

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – The Book of Acts

(SB_Acts 21_Paul's Reception in Jerusalem)

Paul's Journey to Jerusalem (21:1-17)

There are many parallels between Paul's trip to Jerusalem and Jesus' final trip to Jerusalem. Both accounts involve a plot by the Jews resulting in the Jews turning the men over to the Gentiles. There were predictions of suffering in Jerusalem in both cases. Both Jesus and Paul were determined to go there despite the opposition and both resigned themselves to God's will for their lives. Luke probably told the story the way he did to emphasize the similarities between Jesus and Paul and thus to validate Paul's ministry.¹

Paul sails from Miletus (21:1-6)

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; 2 and having found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. 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. 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. 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. 6 Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home again.²
(Acts 21:1-6)

Luke tracks Paul's journey from Miletus, the port city closest to Ephesus. He mentions several locations – Cos, Rhodes, Patara, Phoenicia, Cyprus and Tyre. In the harbor at Rhodes, Paul and his companions would have seen the giant statue of Apollos, the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. It was a figure over 100 feet high, but by the time of this journey, it had fallen over as the result of an earthquake in 224 B.C. The statute had been constructed by the inhabitants of the Greek island of Rhodes between 292 and 280 B.C. and was roughly the same size as the Statue of Liberty in New York. It was designed to be an image of the Greek god Helios as a memorial to the protection allegedly afforded by this Greek god to the island when the forces of the Roman generals Antigonous and Demetrius attempted to seize control of the island from Ptolemy in 305-304 B.C.

Tyre had been an important commercial center as early as the days of Joshua (cf. Josh 19:29, where it is called "the strong city"). By the time of David and Solomon, Hiram, king of Tyre, supplied workmen and materials for the temple (1 Kgs 5:1; 9:11,12). Within just a few centuries, the city became filled with wickedness and arrogance. The king of Tyre was excoriated by the prophet Ezekiel in Ezekiel 28 where the arrogance of the king of Tyre is only exceeded by Satan himself. God had Nebuchadnezzar besiege the city for thirteen years and then had Alexander

¹ Thomas Constable, "Notes on the Book of Acts," www.soniclight.com

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from *The New American Standard Bible*, (La Habra, California: The Lockman Foundation) 1977.

the Great destroy it. It was rebuilt by the Seleucids and was still a large city in Paul's day. Paul found some disciples there who said through the Spirit that he should not go up to Jerusalem.

In verse 4, we note that the disciples in Tyre "kept telling Paul through the Spirit" not to go to Jerusalem. This phrase has caused some to believe that Paul was in violation of the will of God for his life by pressing forward with his plans to go to Jerusalem. However, there are several reasons to reach a contrary conclusion based upon the whole of Scripture. First, Acts 20:22 and 21:14 imply that it was God's will for Paul to continue to Jerusalem.

And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. (Acts 20:22)

And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, "The will of the Lord be done!" (Acts 21:14)

Second, the comfort that the Lord Himself provided to Paul is further circumstantial evidence that Paul was within the will of God.

But on the night *immediately* following, the Lord stood at his side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also." (Acts 23:11)

Third, Paul's own testimony reflected a clear conscience and affirmation that he had been within the Lord's will.

AND Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, "Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day." (Acts 23:1)

Therefore, the phrase "kept telling Paul through the Spirit" (Acts 21:4) is best interpreted to mean that the disciples knew something based upon the ministry of the Holy Spirit to them. They knew that Paul would be imprisoned in Jerusalem, therefore, since they were concerned for his safety, they pleaded with him not to go.

Finally, note the unity of the families that supported Paul and his entourage. In verse 5, Luke notes that the believers who escorted Paul out of the city of Tyre to see him on his way to Jerusalem included wives and children. The wives of the men who made up this early group of believers were a critical part of the team. Imagine the men showing up to encourage Paul with wives who were fully of the same mind with them and who realized the spiritual issues at play. On the other hand, imagine these men showing up to encourage Paul without their wives. How would the effectiveness of these men have been impacted as they tried to encourage Paul when they were dealing with disunity in the home?

Principle: The man or woman who is married to a spouse who is supportive and engaged in ministry is blessed beyond measure.

From Tyre to Caesarea (21:7-14)

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. 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. 9 Now this man had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses. 10 And as we were staying there for some days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 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.” 12 And when we had heard this, we as well as the local residents *began* begging him not to go up to Jerusalem. 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.” 14 And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, “The will of the Lord be done!”

The ship sailed from Tyre and stopped for a day at Ptolemais which gave Paul time to meet and encourage the believers in that city. This town was known as Accho when Israel entered the land under Joshua. During the era of the Crusades, it was known as St. Jean d’Acre. The modern name is Akko.³ It is not clear whether Paul and his party went on to Caesarea by sea, or whether they took the land route.

Caesarea was about 30 miles to the south of Tyre and was the capital of the province of Judea and the major port of Jerusalem.⁴ In Caesarea they stayed at the home of Philip the evangelist. Philip had evangelized the coastal plain about 20 years earlier and could have stayed in Caesarea (cf. 6:5; 8:40). This Philip was not the Philip of the gospels and one of the Twelve apostles.

According to early Church tradition, Philip and his daughters later moved to Hierapolis in Asia Minor. There these women imparted information about the early history of the Jerusalem church to Papias, a church father.⁵

Philip had four daughters who prophesied, but we are not told whether they prophesied anything about Paul. We are told that after several days the prophet Agabus came from Judea and acted out his prophecy by binding his hands and feet with Paul’s belt, saying, “Thus says the Holy Spirit, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owns this belt, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.” On an earlier occasion, Agabus had come from Jerusalem to Antioch to foretell the famine of A.D. 46 (11:26-27).

Note: Notice that the spiritual gift of prophecy was still being recognized at this date (i.e. the late A.D. 50’s). Notice also that it was women who possessed this gift. We are not told whether they indeed prophesied anything at this point. The fact that these temporary spiritual gifts (cf. 1 Cor 13:8) were still present within these early days of the Church Age (or Age of the Body of Christ) is the reason we call this a Transition period. We will address the subject of spiritual gifts (temporary and permanent) more fully when we conclude this series.

Upon hearing the prophecy of Agabus, everyone tried to persuade Paul to turn back and not venture into Jerusalem. But, Paul indicated that they were only breaking his heart. Paul’s love and desire for his own Jewish brethren was so strong (cf. Rom 9:1-5; 10:1) that he was willing and ready to be imprisoned or die so that they might come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah Who had accomplished their redemption. With that, they ceased pleading and said, “The will of the Lord be done.”

On an earlier occasion in Corinth, Paul avoided an almost certain death at the hands of the unbelieving Jews who wanted to thwart the impact of his message (20:3). Why did he want to avoid death then and there, yet here in our passage, he is willing to walk right into it if necessary?

³ Charles F. Baker, *Understanding the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Bible College Publications, 1981), 131.

⁴ Constable, “Notes on the Book of Acts.”

⁵ Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus* – Twin Brooks series, popular ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), 3:39 quoted in Constable, “Notes on the Book of Acts.”

The answer rests with understanding Paul's motivation. Paul was motivated to see Jews and Gentiles unified in doctrine and faith. He also desired to deliver the financial contribution to the believers at Jerusalem (a complementary objective). If he died in Corinth or shortly after he had boarded a ship there, he could have never achieved that purpose. However, if he died in Jerusalem, he could have achieved that purpose and he knew that his death may have only served to advance the cause. Jesus avoided death on many occasions; however, He submitted to death in accordance with God's plan and purpose. Paul was willing to do the same.

From Caesarea to Jerusalem (21:15-16)

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

Although these believers had been informed that Paul would be bound and arrested in Jerusalem, Paul's traveling companions continued to travel with him. They would not leave Paul in his time of crisis.

Principle: True friends are there in a time of crisis – not just the good times.

Jerusalem was about 65 miles southeast of Caesarea, a long two-day trip. Mnason evidently became a Christian early in the history of the church, perhaps on the day of Pentecost. He was a Hellenistic Jewish Christian; he was from Cyprus, like Barnabas. As such he would have been more open to entertaining a mixed group of Jewish and Gentile Christians than many Hebrew Jewish Christians in Palestine would have been. Apparently he lived about halfway between Caesarea and Jerusalem.⁶

Paul Begins His Ministry in Jerusalem (21:17ff)

Paul is Urged to Make Peace (21:17-25)

17 And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. 18 And now the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. 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. 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; 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. 22 "What, then, is *to be done*? They will certainly hear that you have come. 23 "Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; 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. 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." 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.

⁶ Constable, "Notes on the Book of Acts."

Almost ten years had elapsed since Paul had last visited with the Jerusalem church leaders at the Jerusalem Council meeting in Acts 15. A few months prior to Paul's visit to Jerusalem that is recorded here in Acts 21, Paul had written his letter to the church in Rome and asked them to pray that his service might be accepted by the saints in Jerusalem (Rom 15:31). That prayer was answered. Paul survived the experience and if he had not, we would not have the prison epistles of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, and the letters to Timothy and Titus.

After being encouraged by Paul's report (and perhaps even statements made by some of Paul's companions as they delivered the offering collected from the Gentiles), the leadership of the church in Jerusalem raised concerns over problems that Paul was to confront. There were two groups of Jews in Jerusalem: 1) the unbelieving, Christ-rejecting Jewish leaders of the nation; and 2) believing, Christ-accepting Jewish Christians who still practiced elements of the Law and Judaistic traditions, e.g. circumcision and Sabbath observance. The leadership of the church in Jerusalem was primarily concerned with the Christian Jews.

When Paul had met with the Jerusalem church in Acts 15, the issue that was the central focus of debate was whether Gentile believers had to submit to circumcision and effectively become Jews in order to be viewed as having been saved people. However, James and the other leaders of the church at Jerusalem unanimously agreed that Gentile converts were under no obligation to keep or observe Jewish tradition and rituals in order to be saved. However, in the decision documented in Acts 15, nothing indicates that Jewish believers either had to cease or could not continue to observe Jewish ritual and traditions. In fact, it is inferred that they were to continue these practices. During the intervening ten year period, the number of believing Jews had grown to the thousands and the vast majority (if not all) of these Jewish believers continued to practice circumcision and observe elements of the Law and Jewish tradition.

Also, over the course of the ten year period, there were no doubt many false reports about Paul that had filtered back to Jerusalem. James and some of the other elders of the Jerusalem church were concerned about the number of Jewish believers who had believed these reports. Paul was accused of forbidding Jewish parents from circumcising their children and of aposticizing from Moses. Of course, this was incorrect since Paul's position only related to Gentiles and what was required of them to be saved – they did not have to keep any element of the Law since the Law had been fulfilled in Christ. If Jewish believers wanted to continue to observe elements of the Law, then they were at liberty to do so, but not obligated per Paul's teaching. We may remember that in an effort to not offend the Jews, Paul had circumcised Timothy on one occasion and he had written to the Jewish believers at Corinth that it was not necessary that they become uncircumcised now that they were Christians (1 Cor 7:18). Furthermore, Paul taught that circumcision was not an ordinance required for salvation by using the salvation of Abraham, the father of the Jewish race as an example. Abraham was saved by faith alone many years prior to circumcision being made an ordinance (Rom 4:9-11).

Paul must have been accused of such things as making the Law of God void or empty and of no effect. Paul responded in Romans 3:31 to the question – “Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.”

How would these thousands of Jewish believers in Jerusalem who believed these false reports about Paul react to his presence in Jerusalem? What could be done to persuade them that Paul was not an apostate? There were four of their number who had taken the Nazarite vows and were in the temple ready to be purified. They suggested that if Paul would join them, go through the purification ceremonies, and pay their expenses, this would be proof which should convince everyone that the charges against Paul were false and that he

himself was walking orderly according to the law. Paul agreed to follow their advice.⁷

It is very important that we also realize the greater context of what is occurring during this period of the 1st Century A.D. This trip by Paul to Jerusalem took place in A.D. 58. Paul had written the letter to the Romans in the Fall of A.D. 57. The Jewish believers in Jerusalem were still practicing and observing elements of the Law. In just a few short years, the tide of Roman opinion would turn against Christians and eventually against the Jews. First, Christians began to be seen by Rome as a religion apart from Judaism, thus no protected by association with Judaism. Jewish believers in Jerusalem were tempted to practice all aspects of the Law in order to share the exemption afforded to them by the Roman authorities who would view such practices as evidence of their Jewish faith. In addition, many of those Jewish believers may have simply turned from the faith. The writer of Hebrews in about A.D. 64 warned Jewish believers from apostacizing from the faith and reverting to the Law. Thus, within five or six years of Paul's visit to Jerusalem, God would make it very clear to Jewish believers that the practice of the sacrifices and ordinances associated with the Mosaic Law were to cease and were considered to be indicators that these believers had apostacized. These Jewish believers were exhorted to go outside the camp of Judaism, forsake Jerusalem and its temple worship and identify with Jesus (see Hebrews 13:11-13).

Paul paid the expenses of the four men who had taken a vow probably because the men had been impoverished by the famine in Jerusalem and Judea. In addition, when Herod Agrippa I had begun his reign over Judea in A.D. 41, he had paid for a considerable number of Nazirite vows to show his respect for the Mosaic Law. To illustrate to the Jewish brethren that he had not maligned or repudiated the Mosaic Law as having had a purpose, Paul offered to pay for their vow.

We will deal with Paul's arrest and defense in the next lesson.

⁷ Charles F. Baker, *Understanding the Book of Acts*, 134.