

The Acts of the Apostles

“A study of the application of theology to the work of the church as a group”

God Uses Even Our Failures to His Glory

Chapter Twenty-one

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[I am convinced that in this chapter we will see how Paul did not obey God in going to Jerusalem. I would not present this interpretation if it were not also backed up by one of my favorite theologians, James Montgomery Boice⁶. But other interpretations exist in stating that Paul knew that severe problems would come to him but he was determined to serve God even if such meant death. If Paul did not agree with the Jewish elders at the church of Jerusalem to do the obscene act of participating in a cleansing ritual and a sin offering, I would not feel confident in the presented interpretation. However considering that he did agree to such a ritual puts the warnings from the Holy Spirit in the context of a warning not to go into Jerusalem at this time. In going forward with the ritual in spite of the warning, Paul indeed did walk into a situation that would have indicated that he invalidated the blood offering of Jesus had God allowed Paul to complete the ceremony. But please let the Holy Spirit teach you in the material in this chapter. I only ask that you keep an open mind void of prior interpretations of these events. I believe that God will teach you that this interpretation is correct and that it teaches **us** that even when we desire to do good deeds we can be in violation of God’s desire for our lives. We must carefully listen to God’s Word and desire only to do what He wants us to do.]

Acts 21:1 “And when it came about that we had parted from them and had set sail, we ran a straight course to Cos and the next day to Rhodes and from there to Patara;

Acts 21:2 and having found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail.

Acts 21:3 And when we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left, we kept sailing to Syria and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload its cargo.

Acts 21:4 And after looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem.

Acts 21:5 And when it came about that our days there were ended, we departed and started on our journey, while they all, with wives and children, escorted us until we were out of the city. And after kneeling down on the beach and praying, we said farewell to one another.

Acts 21:6 Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home again.”

We tore ourselves away from them certainly indicates the pain the people felt on departing from people of faith as they knew that their time together was over. I remember well the time that I parted from friends of mine in Sweden when I had grown so close to them and knew that I probably would not be with them for a long time. I did not know at the time that one of them, Ollie Kautzer, would soon die and I would be parted from him for some time. Cos was the home of the medical school founded by

Hippocrates in the fifth century B.C. and was famous in academic circles. The direction they were taking was a cross-sea voyage and so the ship was probably large as the smaller vessels hugged the coast in their journeys. According to historical records the journey from Patara to Tyre took five days and then the large cargo had to be unloaded, which would take a week. The time saved in the cross-sea journey led Paul undoubtedly to think that he would be able to make it to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost. They would have known that there was a Christian church at Tyre that had probably been established by the spread of the Jerusalem Hellenists after Stephen's death. There were Christians there who had the gift of prophesy and they warned Paul not to go to Jerusalem.

I believe it is very important to note that these Christians were warning Paul through the Holy Spirit to not continue his haste toward Jerusalem. I believe that Paul should have heeded this warning that was from God. But he did not pay attention to the warning and we see another moving prayer meeting as these Christians were parting company.

Acts 21:7 “And when we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais; and after greeting the brethren, we stayed with them for a day.
Acts 21:8 And on the next day we departed and came to Caesarea; and entering the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, we stayed with him.
Acts 21:9 Now this man had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses.
Acts 21:10 And as we were staying there for some days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea.
Acts 21:11 And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"
Acts 21:12 And when we had heard this, we as well as the local residents began begging him not to go up to Jerusalem.
Acts 21:13 Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."
Acts 21:14 And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, "The will of the Lord be done!"

They continued to meet with fellow Christians and then in Caesarea we see God giving Paul a very strong warning about what lay ahead of him. Philip here is not the Apostle but one of the seven Hellenistic officers appointed in the Jerusalem church to dispense supplies to the needy (Acts 6:3-6). The last we had heard of him was in the report by Luke in Acts 8:40 when he arrived in Caesarea in his missionary work and now twenty years later we find him again in Caesarea. We see that God had richly blessed Philip with a faithful family and four of his daughters had the gift of prophesy. Luke does not report any prophesies by the any of the daughters concerning Paul's daunting journey toward Jerusalem but he does recount the strong prophesy by another prophet named Agabus. The mode of prophesy by Agabus is reminiscent of Old Testament prophesies in which they used actions as well as words in making their points. In 1 Kings 11:29-39 Ahijah tore his new cloak to demonstrate how Solomon's kingdom would be disrupted. In Isaiah 20:2-4 we are told how Isaiah went naked and barefoot to demonstrate how the

Egyptians would be led into captivity by the Assyrians. Also we remember how Ezekiel mimicked the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem by laying siege to a replica of the city (Ezek 4:1-3). Agabus reported to all that his prophesy is indeed given to him by the Holy Spirit. In reaction to this prophesy Paul's friends begged him not to go to Jerusalem. Note that Luke uses the word "we" in relating how they all entreated Paul not to go on this journey. However Paul would not be persuaded away from his intended destination as he said that he was willing to die for the name of Jesus Christ. It seems that Paul yearned so deeply for the salvation of his Jewish kinsmen that he would not be deterred from going to Jerusalem. He was even willing to give up his own salvation for the salvation of those people if that were possible.

Rom 9:3 "For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh,

Rom 9:4 who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises,

Rom 9:5 whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen."

The people did quit entreating Paul to not continue but they also yielded to the will of the Lord.

Acts 21:15 "And after these days we got ready and started on our way up to Jerusalem.

Acts 21:16 And some of the disciples from Caesarea also came with us, taking us to Mnason of Cyprus, a disciple of long standing with whom we were to lodge.

They then put themselves to the task of continuing to Jerusalem. This trip would have been about 60 miles. Historians surmised from Luke's language that animals were provided for them so that they could proceed on land. Mnason was one of the few remaining Hellenists remaining in the mother church.

Acts 21:17 And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly.

Acts 21:18 And now the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.

Acts 21:19 And after he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry."

Paul was met by the brother of Jesus and all of the elders of the mother church. We are not told how many elders were there but the traditional number of elders in Israel was seventy and since there were a large number of believers in Jerusalem this number is probably close to correct. The church was mainly composed of converted Jews who wanted to maintain as much of their heritage in the Christian church as possible. Although there is no mention of the gifts Paul brought to the church, certainly such would have contributed to the warm greeting he received. Paul then began to relate to them the wonders that God had performed among the Gentiles during his ministry. He must have been elated to be able to relate such events to these leaders.

Acts 21:20 “And when they heard it they began glorifying God; and they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law;

Acts 21:21 and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.”

Although they glorified God on hearing of these miracles of God in converting the Gentiles, they had some serious matters on their minds that they had to discuss with Paul. We are not told who relates their misgivings to Paul, but we see that they were concerned about Paul not keeping the Jewishness strong in the church. This matter of circumcising Christian children had already been addressed in the Jerusalem council but remember that the letter at that time did not specifically address circumcision. Although at the time we said that the omission of this was not important, it obviously was very important to the core Jews in the Christian church. The letter led to the conversion of a large number of Gentiles into the Christian church but we see that the leaven of works was still a problem in the mother church composed mainly of former Jews. This issue is very disturbing to me for it shows that the mother church was still involved in strong Jewish practices. They viewed Paul as someone who many in the church thought was taking the church too far away from their core beliefs. It is so very hard to give up the old teachings as we remarked earlier. As we will see in a minute their solution to this “problem” was in severe violation of what Jesus had done in fulfilling and abolishing the practices of works-based salvation.

Acts 21:22 “What, then, is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.

Acts 21:23 "Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow;

Acts 21:24 take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses in order that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law.

Acts 21:25 "But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication."

Acts 21:26 Then Paul took the men, and the next day, purifying himself along with them, went into the temple, giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them.”

This solution seems like something worked out in the back rooms of the non-Christian Jews who had been opposing Paul so often. They asked Paul to perform a purification ceremony and a sacrifice for his sins! Both of these actions had been performed for all time by the work of Jesus. There were to be no more such purification procedures and certainly no more animal sacrifices for sin! In such a sacrifice the men’s sins would have been pronounced over the head of the animal, which would have then been slain to represent a blood offering for the removal of their sins. In the first place Paul had

certainly not sinned and in the second place the works of Jesus forbid any such actions to be ever done again.

Acts 21:27 “And when the seven days were almost over, the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, began to stir up all the multitude and laid hands on him, Acts 21:28 crying out, “Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people, and the Law, and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.” Acts 21:29 For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple.”

It is fascinating to me that God did not let Paul precede with this abomination. The time was almost complete so that the animal sacrifice would have been done soon, but God brought out a mob to stop the actions and to drag him out of the temple!

Acts 21:30 “And all the city was aroused, and the people rushed together; and taking hold of Paul, they dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut.

Acts 21:31 And while they were seeking to kill him, a report came up to the commander of the Roman cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion.

Acts 21:32 And at once he took along some soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them; and when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.

Acts 21:33 Then the commander came up and took hold of him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains; and he began asking who he was and what he had done.

Acts 21:34 But among the crowd some were shouting one thing and some another, and when he could not find out the facts on account of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks.

Acts 21:35 And when he got to the stairs, it so happened that he was carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob;

Acts 21:36 for the multitude of the people kept following behind, crying out, “Away with him!””

God interrupted the ritual and had Paul jerked out of the inner area of the Temple where only Jews could go and slammed shut the doors into the inner area. A Roman garrison was set up just outside of the temple area to keep the peace and surely Paul would have been killed by this mob if the soldiers had not been stationed so close. The commander sent about two hundred soldiers to stop the violence. They bound Paul with chains and tried to determine from him what was going on but the crowd was so violent and loud that they had to take Paul out of the area. Note that the words being shouted by the crowd were the very same words that had been shouted when Jesus was about to be crucified. “Away with him” means to kill him. Why did the crowd have such a viscous hatred for Paul? There really is often no logic in what a mob will say and do for it seems that when people are linked into a mob by someone with a hateful plan as did the Jews who had followed Paul that the conscience seems to disappear. Whenever people try to make us part of a mob we should quickly resist and ask some calm questions concerning

the purpose of the group. Usually a calm reply will cause the trouble-makers to leave you and go on to others who are not willing to ask questions. Mob psychology has been studied by many people over the years. I would say that the linking of people into a group bound only by emotion causes the individuals' feelings of unimportance to be put aside as they seem to be involved individually in a group activity that makes them seem important. The commander seemed to be a person of considerable self control and confidence as he did seek to determine the cause of the riot rather than give in to it.

Acts 21:37 "And as Paul was about to be brought into the barracks, he said to the commander, "May I say something to you?" And he said, "Do you know Greek?"

Acts 21:38 "Then you are not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a revolt and led the four thousand men of the Assassins out into the wilderness?"

Acts 21:39 But Paul said, "I am a Jew of Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no insignificant city; and I beg you, allow me to speak to the people."

Acts 21:40 And when he had given him permission, Paul, standing on the stairs, motioned to the people with his hand; and when there was a great hush, he spoke to them in the Hebrew dialect, saying,"

The fact that Paul addressed the commander in Greek really made the commander look carefully at the person before him. The language of Judah was Aramaic but many people did speak Greek. The commander was a Greek so he would have easily recognized "high Greek" spoken by Paul and such speaking would have been unusual. It seemed that the commander had thought that Paul was an Egyptian that had previously stirred up a huge revolt and that man would not have spoken Greek. That person had stirred up such a commotion that the commander would have understood why the crowd was so violent against Paul but since he was not this person then he had no understanding of why the crowd was so violent against Paul. Since the commander was now confused about the situation he was willing to let Paul try to clear up the misunderstanding by talking to the people. Little did he know that Paul's talk would be pouring gasoline on a fire!

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