

The Last Leg

Acts 21:1-17

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There is a significant contingent of people who call themselves Christians who believe that when we do what God wants, our lives will become much easier, less stressful, and more enjoyable. They frequently talk of God blessing those who are obedient to Him (and God does bless obedience), but they define blessing as comfort, wealth, and freedom from troubles. I think Paul's life shows this simply isn't how God works. Sometimes doing what God calls us to do results in hardship. Hard times shouldn't cause us to doubt God is in control or conclude He has abandoned us. Paul endured much hardship, but trusted God had a purpose in it all.

As I mentioned last week, we are at kind of a hinge point in the book of Acts. Paul has completed his three missionary journeys and is on his way back to Jerusalem. The final section of Acts records Paul's hardships after his arrest in Jerusalem and his eventual imprisonment in Rome. Many question whether Paul returning to Jerusalem was being disobedient to God, making his hardships a consequence of that choice, or whether Paul's hardships were God's plan all along, and Paul's decision to return to Jerusalem is a picture of incredible faithfulness. We'll wrestle with this and some of the other questions raised by this passage as we walk through the first half of Acts 21 today.

To Tyre

Last week, we left off with the Ephesian elders visiting Paul while he was on the island of Miletus. He had told them that they would never see him again, and they all wept as they came to grips with the reality that this would be their last meeting in this life. Paul seems to have had a pretty good idea of what awaited him in Jerusalem. Luke records the group's next steps after they left Miletus.

After saying farewell to the Ephesian elders, we sailed straight to the island of Cos. The next day we reached Rhodes and then went to Patara.² There we boarded a ship sailing for Phoenicia.³ We sighted the island of Cyprus, passed it on our left, and landed at the harbor of Tyre, in Syria, where the ship was to unload its cargo. (Acts 21:1-3, NLT)

They made their way through the Aegean Sea, island hopping their way back until they reached Patara. It would seem that the first ship they were on was too small to make a long voyage at sea, which is why they kept stopping at each port. Each port was likely a day's journey, then they would dock for the night and resupply. When they got to Patara, they were able to get on a much larger cargo ship that was crossing the Mediterranean towards Phoenicia. As Paul passed by Cyprus, where his first missionary journey had begun, I wonder if he reflected on all that had happened since then. He couldn't have known all that God had in store for him at that time. I suspect he felt a similar sense as he returned to Jerusalem, not knowing all that lay ahead for him, but still trusting God.

The boat eventually reached Tyre, where it was to unload its cargo. The ship stayed in port for about a week, which afforded Paul and his traveling companions time to find the local body of believers and meet with them.

⁴ We went ashore, found the local believers, and stayed with them a week. These believers prophesied through the Holy Spirit that Paul should not go on to Jerusalem. ⁵ When we returned to the ship at the end of the week, the entire congregation, including women and children, left the city and came down to the shore with us. There we knelt, prayed, ⁶ and said our farewells. Then we went aboard, and they returned home. (Acts 21:4-6, NLT)

Paul and his companions spent the week with the local believers. I am sure they enjoyed getting to share all about what God was doing in these cities far away from Israel, and it surely served as a great encouragement to the believers in Tyre that God was working in ways they couldn't have imagined.

Apparently were some believers in Tyre had the gift of prophecy. Luke says they prophesied through the Holy Spirit that Paul should not go on to Jerusalem. This statement is the source of the debate about Paul's trip. There are basically two camps.

The first says God told Paul not to go to Jerusalem, but he stubbornly chose to go anyway. Those who espouse this view point to this verse, saying that Paul's warnings from the Holy Spirit that hardships and jail lay ahead were God telling him not to go. They point out that this verse says the believers prophesied through the Holy Spirit, pointedly telling Paul not to go. So, Paul's choice to go anyway represents disobedience, and was the reason God allowed him to be imprisoned. I understand this view and it seems plausible. Nonetheless, I tend to lean toward the second view.

The second view says God warned Paul about hardships but didn't tell him not to go to Jerusalem. Those who lean this direction conclude that the Holy Spirit had warned the prophets in Tyre about the hardships that lay ahead for Paul, and then they concluded that Paul shouldn't go—not that the Holy Spirit specifically told them Paul shouldn't go.

I lean toward this interpretation because it seems consistent with the messages God had been relaying through the Holy Spirit to Paul and is consistent with the message we will see from Agabus in the succeeding verses as well. Paul mentioned earlier that the Holy Spirit had been consistently warning him that hardships and prison lay ahead. But he also said he felt bound by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem. While Christians are often able to find lots of ways to justify the things they want to do, even when they shouldn't do them, Paul's statements do not sound like a person who was stubbornly going their own way (like we see with Jonah), but like a person who was convinced of what the Lord wanted him to do, even though he knew it would cost him dearly. None of this was a huge surprise to Paul, since God had told him from the very beginning that He would show him how much he would have to suffer.

So, despite the warnings from the believers in Tyre, Paul continued resolutely toward Jerusalem. I think he showed great faith in this decision. I think Paul was not concerned with his own selfish motives at all. He certainly would have preferred to be free. He would have preferred an easier course of things. But he was not afraid to face hardship if that's what the Lord wanted from him.

Paul's attitude has much to teach us. Many of us conclude that God has abandoned us or that we have made a mistake if anything even remotely difficult comes into our lives. We assume that obedience to God must always lead to ease in this life. But that simply isn't the case.

Paul's example teaches us the importance of resolutely following God's commands, regardless of the cost. Many believers are willing to follow the Lord when things are going well, but if things get hard, we back off. If we face the choice of obedience to the Lord or a promotion at work, or more money, or success in sports, school, or business, or being popular, or any number of other things, we often choose the path of ease rather than the path of obedience. Paul reminds us that our decisions should be based on a singular question: what does the Lord desire of me? Like Paul, the cost of that obedience shouldn't matter, but our faith should drive us to follow Him, no matter the cost.

After the week was up, the believers in Tyre all went down to the shore with Paul and his companions to see them off. They knelt with them and prayed for them. I wonder what these prayers were like. Is it possible that the people who prophesied that Paul shouldn't go tried to guilt-trip him in their prayers? "Oh Lord, we pray that you would care for Paul, even as he willingly walks into the lion's den. Please help him to see the error of his ways—or at the very least protect him from being harmed too greatly in his disobedience." Maybe that wasn't what these prayers were like. I suspect it was a time of warm fellowship and love. I like to think the believers prayed for Paul and his companions to be faithful, and they thanked God for their continued ministry among them and others like them. Never underestimate the power of praying for another believer. Your prayers can not only bring God's power to bear in their lives but also bolster their spirit and give them courage to face whatever lies ahead.

In Caesarea

After they left Tyre, Paul and his companions got back on the boat as it headed to its next port, the city of Ptolemais in Phoenicia.

⁷ The next stop after leaving Tyre was Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and sisters and stayed for one day. ⁸ The next day we went on to Caesarea and stayed at the home of Philip the Evangelist, one of the seven men who had been chosen to distribute food. ⁹ He had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy.

¹⁰ Several days later a man named Agabus, who also had the gift of prophecy, arrived from Judea. ¹¹ He came over, took Paul's belt, and bound his own feet and hands with it. Then he said, "The Holy Spirit declares, 'So shall the owner of

this belt be bound by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and turned over to the Gentiles.' " ¹² When we heard this, we and the local believers all begged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.

¹³ But he said, "Why all this weeping? You are breaking my heart! I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but even to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus."

¹⁴ When it was clear that we couldn't persuade him, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done." (Acts 21:7-14, NLT)

Ptolemais was a short distance from Tyre, and they were only there for one day, but they still gathered with the local believers. The next day they left Ptolemais and headed to Caesarea, a major port city, and a place where they knew there were many believers.

One of the believers they knew there was Philip the evangelist. We were introduced to Philip in Acts chapter 6, where he was selected as one of the men who would help to run the food program in the Jerusalem church. Later, Philip was given the chance to share the gospel with the Ethiopian eunuch (likely part of why he became known as the evangelist). Philip had continued to be a faithful servant of the Lord and was now residing in Caesarea. He had four believing daughters, who were described as having the gift of prophecy. This brief statement reminds us that women were not second-class citizens in the early church. God had given gifts to both men and women to serve Him.

Philip played host to Paul and his entourage. During their time in Caesarea, a prophet named Agabus showed up and vividly depicted what was going to happen to Paul. He took off Paul's belt and bound his own hands and feet with it, saying the same would happen to Paul when he went to Jerusalem.

Notice that Agabus did not tell Paul not to go. He relayed the message the Holy Spirit had given him, which was that Paul would be bound by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and turned over to the Gentiles. None of this was news to Paul. The Holy Spirit had been telling him the same thing for quite some time. But it was new information for the believers in Caesarea, and they begged Paul not to go.

There are significant parallels between Paul's trip to Jerusalem and Jesus' last trip to Jerusalem as well. When Jesus told his disciples that he would be turned over to the religious leaders and executed, his disciples tried to stop Him. They told Him not to go. And we can understand their attitude! From a merely human perspective it would make sense not to go. If there's hardship ahead, if there's danger, if you might possibly lose your life, it makes sense to turn around and go the opposite direction!

But Jesus understood that He had a job to do in Jerusalem, and the only way for Him to accomplish His mission was to face the hardship that lay ahead directly. Paul had the same attitude. He was confident this was where the Lord wanted him to be, so he had made peace with his fate. He was prepared to sacrifice his own comfort, his freedom, and even his life if it meant the Lord would be honored.

He told the believers in Caesarea as much. He told them not to weep over his fate, because he was confident he was doing what the Lord wanted. Luke's statement is humorous: "When it was clear we couldn't persuade him, we gave up and said. 'The Lord's will be done.'" They tried to convince Paul not to go. Luke says "we" couldn't persuade him, so he may have even been one of the voices telling him not to go. But ultimately, they chose to rest in the fact that God was in control. I'm not sure whether this was more a statement of frustration or faith. Sometimes it's a fine line between the two! But our attitude should always be to rest in the fact that God is directing the course of events in our lives. He promises He is working for good in *all things*, so we can walk through any hardship knowing that God's will is ultimately going to be accomplished.

The last stage of the journey took place on foot, accompanied by some of the believers from Caesarea.

¹⁵ After this we packed our things and left for Jerusalem. ¹⁶ Some believers from Caesarea accompanied us, and they took us to the home of Mnason, a man originally from Cyprus and one of the early believers. ¹⁷ When we arrived, the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem welcomed us warmly. (Acts 21:15-17, NLT)

After weeks of travel, Paul and the group from the Gentile churches arrived in Jerusalem, prepared to bring their offering to the believers there. The church in Jerusalem was excited to see them all and welcomed them as equal members of the body of Christ. This was a time of sweet fellowship, though I suspect Paul's entourage felt that a dark cloud hung over their heads. They wondered what was going to happen next. I doubt any of them (even Paul) could have fully anticipated what lay ahead. Fortunately, they didn't have to. They rested in the knowledge that God knew, and that was good enough.

Conclusion

This passage raises a lot of questions for us, but hopefully also gives us some hope and direction for how we should live and view the trials of our own lives. As we conclude today, I want to draw a couple of applications.

First, we should learn how to discern God's will, and then do it. The topic of knowing the will of God is one that confuses and bewilders many Christians. There is so much teaching on how to discern God's will that it is overwhelming. Some people give the impression that if you just learn how to discern God's will properly, then He'll guide every decision, down to what underwear you should put on today. I'm not inclined to think that's the case. That hasn't been my experience, nor has it been the experience of many other devoted believers throughout history.

Augustine famously said that we should "Love God, and do whatever you please." This sounds like bad advice, until you understand what he was really saying. He was saying that if our hearts are in the right place, then the things we desire will be what God desires. So, how do we discern God's will? We carefully look at what God values in scripture, and we ask God to help us desire what He does. As we understand what God wants, we should want that above all as well. We must be careful, of course, because

we're good at lying to ourselves about what our true desires are. This is where having a trusted, mature, believing friend can help us. They can push us to discover our true motivations, and whether we are really desiring to obey God, or have selfish motives. Once we are honest about our motivations, knowing God's will isn't that hard. When we make God's priorities our priorities, things become much simpler (if not always easier).

Second, we should do what God calls us to, even if it costs us. You may be familiar with the story of Eric Liddell, the famous Scottish track star and a devout Christian. His story was told in the movie, *Chariots of Fire*. Liddell was a great runner and was scheduled to run the 100-meter dash in the 1924 Olympics. But the preliminary race was on a Sunday, and Liddell felt strongly that he needed to take a stand by refusing to run on Sunday. The result was that he wasn't able to compete in his best event. But the reason he is most remembered is what happened after. Though he was not able to compete in the 100, he ended up winning the gold medal and setting a world record in the 400-meter race, an event no one expected him to win! Ironically, few would have remembered Liddell if he hadn't taken a stand for Christ—but because it cost him, his story continues to make an impact.

Liddell had an attitude like Paul. He was willing to do what he believed the Lord desired from him, no matter the cost. Most of us would find ways to rationalize around our beliefs if a gold medal was on the line. Similarly, we could conclude that God would be ok with our compromise if it spared our lives or kept us out of prison. In truth, we're good at rationalizing all sorts of reasons we can compromise, because surely the Lord wouldn't want me to experience hardship! We must learn to take a page from Paul and Eric Liddell. We must follow the Lord's will, regardless of what it may cost. This isn't foolishness, it's faith. It's believing that God has a plan and a purpose and that His way is best, even when we don't understand the how or why behind it.

Finally, we must trust in God, especially in hard times. There are a lot of times that our lives don't go the way we planned. There are times we wish God had drawn things up differently. There are times we may even question the wisdom of what He's doing. But a better approach is to choose trust. When the hard times come, ask what the Lord might be teaching you. Ask what task He might have for you to carry out. As we will see, God used Paul even in the midst of these difficult times. He can and will do the same for us, we simply need to trust Him.

For many, the life of faith seems crazy. For a world that values comfort, "success", and material gain, giving up any of those things to follow the Lord makes no sense at all. But when we approach life with eyes of faith, it makes perfect sense. When we believe that God knows better than we do, when we believe that He is in control, when we believe He is working all things for good, it not only makes sense to follow Him, it seems foolish not to! That was the attitude Paul had. My hope is that it will be ours as well.

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