalem. And this will lead him to Roman, in chains. That’s the geographic focus of chapters 21–28. Theologically speaking, we see the life of Paul patterned after the life of Jesus, as he is conformed to Jesus literally by suffering and dying like Jesus (Phil. 3). Tonight, though, I want you to focus in on the theme of the leading of the Holy Spirit in Paul’s journey to Jerusalem.

Led in Travel

First, we see him *led in travel*. Again we are confronted with a text that seems like a perfunctory list of cities: “We traveled from there, then over there, and finally came to here.” He goes from Ephesus to the island of **Cos**, to the island of **Rhodes**, and to the coast of Asia Minor at **Patara** (v. 1). Then he finds another ship **crossing to Phoenicia** (v. 2) that takes him past **Cyprus**, **leaving it on the left**, and then on to the port of **Tyre** (v. 3). After **seven days** (v. 4) he and his companions **went on board** another **ship** (v. 6)

that took them to **Ptolemais** and after another day (v. 7) **Caesarea** (v. 8) and finally to Jerusalem by land (v. 15).

This is a testimony, though, to the leading of the Holy Spirit in Paul's travel. Remember back in chapter 16 when the Holy Spirit forbade Paul to preach where Paul wanted to preach but instead led him to where he needed to preach? That's what we have here. In fact, later in chapter 27 Paul is on a ship to Rome and it is caught in a major storm. If you look at 27:15 Luke says they "were driven along" by the wind. What's so interesting is that in 2 Peter 1:21 this same verb is used of the Spirit-driven writers of the Scriptures. Peter and Luke use the same verb to describe the wind and the Holy Spirit carrying along the pens of apostles and a ship. The Holy Spirit is leading his travels.

One application of this for us is to try and recognize the leading of the Holy Spirit in our day to day affairs. I'm not saying that he leads us to sin—absolutely not!—but that we need to recognize his providential hand in where we are in life and respond in glorifying his name for it.

Led by Prophecy (vv. 4, 10–14 cf. 20:22–24)

We also see here the Holy Spirit as Paul is *led by prophecy*. Go back to 19:21 and see that "Paul *resolved* in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem." Then in 20:22–23 in his farewell to the Ephesian elders he said, "behold, I am going to Jerusalem, *constrained* by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me." Paul resolved by the Spirit and was constrained by the Spirit onto Jerusalem.

But here's where there's a big problem in our text. When Paul reached Tyre we read that **through the Spirit** [the disciples] **were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem** (v. 4). Some say the Holy Spirit contradicted himself. Other say these disciples just claiming prophetic inspiration. And then things get even more complicated when at Caesarea Paul stayed at **the house of Philip the evangelist**, who had **four unmarried daughters, who prophesied** (v. 9). What did they prophesy? We're not told. But we are told what Agabus prophesied: **And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, "This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles"** (v. 11).

So what's going on? What we can do here is make a distinction between prediction and prohibition. Paul heard the Holy Spirit's call to go to Jerusalem and he must have shared it with those in Tyre just like he did with those in Ephesus. But the disciples knew what that meant and so on the basis of the Holy Spirit's prophecy they tried to prohibit him from going. And so in comes Agabus to make clear to everyone what was the actual word of the Holy Spirit: **"Thus says the Holy Spirit"** (v. 11). He infallibly prophesied but the disciples were making a fallible application. And note that if Paul would have sided with the disciples, the Holy Spirit really would have contradicted himself and Agabus wouldn't be a prophet at all! The disciples did not want him to go because they knew he'd die. And so they **urged him not to go up to Jerusalem** (v. 12) but Paul responded: **"What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus"** (v. 13).

And note the conclusion of those trying to persuade him: **And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, “Let the will of the Lord be done”** (v. 14). We learn a lesson here that not only doesn't the Holy Spirit contradict himself but that sometime his leading is to a place that is painful. He's not always leading to where the grass is greener.

Led to Disciples (vv. 4, 7, 8, 16)

Finally, Paul is *led to disciples* in the various places he is led. After landing in Tyre they **sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days** (v. 4). **And when leaving** they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed and said farewell to one another (vv. 5–6). In **Ptolemais...we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day** (v. 7). In **Caesarea...we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him** (v. 8). In Jerusalem they stayed at **the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple** (v. 16).

We here a lot about the leading of the Holy Spirit today, but isn't a lot of it so self-centered on “what I need” and “what's good for my life?” But note the close connection between the Spirit's leading of Paul and fellowship with other brothers and sisters. We need each other. This was illustrated recently in an unexpected way. After one of our Sunday evening bonfires, Danny Miranda and I were putting out the fire. The first thing he did was to separate out all the pieces in the fire, because apart from each other they would die out. But together they would stay warm. We need each other, brothers and sisters. And God has led each and every one of us together here, for this time. Amen.