

Acts 21:1-22:1.

Power to Stay the Course

In the 21st chapter of Acts, we find Paul concluding his third missionary Journey. He has been meeting with the elders of the Ephesian church in Miletus when he announced to them that he was on a one-way journey to Jerusalem with the knowledge that persecution would await him there. They urged him not to go, but he insisted that this was God's will. Despite continued advice from his trusted friends to turn from his course, He felt that God was calling him to this mission and he was willing to endure whatever the task might bring. His example can help us to look at our own calling and to turn to it with more confidence, staying the course that God has planned for us.

Acts 21:1-6. *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: ²And finding a ship sailing over unto Phenicia, we went aboard, and set forth. ³Now 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. ⁴And finding disciples, we tarried there seven days: who said to Paul through the Spirit, that he should not go up to Jerusalem. ⁵And 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. ⁶And when we had taken our leave one of another, we took ship; and they returned home again.*

Verses 2 through 3 illustrate that Paul and his companions traveled on a cargo ship that landed in several ports on its way to Tyre, where they stayed for seven days. Paul's message to the disciples at Tyre was similar to that shared with the leaders of Ephesus: he was heading towards certain persecution in Jerusalem. Like the leaders in Ephesus, the disciples urged him not to continue the trip and then followed him to the ship, had prayer with him, and sent him on his way.

Why was Paul so determined to continue to Jerusalem when he was aware that he would be persecuted there? Though Luke never mentions it, part of the

purpose of the third missionary journey was to collect an offering to support the struggling Christian church in Jerusalem.¹ Luke assumed the responsibility of carrying this offering. It is evident that a sizable offering coming from Gentiles would influence the circumstances that would arise when Paul delivers it to the Jerusalem church where they are struggling to show *agape* love to Gentiles. Paul knew that the church in Jerusalem was in need, and he was leading the group who would deliver the gift to them. He had no intention of doing anything other than delivering the gift that the Christian churches in Macedonia had provided.

Acts 21:7-9. *And when we had finished our course from Tyre, we came to Ptolemais, and saluted the brethren, and abode with them one day. ⁸And 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. ⁹And the same man had four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy.*

As Paul continued his journey to Jerusalem, Paul visited with Philip, the Evangelist.² This is the same Philip that was chosen by the church in Jerusalem to serve as deacons.³ He led an evangelistic crusade in Samaria, and led the Ethiopian eunuch, the treasurer to the Candace, to Christ on the Gaza road. He later settled in Caesarea.⁴ Philip had four daughters who were raised in the knowledge of the gospel, and probably knew of the many experiences that Philip had while exercising his gift of evangelism. They were faithful to the Lord and each were given the gift of prophesy.

Acts 21:10-12. *And as we tarried there many days, there came down from Judaea a certain prophet, named Agabus. ¹¹And 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. ¹²And when we heard these things,*

¹ 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15; Romans 15:14-32

² Philip the Evangelist should not be confused with Philip the Apostle. Though Philip demonstrated the gift of apostleship, these are two different individuals.

³ Acts 6:1-6.

⁴ Acts 8:4-40.

both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem.

We have met Agabus before. In Acts 11:27-30, we find another reference to this prophet who then came down from Jerusalem to Antioch to tell of a coming famine that would strike the region. This prompted the church in Antioch to take up the offering to be delivered by Paul. In this circumstance, Agabus came down from Jerusalem to Caesarea to deliver his message to Paul. He took Paul's belt, a cloth strip that encircled his waist several times, and used it to bind his own hands and feet to illustrate the binding that would happen to him in Jerusalem. Again, the people begged Paul not to continue towards Jerusalem.

Acts 21:13-14. 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. ¹⁴And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done.

Why would the concern of the people "break" Paul's heart? There is parallel here between the experience of Jesus at Gethsemane and Paul's challenge to turn from the path towards Jerusalem. Just as Jesus was not able to communicate the full meaning of His purpose for going to Jerusalem, Paul was unable to do the same. One commentator gave a simplistic illustration of some of the feelings that Paul could have felt. Called by God to attend seminary on a campus on the other side of the country, she felt great anxiety about going to a strange place with no familiar people. Just as she was getting up the courage to board the plane her mother said, "You don't really have to go." Was this the kind of encouragement she needed at the time? Her mother's concern for her made her task all the more difficult. Likewise, the constant urging of Paul's friends made his continuance just that much more difficult. However, just as Jesus prayed that He would follow God's will, a similar prayer is shared in behalf of Paul.

Many compare Paul's journey from Ephesus to Jerusalem to Jesus' journey through Samaria to Jerusalem. Both encountered plots by the Jews, both were given multiple prophecies concerning being handed over to the Gentiles, a prediction of their suffering, and a resolve to be obedient to God's will. Both had expressed doubts, leading some to consider this passage as Paul's "Gethsemane." In both cases it was the Romans who made the arrest as a result

of the Jewish uprising against them. There is little doubt that Paul would have drawn from his knowledge of Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem as he was observing his own. Unlike Jesus, Paul did not know what awaited him in Jerusalem other than some form of persecution. At this point he did not know if he would live or die.

Acts 21:15-19. *And after those days we took up our carriages, and went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁶There 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. ¹⁷And when we were come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. ¹⁸And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present. ¹⁹And when he had saluted them, he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry.*

Paul's third missionary trip is concluded, and note that the writer of the book of Acts is with him as well as some of the disciples from Caesarea. Recall that Paul desired to arrive in Jerusalem in time for the Pentecost celebration, and he was successful in doing so. Like the situation of the Pentecost experience of Chapter 2, there would be Jews in Jerusalem from every nation. This presence of such a crowd in Jerusalem would put the Roman guard on alert because of the increased probability of civil unrest.

They stayed in the house of Mnason, and being a Christian from Cyprus, he would have been from a Greek background rather than a Hebrew one, making his presence in Jerusalem a little safer. They then went to see James, the primary leader, or pastor, of the Christian church in Jerusalem. It is evident from Paul's letters (1 Cor., Gal.) that he delivered the gift that was given by the Macedonian churches. Upon doing so, Paul reported to James of the work that God was doing among the Gentiles.

We must remember at this point that there was great turmoil at this time in Jerusalem, particularly between the orthodox Jews and the Christian Jews, and between the Orthodox Christian Jews who resented including Gentiles in God's promise to Abraham. They still felt that the Gentiles were unclean, and unworthy. They resented their freedom from following the Mosaic and traditional

laws. They felt that their most important traditions were in danger of being compromised, and would go to any length to stop this pattern of change.

Acts 21:20-22. *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: ²¹And 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. ²²What is it therefore? the multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that thou art come.*

Here we begin to see the real source of danger that was threatening Paul in his visit to Jerusalem. In order to discredit him, Christian Jews were propagating false rumors that Paul was teaching Jews to turn away from their Jewish customs. These rumors were certainly not true, as we see that Paul never instructed Jews in such a manner. Jewish Christians continued to go to the tabernacle, and could not do so if they turned from their traditions. Paul even had Timothy circumcised so that he could be able to accompany Paul into Jewish ceremony.

Note that in this conflict, it is the zealous members of the Jerusalem church who are rising up against Paul, and not members of the Jewish orthodoxy. It seems to be an axiom that the most common and insidious opposition that rises against Christians comes not from the lost world, but rather from within the church itself. We see the unity of church after church destroyed by members who are far more interested in following their own prideful desires than following the prompting of the Holy Spirit. In this manner, Satan has been empowered in our churches to create great havoc. Paul's experience in Jerusalem is one such example.

James and the leaders of the Jerusalem church do not side with the zealots. They fully support Paul's ministry, and by his presence in their church are now faced with a dilemma that until now had gone largely ignored. Again, when we have conflict in the church and we let that conflict fester, what happens? Does it go away? Generally, the polarization that such conflict engenders will strengthen, and will coexist until each side has to respond to a dividing issue. Paul's

presence created such an issue. James asks the question, "what will we do?" as he seeks to bring the two factions together in unity.

Paul could have, at this point said, "I have delivered the gift. I am now free to go." This would have averted the conflict, but only serve to perpetuate the polarization and deny God's calling him to Jerusalem for the Pentecost celebration.

Acts 21:23-25. *Do therefore this that we say to thee: We have four men which have a vow on them; ²⁴Them 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. ²⁵As 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.*

The vow referred to here is a Nazirite vow that had been taken by four Jewish Christians. Numbers 6 describes the requirements of this vow of purification. During the period of the vow, the person was not to become defiled in any way, not to touch grapes or grape products or any other strong drink, and was not to cut his hair. At the end of this period of purification, one who had taken the vow would present himself to the priest and offer a sacrifice that included shaving his head and burning the hair. This Nazirite vow was considered the most meaningful and significant of the Jewish ceremonial traditions. By paying their expenses, Paul would be providing their sacrifices for them, and by participating in the rite, would demonstrate that he had not abandoned the traditions. James also reassures Paul that they had not changed the agreement of the requirements for Gentile believers.

Acts 21:26-29. *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. ²⁷And 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,*

²⁸Crying 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.)

Up to this point, the plan seems to have been working. We are not aware of any conflict arising from the Christian community. Paul went into the temple with these four men who, again, were Christian Jews, fully authorized to enter the temple area and take part in the ceremony. He was seen entering the temple by some of the Jews who were from the province of Asia. These Jews would not have recognized the four men who went into the temple with Paul. They had seen Paul with Trophimus, an Ephesian, in the city. They may have assumed that Trophimus was one of the four men that were with Paul. They were also, quite obviously, part of the Jewish community that was very antagonistic to Paul's ministry. Upon seeing Paul enter the temple with these men, they shouted for help as they accused him of bringing Greeks into the temple. They used this as a platform to try to bring Paul down once and for all. Coming from Asia, the local Jews would tend to believe their testimony about what was taking place in Asia. Their testimony, however, is a contrived lie. They told the people that Paul had been going around teaching everyone to resist Judaism, its people, its law, and the temple itself.

Acts 21:30-32. 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. ³¹And as they went about to kill him, tidings came unto the chief captain of the band, that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. ³²Who 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.

The violence escalated in a hurry. Recall that this event was immediately preceding the Pentecost celebration. There would be a lot of people in the town who would be drawn to a commotion of any kind. This was the same circumstance that drew the crowds to the disciples during the Pentecost experience of Acts, chapter two. They dragged Paul from the temple, (did they

also eject the four men with Paul?) and closed the gates to the temple to prevent anyone else from entering. The Roman troops were stationed at the Fortress of Antonia, a very short distance northwest of the temple. It was built by Herod the Great for the purpose of protecting the temple. The commander of the fortress was Claudius Lysias (23:26), a tribune who was in charge of a cohort. A fully-staffed cohort was made up of 1,000 soldiers (240 cavalry and 760 infantry.) Lysias was in command of the region since the Procurator for the region was stationed in Caesarea. Upon hearing of the uprising, the Roman commander would respond swiftly. He summoned at least two of his Centurions and their soldiers and ran to the temple and penetrated the crowd. When the Jews saw the coming of the Roman guard, they stopped beating Paul. It is likely that the presence of the Roman guard at this point saved Paul's life.

Acts 21:33-36. *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. ³⁴And 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. ³⁵And when he came upon the stairs, so it was, that he was borne of the soldiers for the violence of the people. ³⁶For the multitude of the people followed after, crying, Away with him.*

Do the shouts of the crowd sound familiar? Very few would have been there who could remember the shouts of the crowd when they said, "Away with this man!" as they called for the crucifixion of Jesus. What had Paul done wrong to justify this type of treatment? What had Jesus done wrong to be subject to the same treatment? Just as Pilot asked Jesus of the nature of the crime, Lysias interrogated Paul the same way. The procedures did not change much over the years. Because they represented the government, it was up to the temple guard to dispense justice to those who broke temple law. Paul was accused of a variety of offenses against the temple, and even though the Romans could not ascertain just what these charges were, the violence of the crowd was sufficient to justify punishment. A Gentile could enter the first court in the temple, the Court of the Gentiles. The next court was the Court of Women, and if a Gentile went into this court, he did so under threat of death. Numerous signs were posted at the entrance of the second court warning of the rule. It could have been from this court that Paul was dragged. Though Rome had not been

executing Gentiles for this infraction, it was customary to scourge them, just as Jesus was scourged, and let them go. This was the punishment that awaited Paul, and there was little in the Roman or temple law that would prevent it, except one little law that Paul would later draw on.

Acts 21:37-22:1. *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? ³⁸Art not thou that Egyptian, which before these days madest an uproar, and leddest out into the wilderness four thousand men that were murderers? ³⁹But 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. ⁴⁰And 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, ^{22:1}Men, brethren, and fathers, hear ye my defence which I make now unto you.*

When Paul spoke to the Roman commander, the commander must have been surprised by his words. The commander had apparently assumed that Paul was an Egyptian terrorist, most likely because he thought that the terrorist was the only one who could create such an uproar. However, when Paul spoke to him in Greek, the commander listened. Paul described himself first as a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, a region to the North, just over what is not the border of Turkey. Furthermore, he described himself as one from "No mean city." This was a Greek idiom, referring to a single city that is by no means simple, but one to be greatly respected: Rome. Paul expressed to the commander that he was a Roman citizen, a status that would uniquely spare him the brunt of Roman punishment. Realizing that Paul was not the criminal that he had first assumed, he gave Paul permission to speak to the crowd that had followed them to the barracks of the fortress.

Few of us will probably ever have to experience an event that is similar to Paul's trip from the church at Ephesus to the barracks of the Fortress of Antonia. Few of us will ever experience a physical beating at the hands of evil men that comes as a result of our faithfulness to the gospel. However, just as Paul was called by God to stay on the course that was placed before him, every Christian is called by God to fulfill the plan that God has for them. Each Christian is a minister of

the gospel who is called to be salt and light to an evil and dark world. Just as Paul was unwilling to compromise his calling to assure his own safety and security, we as Christians should do the same. Unfortunately, for too many Christians today, it is safety and security that come first. The church has wandered from the course that God placed before it, and it is failing to be effective in its ministry of salt, light, and evangelism. The church has watched, almost silently, while society has continually turned further and further from God, and even though the church has grown in number, its influence on society is continually eroding. Much of the church today has gone so far from the course as to take into its tradition the ungodly doctrines of the world. Both the church as a whole, and each individual member must be aware of its true purpose: to make disciples, baptizing them in the knowledge of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When we become actively engaged in the course we, like Paul, may find resistance, but we will also find the courage and direction to overcome it.