

“DOING THE WILL OF GOD” (Acts 21:1-40)

From this chapter onwards, Paul is presented by Luke in a different role from before in Acts - a prisoner of the Lord. His ministry is not over, but it will have a new dimension. We all need to be prepared for God to Sovereignly decide this in our own lives and embrace it. The chapter concludes his third missionary journey and can be outlined as follows:

- From Miletus to Tyre - verses 1-6
- From Tyre to Caesarea - verses 7-14
- From Caesarea to Jerusalem - verses 15 - 40

Paul will stop off for a short time on this journey to Jerusalem at different points. He will make use of every opportunity to preach and encourage any saint he meets on this trip. The Holy Spirit devotes almost 6 chapters to the account of Paul's last visit to Jerusalem.



And it came to pass, that after we were gotten from them, and had launched, we came with a straight course unto Coos, and the day following unto Rhodes, and from thence unto Patara: And finding a ship sailing over unto Phenicia, we went aboard, and set forth. Now when we had discovered Cyprus, we left it on the left hand, and sailed into Syria, and landed at Tyre: for there the ship was to unlade her burden. And finding disciples, we tarried there seven days: who said to Paul through the Spirit, that he should not go up to Jerusalem. (v1-4)

The Apostle Paul is presented here with a passion to get to Jerusalem to honour the Lord there. This doesn't mean that he feels nothing for those he has to say farewell to on his way. Leaving his beloved members at Ephesus was especially hard for him. For the idea in the Greek of “we were gotten from them” is “tearing ourselves away from them” indicates the depth of the love they had for one another.

This declaration at Tyre, “*And finding disciples, we tarried there seven days: who said to Paul through the Spirit, that he should not go up to Jerusalem*” was probably the Holy Spirit speaking through them in a prophetic warning to test or demonstrate Paul's obedience and faith in

pressing on anyway. In Acts 16:6-7, Paul had obeyed the command of the Spirit not to go into Asia and Bithynia so there was no indication here he disobeyed. It is hard to imagine he was acting in the flesh, when the Bible records the mistakes of the choicest of God's men.

Paul had known previously that he was going to lay his life down as he told the Ephesian elders “*they should see his face no more.*” God's servants believe the cause of Christ was worth dying for as Paul told them, “*the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me*” but “*none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy.*” He also mentioned in Acts 23:1, “*I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.*” Paul's conviction was that he must finish his required course for the Lord, despite the consequences.



And when we had accomplished those days, we departed and went our way; and they all brought us on our way, with wives and children, till we were out of the city: and we kneeled down on the shore, and prayed. And when we had taken our leave one of another, we took ship; and they returned home again. (v5-6)

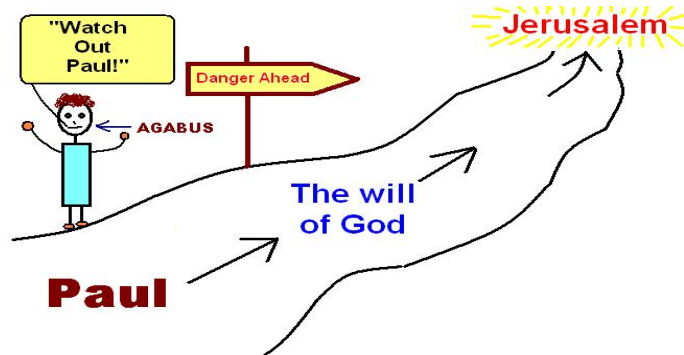
It is clear the deep bonds of affection Paul had for these churches was reciprocated. These people went with him as far as they could to the sea shore.

And when we had finished our course from Tyre, we came to Ptolemais, and saluted the brethren, and abode with them one day. And the next day we that were of Paul's company departed, and came unto Caesarea: and we entered into the house of Philip the evangelist, which was one of the seven; and abode with him. And the same man had four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy. And as we tarried there many days, there came down from Judaea a certain prophet, named Agabus. And when he was come unto us, he took Paul's girdle, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles. And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem. (v7-12)

The next church they spent time with was the church at Ptolemais. After a short visit there of 24 hours, they headed to another church at Caesarea. They likely met in the home of Philip the evangelist. Caesarea was a significant city of 20-30,000 people with a strong Roman and Greek

influence. Philip had disappeared from the Bible for 20 years, but he was clearly still serving the Lord. He evangelised his home for he had four godly daughters, who God honoured by ordaining them as prophetesses. One writer noted,

“We can see his four daughters working early and late in order to grind the corn, bake the bread, carry the water and have all the work about the house done so that they might listen to Paul as he told of what God had wrought through his ministry in Asia and Macedonia and Achaia. They were prophetesses themselves and they would treasure Paul’s messages and repeat them often when they went out to teach and speak for their Master in and about Caesarea, or when they went on missionary journeys with their father and helped him in his evangelistic work. Paul’s faithfulness and courage would encourage them and his clear messages would enable them to expound the Scripture more clearly when they taught others of Christ and Him crucified. They too, knew how their father had fled from Paul some twenty years before. Some of them must have been little girls at that time, and the occasion would stand out most vividly in their minds, so impressionable at that age, when every one of the Christians feared, hid from and trembled at the very name of Saul of Tarsus. But there is no hint of retaliation now. They honored and loved the great apostle and, prophetesses that they were, no doubt agreed with Agabus and entreated Paul not to go to Jerusalem where they knew he was to be bound and delivered to the Romans.”



The early church had prophets like Agabus who could foretell the future. Indeed, Agabus, correctly prophesied the great famine in Acts 11:28. Women may also have had this power or this incident may be referring to their teaching ministry to women and children. Like the apostles, the prophets’ ministry was foundational and once the Church moved from its kindergarten phase with the epoch of signs and wonders, they ceased to be present. The Apostles’ revelation was mainly doctrinal whereas the Prophets had more of a practical kind of revelation.

We read of one such practical revelation, “*And when he was come unto us, he took Paul’s girdle, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the bands of the Gentiles.*” This type of acting out in

an emblematic manner of prophesied events was nothing new (cf. 1 Kings 11; Jer. 13:4; Isa. 20:3). This was a true prophecy because it came true. However, they were not binding Paul not to go with an express prohibition from God. It must be carefully noted that Agabus does not say, “It is against God’s will for you to go,” but rather “If you go, this is what will happen to you.”

Then Paul answered, What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done. And after those days we took up our carriages, and went up to Jerusalem. There went with us also certain of the disciples of Caesarea, and brought with them one Mnason of Cyprus, an old disciple, with whom we should lodge. (v13-16)

Paul was not a dry stick, but he rejects their entreaties from a full heart, *Then Paul answered, What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart?* Despite the tears and pleas, Paul will not be moved from following the Lord’s leading, “*The will of the Lord be done.*” This is the key to this debate over Paul’s action. Like Daniel in continuing to pray knowing the law had been passed forbidding him to do so, Paul would not be diverted from doing the will of God for his life. Paul counted the cost but still went on because he was willing to pay the price. We must never allow the strong emotions of others and even ourselves to dissuade us from the will of God.

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. And when he had saluted them, he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry. (v17-19)

The last time Paul stood before these men was in Acts 15:12. He follows biblical accountability through the church. There are no apostles present mentioned to report to as the transition to churches ruled by elders had already begun. Paul is very careful to make it clear that this work was all of God (cf. Acts 14:27; 15:12).

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: 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. 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. 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. (v20-25)

These Jewish believers did at least give glory to God in their response. These likely included some of the Judaizers that spread this misinformation about Paul. The Church at least asked him privately first. The word here for “*forsake*” means to apostatize from the Law of Moses. This was a lie of the devil as Paul had Timothy circumcised in Acts 16:2-3, travelled to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, and seemingly took a Nazarite vow in chapter 18. Indeed, in Galatians

5:11 they accuse him of teaching circumcision but here they accuse him of not teaching circumcision.

They wanted him to do something tangibly Jewish to assuage the fears of the thousands of Jewish believers who had heard the rumours that he was teaching apostasy. This was a wise move by the Church leaders and Paul responded in kind. There words also show they understood the previous edict in Acts 15 as true and balanced.

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. 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. (v26-30)

We need to see Paul acting in a Romans 14 situation here (he had taken a vow before the Lord so this was not his conviction). He did this for the sake of the immature brethren. Paul, as an apostle, shows great respect for the authority of the church elders here and the need to preserve the unity of the church whenever possible. He truly loved the Church of Jews and Gentiles and sought as he said, “For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more” (1Cor. 9:19). In no way did he violate his conscience but from a deep burden for the conversion of the Jews (Rom. 9:1-3).

A group of unbelieving Jews recognised Saul of Tarsus that day in the temple. They especially had cause to hate Paul for the work he had done in Asia Minor for the gospel. Some may even have been part of the crowd that cried against Jesus Christ, “crucify Him.” This spread another lie against Paul, “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.” Ironically, his desire for unity with his fellow Jewish brethren led to the false charge that he was trying to divide his people. You can do the right thing and suffer seemingly a wrong result!

And as they went about to kill him, tidings came unto the chief captain of the band, that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. Who immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down unto them: and when they saw the chief captain and the soldiers, they left beating of Paul. Then the chief captain came near, and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and demanded who he was, and what he had done. And some cried one thing, some another, among the multitude: and when he could not know the certainty for the tumult, he commanded him to be carried into the castle. And when he came upon the stairs, so it was, that he was borne of the soldiers for the violence of the people. For the multitude of the people followed after, crying, Away with him. (v31-36)

Paul had been warned that he would be beaten and went up under the orders of James and the church elders. But they do not appear to have stood by him despite claiming to have “thousands” of believers among Judaism. We must ask the question: Where is James and these ultra Judaizers now? Where are the all-night prayer meetings for Paul?

The Apostle Paul has been caught in the web of providence now. God overruled the wrath of man to his own glory. For it should be noted that although Paul lost his liberty, he was

delivered from the mob and was able to preach to a vast crowd of unconverted Jews. Later he was able to preach Christ to governors and rulers, and then he got an all-expenses paid trip to Rome where he was able to witness to many in Caesar’s household, and finally he was able to spend the time writing his prison epistles. God used Paul’s enemies to help to carry out both his plans and the plan of God (Rom. 8:28).

There was a Roman garrison situated near the temple in case of a riot. They would providentially be on high alert at the sensitive time of the Passover. Providence used them to save the life of Paul from the mob. For these people who came to supposedly worship God were now intent on murder. Paul is truly experiencing the life of Christ in this incident. Doubtless, it gave him a deeper appreciation of the sufferings of Jesus and in his subsequent prison epistles, where he yearned to know Christ’s sufferings more.



PAUL IS BOUND BY THE ROMAN SOLDIERS.

And as Paul was to be led into the castle, he said unto the chief captain, May I speak unto thee? Who said, Canst thou speak Greek? Art not thou that Egyptian, which before these days madest an uproar, and leddest out into the wilderness four thousand men that were murderers? But Paul said, I am a man which am a Jew of Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city: and, I beseech thee, suffer me to speak unto the people. And when he had given him licence, Paul stood on the stairs, and beckoned with the hand unto the people. And when there was made a great silence, he spake unto them in the Hebrew tongue, saying, (v37-40)

Paul had a lot of bad reputations. His own brethren accused him falsely, then the Jews, and now the Romans said he was an insurrectionist. But God was working through this incident for good.