

## **A Prophet, A Vow, An Arrest**

**Acts of the Apostles**

**Acts 21:1-36**

**October 15, 2017**

***21 And when we had parted from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos, and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. <sup>2</sup> And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. <sup>3</sup> When we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload its cargo. <sup>4</sup> And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup> When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed <sup>6</sup> and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.***

***<sup>7</sup> When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. <sup>8</sup> On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. <sup>9</sup> He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. <sup>10</sup> While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. <sup>11</sup> And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem***

*will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’ ”<sup>12</sup> When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.<sup>13</sup> Then Paul answered, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”<sup>14</sup> And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, “Let the will of the Lord be done.”*

*<sup>15</sup> After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem.<sup>16</sup> And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge.*

#### *Paul Visits James*

*<sup>17</sup> When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly.<sup>18</sup> On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.<sup>19</sup> After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.<sup>20</sup> And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law,<sup>21</sup> and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.<sup>22</sup> What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.<sup>23</sup> Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow;<sup>24</sup> take these men and purify yourself along with them and*

*pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. <sup>25</sup> But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.” <sup>26</sup> Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.*

#### *Paul Arrested in the Temple*

*<sup>27</sup> When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, <sup>28</sup> crying out, “Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place.” <sup>29</sup> For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. <sup>30</sup> Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. <sup>31</sup> And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. <sup>32</sup> He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. <sup>33</sup> Then the*

***tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. <sup>34</sup> Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. <sup>35</sup> And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, <sup>36</sup> for the mob of the people followed, crying out, "Away with him!"***

We are moving into the final section of Acts. Our journey through this book has been eventful... it started with the ascension of Jesus into heaven, where He sits at the right hand of God. The nations have been placed under his feet as his footstool and he is now the ruler of heaven and earth. From there we experienced Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, who now indwells every believer. The church exploded as thousands of Jews believed that Jesus is the Christ. Then persecution came and Stephen was stoned to death. The church was scattered and as they went they shared their faith. A young man named Saul had stood and watched as Stephen was murdered. He had fully approved and actually became a murderer of Christians himself. His persecution of the church was so severe that even the believers in Damascus knew who he was and that he was coming to get them. But, in his sovereign plan, God had other ideas. Saul would become Paul, the ultimate apologist for Jesus Christ. It would be Paul who would evangelize

Asia and Eastern Europe. The gospel invasion of Europe would be led by the church's former persecutor. Four men would enter Macedonia, and now, a decade later, the churches in Macedonia and Greece were thriving. Millions of believers would come from that seemingly inconsequential invasion army.

Now, Paul's ministry in Asia has come to an end. He is headed back to Jerusalem. Traveling with him are representatives of the churches of Macedonia, Greece and Asia. They have a monetary gift, a relief fund from the Gentile churches to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem. This gift is Paul's idea, his passion. He intends to use the gift as a means of forging unity between the Gentile churches and the predominately Jewish church in Jerusalem. Paul has a huge burden for the Jewish people. This is a critically important point to understand if we are going to really understand the what is happening in our passage this morning. There is a barrier between the Jew and the Gentile. It has existed for nearly two thousand years. Paul wrote this to the church in Ephesus:

*Ephesians 2:13-16 -- But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.* There was a physical gate in

the temple that divided the Court of the Gentiles from the inner courts. Only Jews could pass through that gate. A sign on the wall, in multiple languages, warning those who were in the outer court... if you pass through this gate and you are a gentile, you will die a quick and certain death. It was a capital offense for a Gentile to enter the inner courts of the temple. That place was reserved for “God’s chosen people”. No trial, no testimony, no due process. Just immediate death. That fact will come into play at the end of our passage today.

The Apostle Paul had such a burden to see this barrier come down. It had been broken down in the death of Christ, but in the culture... that wall was still dividing them. It was gone in God’s economy, but in the brokenness of the culture it would only be brought down by the Jews coming into faith in Christ and they were very resistant! Paul hoped that the offering from the Gentile churches would be a huge step toward unity, showing the Jews, especially the Jewish believers, that the Gentiles were in one accord with them and that in Christ they were true brothers and sisters. So that brings us to our passage. Here is an outline:

- 21:1-16. A Frightening Prophecy
- 21:17-26. A Questionable Ministry Decision
- 21:27-36. A Prediction Comes True

## **A Frightening Prophecy**

Paul is leaving Ephesus for the last time. Get a good feel for Paul’s state of mind. In verse one it says, “When we had parted from them and set sail.”

The word that is translated “parted” in the ESV carries a much deeper meaning. It literally means to be “dragged away” or “torn apart”. It could be translated, “When we had been torn away from them...” Paul was grieving over the Asian churches. These people were his friends and disciples. He knew he would never see them again. So, he set off for Tyre and then on to Caesarea, the home of Philip the evangelist. We last saw Philip when he had shared the gospel with the Ethiopian eunuch.

Now, all these years later, Philip is married and has four unmarried daughters... all of whom were prophets. How fascinating! Look at verse 10. Paul stayed with Philip for “many days.” Then a prophet from Jerusalem named Agabus stopped by to visit. It is no coincidence. Agabus has a message for Paul. He takes Paul’s belt and ties up his hands and feet. This is really important... the Holy Spirit is speaking through Agabus when he says, “This is what the Jews at Jerusalem will do to the man who owns this belt.” The reaction of all those who are with Paul is immediate and direct. Notice in verse 12, Luke includes himself... we and the people there, this would include Philip and his four prophetic daughters, urged him not to go to Jerusalem.

This passage begs for some conversation and consideration. Remember when Paul was in still in Corinth and then on his way to Ephesus and Syria, Luke told us that he was warned in every city, by the Holy Spirit, that he would be arrested and afflicted. Here is what he says in Acts 20:22, *And*

*now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.* Now Agabus has confirmed these warnings and Paul's friends and co-laborers urged him, they pleaded with him, not to go. Paul's answer to them is convicting and compelling. He says to them, "Why are you crying, it is breaking my heart. I am ready to be imprisoned and even to die if I have to for the cause of Christ." Now look at what Luke says as he ends the conversation, "since he would not be persuaded... we said, 'the will of the Lord be done.'"

Here is my question as I read this passage. How could Paul and those who were with him both be right about whether Paul should go to Jerusalem, if they were both being led by the Holy Spirit? It is a difficult question that arises in this passage. Paul said in Acts 20 that he was constrained by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem, even though he was being warned of what would happen. And, Agabus prophesying under the leading of the Holy Spirit, warned of his arrest in Jerusalem. Think about who are pleading with Paul not to go. Agabus, is a prophet of God; Philip is an evangelist and a seasoned, Godly leader of the church who had lived his life under the direction of the Holy Spirit; Philip's four daughters who Luke took special care to tell us were all prophets themselves; and Luke, a man who had traveled extensively with Paul and who was a Godly man, not prone to fear or intimidation. Paul was getting advice from all of these, under the

direction of the Holy Spirit, not to go. So who was right, because they can't both be right.

Here is the question, did Paul make a mistake when he went against their advice and headed off to Jerusalem? When I first considered this question, my immediate answer was "no". Most commentators on the passage agree with that answer, including two of the commentaries I use extensively in this series, written by F.F. Bruce and John Stott. But I also found a commentator who made a strong case for the answer being "yes, Paul made a mistake and went against the leading of the Holy Spirit." That was James Boice, a man whose opinion I greatly respect and routinely consult. Boice believes that Paul made a serious mistake when he went to Jerusalem. That the Holy Spirit had been warning him with increasing intensity, an intensity that had climaxed with the prophecy of Agabus. Boice makes his claim based most particularly on what happens when Paul arrives in Jerusalem... when his desire to see his Jewish kinsmen come to know Jesus seems to have overtaken his ability to hear the leading of the Spirit. We are going to look at that in detail, because when Paul arrives in Jerusalem, he is going to do something in the name of Jewish/Christian unity that we would never expect from the apostle Paul. Boice says, "In spite of these warnings, Paul yearned for the salvation of the Jews so much that he disregarded what he had been told and went to Jerusalem." Now, I don't want to be dogmatic nor do I want us to get off on a rabbit trail. But I think there are some important lessons to be learned by wrestling

with this question. Luke does not give us his opinion about whether Paul was right or wrong here. He simply tells us what happened. We know that Luke did not favor going, but he never says that Paul disregarded the Holy Spirit, or that his going was a mistake. So, I will leave you to draw your own conclusions on that issue, but wait until we discuss what I believe is a very questionable ministry decision made by Paul in Jerusalem. Look at verse 17.

### **A Questionable Ministry Decision**

The team has arrived in Jerusalem. They are staying with Mnason of Cyprus, who Luke tells us had been one of the early believers, maybe one who had believed at Pentecost. The day after they arrived they went to see James. This is James the brother of Jesus, the author of the book of James. Peter was now gone from Jerusalem and James was the leader of the church in Jerusalem. After they had greeted one another, Paul gave James and the elders an update on all that had happened in the years since he had last come to Jerusalem. It must have been a long discussion, it says he went through them “one by one”... that is a lot of stories! The leaders in Jerusalem were overjoyed when they heard the report. Luke doesn't record this, but remember the whole purpose of coming to Jerusalem was to deliver the offerings from the Gentile churches to the church in Jerusalem. That must have happened at this meeting.

Then James told Paul their own stories about how the gospel had spread in Jerusalem and how many thousands of Jews had proclaimed the name of Jesus. But James had a problem. He told Paul, these Jewish believers are also very zealous for the law. They had been told (wrongly) by opponents of the gospel that Paul was teaching Jewish background believers to ignore the law, not to circumcise their children and to generally disregard their Jewish heritage. Remember, this is a very similar argument that the Jewish leaders had used in many of the cities that Paul had visited in Europe and Asia. But, here is where the problem begins. This is why I took the risk of bringing up whether Paul should have come to Jerusalem. Look at what James says to Paul in verse 22... “What then is to be done?” Reading between the lines, here is what James is saying, “They will know you are here, they will be watching you to see what you do and say. You know how hard we have been working to foster unity between the Jews and those who have become believers in Christ. What you do here will either split the church or propel us into a future of cooperation and unity.” Now, remember Paul’s own strong desire to see the barrier come down between Jews and Gentiles. He knows that barrier has been removed in Christ and he wants nothing in this world more passionately than to have his kinsmen come to Christ. Listen to what he written just months before in his letter to the Romans, it is found in Romans 9:1-3, *I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit— that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I*

*could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.* Paul was willing to be sent to hell for all eternity, if he could take the place of his fleshly kinsmen, the Jewish people. This is not hyperbole. Paul meant it, he would do it if it was possible. Imagine! Now, James is offering him what appears to be an opportunity to do something that will further the evangelization of the Jews of Jerusalem. Show your love for the law, take a vow, purify yourself ceremonially and make an offering at the end of the purification rites. Paul will join four other men who had taken a Nazarite vow. This is a vow that is outlined in Numbers 6:1-21. A Nazarite is one who voluntarily takes a vow of consecration or separation. It required the person to abstain from wine or wine vinegar, grapes, raisins, and any intoxicating liquors. The person also had to refrain from cutting their hair and avoided becoming impure by contacting a corpse or a grave. At the end of the period of consecration, which in this case was one week, the individual would then make three offerings, a lamb as a burnt offering; a ewe as a sin offering and a ram as a peace offering. They would also shave their heads and offer their hair to be burned along with the peace offering.

The logic of James' request is clear. If Paul shows his "Jewishness" by taking a Nazarite vow and making a sacrifice, that will calm his critics and keep the people from rising up against him the teachings of Christianity. Paul says, "Yes, I will do it."

Here, I have to say that I agree with Boice. This is a serious mistake on Paul's part. Of all people, the apostle Paul should be the last person on earth who would participate in this ceremony. He had strenuously argued with the Judaizers when they tried to teach the Gentiles they had to circumcise their children if they wanted them to be saved. Paul had distributed the letter from the Jerusalem Council to all the churches of Asia, Macedonia and Greece. Of course, this was different than the argument at the Jerusalem Council. James made sure to say that in verse 25. Taking the vow didn't negate the Council's decision. This vow, in their minds, was simply contextualized ministry, a way to show the Jews that the Christian faith was not judgmental or condemning or exclusive. This was not about salvation, it was about race relations and moral living.

I totally understand the logic and why Paul would do it. But, here is the rub. The Nazarite vow included an offering for forgiveness of sin and an offering of peace with God. To make an offering to God and ask for forgiveness of sin and peace is to deny the completed sacrifice of Jesus Christ and, as the writer of Hebrews called it, it re-crucifies Jesus. To offer a sacrifice for sin was to deny the once and for all sacrifice of the savior. When Jesus died on the cross he dealt with our sin, once and for all. He didn't die so we could make a sacrifice and ask God to consider forgiving us. Jesus didn't die to make it possible for us to be saved, he died to save us once and for all. Christ death brought believers peace with God. In Paul's zeal to be culturally relevant and to calm any division between Jews

and Gentiles, he denied the very gospel that he had preached so effectively in all of Asia and Europe. He didn't intend to, he didn't see it that way. His intentions were pure. But I agree with Boice, it was a huge mistake. It was a mistake that God allowed Paul to make and a mistake that God would use to further his purposes, but it was a mistake. Remember what Luke had said in Caesarea? "Let the will of the Lord be done." Well, ultimately God's will is always accomplished, but sometimes just not how we expect. Remember, Romans 8 teaches us two things that we must always understand. First, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Second, for those who love God, all things work together for good for those who are called according to his purpose. Paul is no exception. No condemnation, but he made a mistake in my opinion. Yet, God will use it to accomplish his purposes, which also are for Paul's good since he is called to the purposes of God! Now, Agabus' prophecy is going to come true, look at verse 27.

### **A Prediction Comes True**

Paul never made it to the end of the period of the vow. I firmly believe we can see God's hand in this. He did not allow Paul to sacrifice in the temple. Just like God has taken away the sacrifices from the Jews, he took it away from Paul and did not allow him to follow through with his vow. The seven days were almost up, but not quite, and here come the Jews from Ephesus. They accuse Paul of taking Greeks into the temple. Remember, that was a

capital offense. They stir up the people until a riot breaks out. They grab Paul and start beating him. The only thing that kept him from being killed was the Roman commander. Just a side note here... notice how throughout the book of Acts we see the Jews violently opposed to the gospel and the Roman authorities being tolerant and even downright supportive of the gospel. Something to consider on another day. The scene is chaos and the soldiers have to actually pick Paul up and carry him off, while the people are screaming, "Away with him!" This could also be translated "do away with him, kill him!"

Think about the venom of Satan in these people. Paul loved the Jews so much as a people that he would be willing to be sent to hell for them. He had challenged the Gentile believers to give to the Jews in Jerusalem. He had compromised and taken a Nazarite vow to show his concern for the Jews and the law of God. All of that was for nothing... Satan hates Paul, he hates all Christians, because he hates Jesus. Crucify Him... Crucify him... Away with Him, Away with Him... such similar scenes.

## **Application**

I think the application of this passage is pretty straightforward. But let me make a couple of suggestions of areas where we need to be very careful in our ministry. Today it is very much in fashion to talk about unity and peace among people of like minds. In our city, there are efforts that are seriously attempting to bring unity for the common good among Christians, Jews,

and Muslims. There are efforts to band together with those who claim to be Christian but teach another version of Christ, like the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons. We need to be very careful how we think about this. Many times we find allies in these groups when we are working on things that benefit the general good of the community, like distribution of food and community development. These can be good and very appropriate. But we can never compromise the gospel. It can happen so easily when we do things like community prayer services that are intended to bring people together. Christians, Jews and Muslims do not pray to the same God. Neither do Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses. If Jesus is not God incarnate, then you do not know the one true God. Your God is false. No matter what we do in the name of unity, if it isn't truth, if it isn't gospel, it won't make any permanent difference. The natural world is fallen and under the dominion of evil. Satan hates Jesus and his gospel. We must be determined, as Paul was, to preach the gospel to every person. But we have to be careful that we use a means of ministry that honors the sacrifice of Christ. Don't get caught up in thinking that the end justifies the means. Unity among people and peace with God is only found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. That which divides is also the only true unifier. Never, ever forget that. Trust the gospel, it is the one and only means of salvation.

