

More Than a Little Comfort & Encouragement

Acts: The Spirit Moving / Acts 20:1-12 / May 24, 2026

Introduction:

This morning, we are returning to our study of Acts to finish the final eight chapters of Luke's narrative account over the next few months. This final section covers Paul's journey to Jerusalem, imprisonment and trials, and Paul's travel to Rome as a prisoner, holding a lot of similarities to Jesus' final days on earth. Ending with his entry into Rome brings Luke's letter to an appropriate close, marking the fulfillment of Jesus' promise in Acts 1:8 as the gospel reaches the ends of the known earth. Our passage today begins the final steps in Paul's journey to Jerusalem and our understanding of it is significantly shaped by Paul's final moments with the Ephesian elders at the end of chapter 20. Look again at what Paul shared with them in Acts 20:22-24 "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. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again." Note Paul's declaration of being constrained by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem and knowledge of them never seeing his face again. This and the affectionate departure at the end of chapter 20 launch us into our story which directly correlates to those words shared with the Ephesian elders. To grasp Luke's main point in our passage, we will carefully follow the story's problem to its climax and resolution. Start with the story's problem in verses 1-12, where we see,

Spirit-Inspired Pleas of Care and Concern

Follow the flow of verses 1-6. Look at verses 1-4, "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. And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. 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. And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days." Pause there. Following Paul's departure from the Ephesian elders, Luke quickly details their journey from Cos, to Rhodes, to Patara, and to Tyre. The voyage from Patara to Tyre would have been around four hundred miles alone. Then, the narrative slows down in verse 4 as the travelers seek out disciples in Tyre and stay with them for seven days. Note what happens in verse 4, "And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem." "Through the Spirit" indicates their pleas came from the Spirit's prompting in some form, likely through some sort of prophesy. Hang onto this as we continue. Look at verses 5-6, "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 and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home." Their pleas are ineffective, and the parting mirrors the end Acts 20 with the Ephesian elders. Only now it is an entire church that has known Paul for only seven days, rather than elders he spent three years with. Consider this powerful testimony of how quickly they were bound in unity and love for Paul. And note their final response at the end of verse 5. They didn't simply share their heart and move on. They brought Paul before the Lord in prayer before saying farewell. Continue in verses 7-9, "When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. 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. He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied." Luke quickly details their travels from Tyre, to Ptolemais, and to Caesarea, before slowing down again to focus on Philip and his family. Philip is identified by his spiritual gift of evangelism and participation in the seven from Acts 6, reminding us of how the Spirit used him in Samaria and with the Ethiopian Eunuch on the road to Caesarea. Then, Luke shares of Philip's daughters and their prophetic ministry. This detail is interesting.

Philip's daughters become known for their prophetic gifts and as respected voices throughout early church history, even serving as sources of information for the second century bishop, Papias, who documented early Christian oral tradition (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, 3.39). However, Luke simply mentions them, and doesn't even share any content of their prophecies, while using language that indicates an ongoing prophetic ministry. In the New Testament, prophets and prophetesses served several functions; receiving insight into the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, giving new predictive prophecies, and sharing revelations that bring comfort, encouragement, and consolation to God's people. We don't know the function they filled, but context suggests they may have been giving further predictions of Paul's trials in Jerusalem or sharing revelations from the Spirit to provide him encouragement. But why insert this detail and nothing more? I agree with many who see this as the continual fulfillment of Joel's prophecy, showing the Spirit working through all kinds of people. The detail about them being unmarried may even serve to make it more surprising to see them prophesying. We'll come back to this later. For now, look at verses 10-12, "While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 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."' When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem." Luke immediately turns to Agabus, who prophesied of the famine in Acts 11, arriving to give a detailed prophecy of Paul's coming persecution in Jerusalem. This highlights the content of this prophecy as the focus of the story. Yet, not in the way we might think. We'll see its fulfillment in Acts 21:27-33, though slightly different than Agabus predicts. Rather than the Jews binding Paul and delivering him to the Gentiles, Gentile authorities bind Paul, saving him from the Jews beating him to death. What do we make of this difference? I would suggest two possibilities. One, Agabus may have misinterpreted the details of the Spirit's revelation, mixing up the roles in what would take place. Two, he gives a generalized prophecy in line with others from the Old Testament, which are not intended to be precise. Neither possibility makes him a false prophet because the primary content came true, and both help us understand the gift of prophecy, which we will consider later. Either way, Luke's primary goal is to highlight this prophecy before turning our attention to believers urging Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Note how this mirrors the sequence of events from verse 4 in Tyre. Twice, we see pleas of care and concern for Paul, suggesting both came after similar prophetic revelations by the Spirit. Now, these pleas present a problem for us as readers, because we just heard Paul share how he was constrained by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. This brings me to the story's main point where the climax and resolution meet in verses 13-16, revealing,

Spirit-Filled Resolve to Trust in God's Will

Feel the tension by putting yourself in Paul's shoes, hearing these passionate pleas over what awaits you in Jerusalem. Now, look at verse 13, "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.'" Paul looks at them and says, "Don't go breaking my heart. These revelations are not surprising, and they certainly aren't reasons for me not to go, because I'm ready to die for Jesus' sake." Let this sink in. God's people assumed the prophecies of suffering meant Paul should avoid Jerusalem, but he saw them as grace to deepen his trust in God as he went. Notice the resolution in verses 14-16, "And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, 'Let the will of the Lord be done.' After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. 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's resolve to follow the Lord was strong and he could not be persuaded otherwise. Why? I believe it is because Paul understood Jesus' words in John 16:33, where He said, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world." Remember, Paul told disciples in Acts 14:22, "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." He knew trials, tribulations, and suffering are not outside of God's will, and sometimes they are the specific way of it.

And note how Paul's resolve led to everyone trusting the Lord's will, even moving some disciples from Caesarea to join them. What a powerful testimony of trusting in the Lord's will. One that we should dwell on. To close our time, consider three things we can learn from this story. First,

1) We Should Receive & Respond to Prophecy with Care

This isn't the main point, but I believe we can learn something about the Spiritual gift of prophecy from this story. Note who are using this gift. It's the church in Tyre, Philip's unmarried daughters, and Agabus, all of whom are not connected to apostolic ministry. They are simply part of God's new covenant people. Joel's prophecy said God would pour out His Spirit on all people in the last days. One reason I'm persuaded God still gives the gift of prophecy today is because we don't see it relegated only to apostolic ministry in the New Testament. Therefore, I believe the commands of 1 Thessalonians 5:19–20 and 1 Corinthians 14:1 still apply today, which tell us, "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies" and "earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy." And I see this story encouraging the use of these gifts as we see it leading to a beautiful resolve to follow the will of the Lord. Yet, we need to abide by the instructions of 1 Thessalonians 5:21–22 and 1 Corinthians 14:29, to "test everything; hold fast what is good" and "weigh what is said." And I see our passage discloses why and what to weigh and test. When the gift of prophecy is exercised, there is no error in the Spirit's revelation, but, as our passage shows, there can be error in our interpretation and application of it. So, we should weigh and test the interpretation and application of prophetic revelations. To guide the proper use of these gifts, let me give three brief encouragements from this passage. First, if you receive a revelation, share only what you receive. Whether it is a word, picture, dream, or scripture related to something, fight the temptation to expound on what was received. Let the revelation stand on its own merits. Second, humbly share it with others and ask them to weigh it with you. We see a pattern in the New Testament of the covenant community weighing and testing prophecy together. Third, pray for clarity until you have clarity of the application. Family, I share this because I am persuaded the Spirit still uses these gifts today to strengthen the church in similar ways we see in our passage. And when we receive and respond to prophecy with care, weighing and testing the meaning and application, we'll see this gift providing comfort, encouragement, guidance, and consolation. Second, and this is the main take away,

2) We Must Trust the Will of the Lord

The main point of this story is seen in the story arc. In verse 4, the problem is introduced with the church in Tyre telling Paul not to go to Jerusalem "through the Spirit." The tension rises in verse 12 with everyone urging Paul not to go to Jerusalem following Agabus' prophecy, reaching its climax in verse 13 when Paul declares his willingness to die for Jesus' sake. And the resolution is in verse 14 when everyone trusts in the will of the Lord. Family, we must trust the will of the Lord, even, at times, when counsel from other believers is trying to persuade us otherwise. Now, we need to be careful here. Paul's resolve came from the Spirit's leading connected to truth from Jesus. Don't use this passage to deny wise godly counsel and go against God's revealed Word because you think the Spirit is leading you. Paul kept moving forward because the Spirit's constraint on him agreed with Jesus' call of discipleship and promise of tribulations. If you believe the Spirit is leading you in a direction that does not align with Scripture, and godly counsel is urging you in a different direction, turn from the error of your way. But, if the Spirit's leading aligns with God's Word, trust in the will of the Lord regardless of what may come. Finally, this story can teach us how,

3) We Don't Know the Purpose of Our Suffering

The thought of suffering didn't deter Paul. And a study of Paul's ministry following his persecution and arrest in Jerusalem reveals a purpose in Paul's suffering far beyond what anyone could see. Paul's arrest in Jerusalem will place him before various Gentile rulers and authorities to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. It also set in motion events that led to his imprisonment in Rome.

Consider what he says in Philippians 1:12-13, while imprisoned, “I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.” The suffering prophesied of in Acts 21 expands the reach of the gospel in magnificent ways. Family, we don’t know God’s has in our suffering, but I guarantee you it is never meaningless.

Conclusion:

So, as the worship team comes for our time of response, let me end with Jesus’ words in Mark 8:34-35. Jesus says to each of us, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.” This life is a mist, a vapor, a blip. Eternity is forever. Resolve to let the will of the Lord be done. Like Jesus and Paul, set your gaze on what lies beyond this life, knowing the rewards of taking up your cross far outweigh any suffering you may experience. Lose your life for Christ’s and the gospel’s sake, so you can save it. Would you pray with me as we prepare to respond?