

To Go or Not to Go?

Week 35: Aug 27-Sep 2 – Acts 21-26

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Helpful Resources

Map of Paul's Missionary Journeys

Making Sense of It All

- The Big Picture

After three incredible missionary journeys, during which Paul took the gospel to Cyprus, Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece, the great apostle was arrested one last time in Jerusalem. It seemed that the Lord had brought his ministry to an end. But why? Was God finished with Paul? Or did Paul make a mistake and his arrest was the punishment for his disobedience?

Paul had expressed a desire to go to Rome, so why didn't he? Why did he choose to go to Jerusalem, even after being warned by friends not to go? If God wanted Paul to go to Jerusalem, why was he arrested immediately, before getting to minister to the people there? These are difficult but important questions to ask. In this review, we will resolve them.

- Critical Questions

1. Why did Paul's friends beg him not to go to Jerusalem?

Paul had announced to his teammates and friends that he wanted to go to Jerusalem for Pentecost, to deliver the contribution to the church there (*Acts 20:16, 22-24; Rom. 15:25-28*). But his friends warned him not to go. They were concerned for his safety.

"After looking up the disciples, we stayed there (Tyre) seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem." *Acts 21:4*

"As we were staying there (Caesarea), a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 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.'" When we heard this, we as well as the local residents begged him not to go up to Jerusalem." *Acts 21:10-12*

The difficult part of these warnings is that they were given by the Holy Spirit. But notice that the Spirit wasn't telling Paul not to go. He was informing him of the dangers that awaited him. Paul's friends received accurate information from the Spirit, but they made inaccurate interpretations of the message. They added their preferences to the visions.

2. Why didn't Paul heed these warnings? Did he make a mistake by going to Jerusalem?

While he appreciated his friends' concerns, he felt led by God to go to Jerusalem.

"Paul purposed in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem..." *Acts 19:21*

"Behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem..." *Acts 20:22*

The same Spirit who spoke to Paul's friends, spoke to him. He was compelled by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. If he did not go, he would be disobedient. What he did not know was what would happen to him there. Thus, Agabus' prophecy was insightful to Paul, not as a command to avoid Jerusalem but as a heads up as to what would happen to him. Jesus was warned many times by His disciples not to go to Jerusalem, but He knew it was the Father's will that He go. Both Paul and Jesus desired to please God more than men.

3. What was the Lord's response to Paul's decision?

Jesus appeared to Paul in Jerusalem. In fact, He stood by his side. In this moment, the Lord could've rebuked Paul for disobeying him, but He didn't. Instead, He told Paul, "Take courage. For as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also" (*Acts 23:11*). Besides, if the Lord did not want Paul to go to Jerusalem, he could've hindered him as He did in Asia Minor (*Acts 16:6*).

4. Why did God send Paul to Jerusalem if he was arrested immediately?

Paul got to deliver the contribution of the saints for the relief of the Jerusalem church. He also got to speak to the Jews one last time (*Acts 21:39-22:22*). After being arrested by the Romans, Paul would have a chance to speak to governors and kings about the gospel, which God said he would do (*Acts 9:15, 16*). Paul would also get to go to Rome, which was his desire, under the protection and safety of the Romans.

- Temple Trouble

Paul's arrest in Jerusalem would've happened around 59-60 AD, ten years before the Romans destroyed Jerusalem (70 AD). The destruction came because of a Jewish revolution, and as a result, the entire city, including the Temple, was leveled. Jesus prophesied of this event (*Matt. 24:1, 2; Luke 19:29-21:24*). Paul's visit to Jerusalem was an omen against the condemned city. Notice that Paul (the leader of Christianity) was removed from the Temple, and the doors were immediately shut (*Acts 21:30*). The Temple's days were numbered.

- Learning From Paul

1. **The Will of God:** Discerning God's will can be difficult. It helps to pray, read God's Word, listen to the Spirit, and get godly counsel from others. But in the end, we must follow our conscience and convictions (*Acts 24:19*) and do what we believe is right by God.
2. **Obedience First:** Foreseeing danger or difficulty should never sway us from being obedient to God's will. God is not honored by fear but by faithfulness and courage.
3. **Pray and Act:** All actions should begin with prayer, but prayer should not be the end of action. We must step out in faith, trusting God to lead us as we go (*Ex. 14:13-16*).

The Bottom Line

We must step out in faith and be obedient to God despite possible dangers and difficulties.

Questions to Consider

1. Share a difficult decision you've had to make. How did you determine God's will?
2. What does it look like to pray and act? Should fear ever be a part of your planning?