

Acts 21:1-16 ~ Teacher's Lesson Struggling With God's Will

Review: In 1881, Oscar Wilde wrote a poem called "Serenade" (it was later popularized in a song called "Lady Come Down" in the movie, *The Importance of Being Earnest*: "The western wind is blowing fair Across the dark Aegean sea, And at the secret marble stair My Tyrian galley waits for thee . . ." ¹ Today's passage touches on both the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean city of Tyre. In our last lesson, we read where Paul stopped at the city of Miletus for a meeting with the Ephesian elders (20:15-17). That conference marked the end of his third missionary journey. He then continued on his way to Jerusalem to take relief money to the church there (24:17). He sailed the Aegean Sea, southward along the western coast of modern Turkey (then known as Asia), and then out into the Mediterranean Ocean. Traveling with Paul were Luke and presumably also the nine men listed in 20:4 (see the "we" in 21:1).²

Introduction: Today's passage offers insight in determining God's will, as Paul got conflicting messages about what God wanted Him to do.

Navigation (21:1-3): *Read, stopping to explain the information below as it is read. (In advance, write the names of the places on the board).* Leaving the Aegean Sea, Paul's ship went out into the Mediterranean Ocean.

- They went first to the island of **Cos** (modern Kos), off Turkey's SW coast (owned today by Greece).
 - The next day they arrived at the island of **Rhodes** (also owed by Greece today).
 - From there they went to a seaport called **Patara** on the Turkish coast (birthplace 200 years later of a church leader named Nicholas who was persecuted by Diocletian, participated in the Nicene Council, and from whom the tradition of Saint Nick or Santa Claus eventually evolved. The city later was abandoned during the many wars between the Byzantines and the invading Muslims, and still lies in ruins today).
 - From Patara they sailed past the island of **Cyprus** (today a sovereign nation) and finally stopped at the city of **Tyre** in what was then **Phoenicia**, which in turn was part of Syria (but in Lebanon today).
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******When Paul got to the city of Tyre, what message did the disciples have for him (21:4-6)?** They told him not to go to Jerusalem, 21:4. Earlier, Paul told the Ephesian elders that in every city the Holy Spirit told him (through the local prophets?) that prison and affliction awaited him there, 20:22-24.

Read: 20:22-24.

¹ A "Tyrian galley" is a low, flat ship with a sail and rows of oars from city of Tyre.

² Kistemaker, 744.

1. Everywhere Paul went, he got the message that bad things awaited him in Jerusalem, Acts 20: 22-24. Since it was “through the Spirit” that they told Paul not to go to Jerusalem (21:4), was he disobedient in going anyway? Explain See 1 Corinthians 14:29, 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21. First, it should be noted that no prophecy is to be accepted without question. Every prophecy must be judged:

ESV 1 Corinthians 14:29 Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.

ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21 Do not despise prophecies, but test everything . . .

Despite the fact that they were “constrained by the Spirit” to warn Paul not to go, Paul evidently judged at least part of their prophecy to be wrong. Paul agreed that bad things awaited him in Jerusalem. However, Paul must have concluded that the prophets wrongly applied the revelation to mean he should not go to Jerusalem. Paul felt strongly that the Lord would have him go anyway (20:22-24); he said he was “constrained by the Spirit” to go there (20:22).

Wise Counsel: One way to help decide God’s will for you is to seek the wise counsel of other believers. In this case, a clear message came from the church in Tyre to Paul: Don’t go to Jerusalem. Paul ultimately disregarded that advice. Wise counsel sought be considered, but must be weighted (evaluated).

Example: Suppose you feel called to missions in North Korea. Your parents will probably counsel you not to go since you will likely be killed there. You must weigh the counsel and decide.

Commentaries Differ: Some commentators have concluded that Paul was wrong to disregard the message the church at Tyre believed it had received from the Spirit—it was not God’s will for Paul to go to Jerusalem. Paul stated that he wanted to take an offering there, but he could have sent the other men there with it. He didn’t have to take it himself. Surely, they reason, it would have been better for Paul to be free to spread the Gospel rather than in prison. Other commentators feel that Paul was right in going on to Jerusalem. Since godly teachers even today differ over whether Paul did the right thing or not shows that discerning God’s will can be difficult sometimes. *If it is difficult it is because God has made it difficult.* Spiritual growth comes through struggle.

Insight: There is no simple, mechanical formula for discerning God’s will. Here we have two godly groups reaching completely different conclusions.

Grace: Even if we get it “wrong”, God is gracious and sovereign to overcome our mistakes.³

³ Steven Cole, “Lesson 56: Discerning the Will of God, Acts 21:1-14”, Bible.org, accessed June 16, 2018.

Guiding Principle: In determining the right course of action, ask yourself, “Where can I be most effective in advancing God’s kingdom in light of my gifts?” Like Paul, we should all be willing to die for Christ. I wonder if someone asked Paul, “Would you be more effective in prison or free? Living or martyred?”⁴ On the other hand, if Paul had not spent so much time in prison, he might not have written as many of the New Testament letters as he did.

2. Why is it significant that all the disciples, along with their wives and children, escorted Paul to the beach and prayed with them there (21:5-6)? Not only did they appreciate Paul, but they were deeply concerned for his welfare after he got to Jerusalem.

Navigation (21:7-8a): *Read, stopping to explain the information below as it is read. (In advance, write the names of the places on the board).*

- Leaving the seaport of Tyre (in modern Lebanon), they traveled south (probably by ship) to the seaport of **Ptolemais** (in modern Israel; later known to the Crusaders as Acre. Modern name: Akko).
 - Leaving there, they continued south (probably by boat) to the coastal city of **Caesarea** (about 60 miles NW of Jerusalem).
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******How did the believers in Caesarea break Paul’s heart (21:8b-14)?** With weeping they tried to persuade Paul not to go to Jerusalem, 21:12-14.

3. In 21:11-12, what did Agabus prophesy? Using Paul’s belt, he very creatively prophesied that Paul would be bound by the Jews and then delivered over to the Gentiles. Prophets are great at object lessons. **Examples:** Isaiah preached naked (Isa 20) and Ezekiel lay on his left side over a year and then turned over to his right side (Eze 4).

4. Based on 11:12, who besides Agabus and the local believers urged Paul not to go? The word “we” indicates that Luke—along with Paul’s other traveling companions—also urged Paul not to go to Jerusalem.

Wise Counsel: Once again, Luke records that God’s people unanimously interpreted the Spirit’s prediction of jail in Jerusalem to mean that Paul should not go to Jerusalem. Nobody except Paul thought he should go to Jerusalem. Paul’s stated purpose for going was to deliver the offering, but Luke did not even write about it, implying Luke’s disapproval of the personal delivery.

Problem: The same set of circumstances can be interpreted in a number of different ways.

5. What was Paul’s attitude toward imprisonment and death (21:13)? He was ready to face both for the name of the Lord Jesus.

⁴ Ibid.

Application: *Would you be able to say about your own life what Paul did in 21:13? When you are seeking God's will, you must trust Him enough to give Him a blank check. You must want to please Jesus more than you want to live.*

What did they conclude when Paul would not be persuaded (21:14)? They gave up and concluded that bondage was God's will for Paul since he was determined to go to Jerusalem no matter what.

6. What exactly was it that was the "will of the Lord" (21:14)? They believed that Paul should not go. The will of the Lord was that since he was going anyway, he would be jailed and delivered over to the Romans.

7. What can we learn about God's will from 21:4, 11-14? It is God's will to sometimes allow bad things to happen to us explicitly because we follow Jesus. It is also possible to misapply revelation from the Spirit.

D. L. Moody: "If you don't go to work for the Lord because you're afraid of making mistakes, you will probably make the greatest mistake of your life—that of doing nothing."⁵ Don't have paralysis of analysis!

Thoughts on Prophecy

8. Since Philip had four daughters who prophesied, why did God send Agabus down from Judea to prophesy (21:9-11)? The Lord moves in mysterious ways. There are a number of places in the Bible where women prophesy to men, so gender was not the issue. It is just an assumption that the four women still lived with their father; they may have been elsewhere.

9. Why did Luke bother to tell us that Philip had four virgin daughters who prophesied (21:9)? Perhaps Luke recorded it because it was so unusual to have four daughters with this gift. This also shows the historicity of Luke's account.

10. What application can we derive from 21:9? *See also 1 Corinthians 11:2-5.* Both historical narrative (Acts 21:9) and the direct teaching of Scripture (1Co 11:2-5) reveal that it is perfectly consistent with the biblical gender roles for women to have the gift of prophecy.

11. What is the gift of prophecy (21:9)? *See Matthew 26:68, John 4:18-19, 1 Corinthians 14:25, Acts 15:32.* We most commonly think of a prophet as one who tells the future. However, prophecy can also involve the revelation of personal information that would otherwise be unknowable, such as secret sin in a person's life (Jn 4:18-19, 1Co 14:25). It can also take the form of an encouraging and strengthening message (Acts 15:32). It is listed as a distinct spiritual gift that is different from teaching (Acts 13:1, 1Co 12:28-29).

⁵ Quoted in "Transformed By God's Grace", Sermons.GraceLife.com, accessed June 16, 2018.

******12. How did the disciples help the missionaries after they left Caesarea (21:15-16)?**

Some of them went with the missionaries to Jerusalem and set them up in the home of Mnason, an early believer.

So What?

13. What can we learn about discerning God's will from this passage? How can we know when to go against the counsel of godly people? We must weigh prophecy. We should consider wise counsel. We must seek the Lord's face. Paul believed that it was God's will for him to go to Jerusalem, and he obeyed despite the pleadings of others that he not go. Paul was committed to obey God's will no matter what. Even if, in spite of all, we sincerely choose plan B, God is gracious and can still use us to His glory.

ESV **Romans 8:28** And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

**** = ask this question before reading the text aloud. Doing so will cause focus.

- These lessons are designed for a 45 minute session and are based on the text of the ESV.
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