

The Great Stories of the Early Church
73-Paul, from Ephesus to Jerusalem 01
To Go, or Not to Go?
Acts 21:1-40

- 1 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:
- 2 And finding a ship sailing over unto Phenicia, we went aboard, and set forth.
- 3 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.
- 4 And finding disciples, we tarried there seven days: who said to Paul through the Spirit, that he should not go up to Jerusalem.
- 5 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.
- 6 And when we had taken our leave one of another, we took ship; and they returned home again.
- 7 And when we had finished our course from Tyre, we came to Ptolemais, and saluted the brethren, and abode with them one day.
- 8 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.
- 9 And the same man had four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy.
- 10 And as we tarried there many days, there came down from Judaea a certain prophet, named Agabus.
- 11 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.
- 12 And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem.
- 13 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.
- 14 And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done.
- 15 And after those days we took up our carriages, and went up to Jerusalem.
- 16 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.
- 17 And when we were come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly.
- 18 And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present.
- 19 And when he had saluted them, he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry.
- 20 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:
- 21 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.

22 What is it therefore? the multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that thou art come.

23 Do therefore this that we say to thee: We have four men which have a vow on them;

24 They 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.

25 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.

26 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.

27 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,

28 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.

29 (For they had seen before with him in the city Trophimus an Ephesian, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.)

30 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.

31 And as they went about to kill him, tidings came unto the chief captain of the band, that all Jerusalem was in an uproar.

32 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.

33 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.

34 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.

35 And when he came upon the stairs, so it was, that he was borne of the soldiers for the violence of the people.

36 For the multitude of the people followed after, crying, Away with him.

37 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?

38 Art not thou that Egyptian, which before these days madest an uproar, and leddest out into the wilderness four thousand men that were murderers?

39 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.

40 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, KJV

Introduction:

This is a story with more than one plot going on. Part of it is not mentioned by Luke and, so, we are left somewhat in the dark and would be forced to remain in the dark had not Paul written about these events in other places.

Paul was going to Jerusalem (1). Paul felt a profound spiritual obligation to do so (2). Those who had the NT gift of prophecy were telling him everywhere he went that his visit was going to be problematic (3). He was determined to go anyway (4). Therefore, some rationalization of these events is going to be necessary to keep us from concluding that the man was on a fool's errand and, contrary to all guidance, placed himself in danger and was subsequently arrested by the Romans, an encounter that would, ultimately, lead to his death.

We need to back up and fill in some material that we skipped over last week in order to keep the story of Ephesus together. Paul had not sailed directly from Ephesus to Jerusalem. He had, instead, sailed back to Macedonia, visited the churches there and in Greece, ending up at Corinth from which he intended to sail back to Judea and ultimately to Jerusalem from there. But some of the Jews had formed a plot to kill Paul and he decided to retrace his steps through Macedonia and sail from Philippi. It was from here that he had come to Troas and it was there that the young man Eutychus had fallen asleep, fell from the window and been killed. Paul raised him and continued the meeting, then the disciples left for Miletus where the events of the last message occurred.

From there the group made its way back to Judea, ending up at the port of Caesarea where Philip the evangelist lived, the one who had begun as a deacon in the Jerusalem church. Luke mentioned in an offhand way that Philip had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy.

From Caesarea the group made its way to Jerusalem where Paul ended up in Roman custody and was ultimately taken to Rome.

But as we observe the story we discover one layer of it which describes warnings to Paul all along the way telling him that bondage and prison were waiting for him at the end of his journey. He mentioned that to the Ephesians as he said his farewell to them.

Acts 20:22-24

- 22 And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there:
- 23 Save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me.
- 24 But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God. KJV

How had the Holy Spirit been 'witnessing' to Paul concerning the dangers of the trip? Well, the text before us today tells us.

- 3 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.
- 4 And finding disciples, we tarried there seven days: who said to Paul through the Spirit, that he should not go up to Jerusalem.
- 10 And as we tarried there many days, there came down from Judaea a certain prophet, named Agabus.
- 11 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.
- 12 And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem.

There was in the church of the First Century a gift of prophecy. We are told that in scripture.

1 Cor 12:1-11

- 1 Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant.
- 2 Ye know that ye were Gentiles, carried away unto these dumb idols, even as ye were led.
- 3 Wherefore I give you to understand, that no man speaking by the Spirit of God calleth Jesus accursed: and that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.
- 4 Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit.
- 5 And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord.
- 6 And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all.
- 7 But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal.
- 8 For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit;
- 9 To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit;
- 10 To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues:
- 11 But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will. KJV

It seems that in every church there was someone with this gift, a way to know certain things without having learned them. They received information directly from God. This gift, like a number of the others mentioned seems to have mostly, if not altogether, have disappeared. Those who claim to have it in our day are manifest frauds and people who are saying things completely contrary to the Bible and prophecying things which do not happen. The scriptures have from earliest times condemned such.

Deut 18:20-22

- 20 But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even

- that prophet shall die.
- 21 And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken?
- 22 When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him. KJV

This was, and still is, the standing rule for those who claim the gift of prophecy.

But, back to our story, we ask ourselves the question, “why did Paul not pay attention to the revelations that the Holy Spirit was giving to Christian people all along the way back to Jerusalem?”

The answer to that is to be found in a sub-plot to this story. If you will recall, some time back in the book of Acts, this same prophet, Agabus, had been given a message concerning the future in Judea.

Acts 11:25-30

- 25 Then departed Barnabas to Tarsus, for to seek Saul:
- 26 And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch.
- 27 And in these days came prophets from Jerusalem unto Antioch.
- 28 And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar.
- 29 Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea:
- 30 Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. KJV

This had been a continuing need during the Missionary Journeys of Paul and as he told of the drought and its impact on the Christians to the Gentile converts they determined to make a collection among themselves and send that money with Paul back to Jerusalem.

In the 2nd letter to the Corinthians Paul had mentioned this offering under a couple of headings. It seems that the Corinthian church had earnestly committed to the project but then had lagged behind their commitments in the collecting of it. The letter had been written from Ephesus during Paul’s ministry there and had been sent by the hand of Titus apparently in preparation for his second visit to them. Their laxness concerned him because he believed that some of the Macedonians would be with him when he came and that presented a problem to him.

You see, the Macedonian churches, though very poor, had gathered an amazing offering to send to the Jewish saints.

2 Cor 8:1-5

- 1 Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia;
- 2 How that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality.
- 3 For to their power, I bear record, yea, and beyond their power they were willing of themselves;
- 4 Praying us with much intreaty that we would receive the gift, and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints.
- 5 And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God. KJV

This was a tremendously sacrificial work the Macedonians had done. I have often mentioned that when poor people give “beyond their power” someone does without in some very real ways yet that is exactly what had happened. Paul was reluctant even to take this much money from them but they insisted, which is the way Christian giving is to go in general.

Now, there is another layer to this story.

2 Cor 8:6-11

- 6 Insomuch that we desired Titus, that as he had begun, so he would also finish in you the same grace also.
- 7 Therefore, as ye abound in every thing, in faith, and utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, see that ye abound in this grace also.
- 8 I speak not by commandment, but by occasion of the forwardness of others, and to prove the sincerity of your love.
- 9 For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.
- 10 And herein I give my advice: for this is expedient for you, who have begun before, not only to do, but also to be forward a year ago.
- 11 Now therefore perform the doing of it; that as there was a readiness to will, so there may be a performance also out of that which ye have. KJV

One need not read very deeply between the lines to realize that Paul was concerned because the commitment had been made a year previously and yet was still not completed. Even though they were much wealthier than the Macedonian churches (Philippi, Derbe, Thessalonica) they were noticeably less generous and willing to help. They talked a good game but then had a problem following through.

We know from Luke’s account that there were Macedonians in the party.

Acts 20:2-5

- 2 And when he had gone over those parts, and had given them much exhortation, he came into Greece,
- 3 And there abode three months. And when the Jews laid wait for him, as he was about to sail into Syria, he purposed to return through Macedonia.

- 4 And there accompanied him into Asia Sopater of Berea; and of the Thessalonians, Aristarchus and Secundus; and Gaius of Derbe, and Timotheus; and of Asia, Tychicus and Trophimus.
- 5 These going before tarried for us at Troas. KJV

And Paul wanted no one embarrassed and no one discouraged.

2 Cor 9:2-5

- 2 For I know the forwardness of your mind, for which I boast of you to them of Macedonia, that Achaia was ready a year ago; and your zeal hath provoked very many.
- 3 Yet have I sent the brethren, lest our boasting of you should be in vain in this behalf; that, as I said, ye may be ready:
- 4 Lest haply if they of Macedonia come with me, and find you unprepared, we (that we say not, ye) should be ashamed in this same confident boasting.
- 5 Therefore I thought it necessary to exhort the brethren, that they would go before unto you, and make up beforehand your bounty, whereof ye had notice before, that the same might be ready, as a matter of bounty, and not as of covetousness. KJV

Now, why have I diverted the story to talk about the offering of the churches to the Christians in Judea? Well, actually, I have not diverted. This offering seems to be the reason that Paul was insistent upon going himself to Jerusalem in spite of the danger.

Remember what he said to the Ephesians about the journey.

Acts 20:22-24

- 22 And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there:
- 23 Save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me.
- 24 But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God. KJV

Let me read you v.22 in a couple of other translations.

Acts 20:22

- 22 "And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, NASU

Acts 20:22-23

- 22 "And now I am going to Jerusalem, drawn there irresistibly by the Holy Spirit, not knowing what awaits me, TLB

Acts 20:22

- 22 "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. (from New International Version)

Now, let me suggest to you a possibility based on these different readings, “And now, under spiritual pressure, I feel an obligation to go to Jerusalem even though I do not know what will happen.... so that I might finish this project...”

I would suggest to you that the size of the gift made it very difficult for Paul to have peace passing it off to someone else. The Power of God was upon him and he was far better able to navigate through any difficulties than anyone else in his party. Beside that all of these others were still men in training, not finished warriors. What a disgrace and shame it would have been upon him as well as upon the work as a whole if he had delegated his responsibility to others and then they had failed.

So, even though the Holy Spirit was truthfully revealing what was going to happen and even though God’s people were begging not to go, still he went.

This is a tremendous lesson concerning the deciphering of the Will of God, if you can hear it.

I have had people tell me, after they have made a certain spiritual decision concerning their life, “well, God has brought this thing (or this person) into my life, surely he must be leading me in a different direction than I originally had determined.” This statement often precedes horrible errors of decision on the part of Christians.

“Surely God is not going to mess with me!” they say. Well, God will certainly put you to the test. Sometimes he will give you easy ‘outs’ of commitments you have made to teach you not to take them.

You may not believe it but Paul was a man who had experienced profound failure as a believer. Luke did not record any of them and Paul never went into detail but he did generalize descriptions of them.

Rom 7:18-23

- 18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.
- 19 For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.
- 20 Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.
- 21 I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me.
- 22 For I delight in the law of God after the inward man:
- 23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. KJV

2 Cor 7:5-6

- 5 For, when we were come into Macedonia, our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears.
- 6 Nevertheless God, that comforteth those that are cast down, comforted us by the coming of Titus; KJV

Failure, for Christians, often consists of making a commitment to God to do a thing and then not doing it, doing something else instead which they knew, deep down inside, was the wrong thing. On some level and in a very powerful way, Paul had experienced failure and he was resolved not to fail in this task of carrying aid to the brethren who were in such desperate need.

Deciphering the Will of God can be a tricky thing. The devil will always mess with us, and God will sometimes test us. The only course is to remain faithful to whatever we have decided through prayer and meditation is the right course. The right course will sometimes (shall I say 'often'?) lead us into troubling circumstances and be very costly to us but we dare not take any of the exit doors that are offered to us.

I believe this is the great lesson of this story, Integrity in Doing what we Know is the Will of God.

So, I want to end this message by asking us all, including myself, some difficult questions.

Have you made any commitments to God that you knew were the result of His leading, that you have not kept?

What are you doing with that reality?

Are you working in the direction of correcting your error? Or, have you given up?

Have you begun projects or made decisions concerning a course that is contrary to what God led you originally to do? Have you taken one of those 'exit' doors?

If it is a decision which revolves around self-discipline, have you let yourself come up short and then quit trying? What is your plan looking forward?

Or, has God shown you things and pressed you for a decision but you are holding back, afraid of the consequences?

The bottom line is, are you exercising integrity in either the spiritual decisions you have made or the ones God is pressing you to make?

Follow Paul's example. Finish the course with joy rather than regret. Even in suffering and loss count it all joy.

Phil 3:7-9

7 But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.

8 Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ,

9 And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: KJV

So, you see, our story is much more complex than it seems.