

MBC – 9/13/2020 – Pastor Doug Thompson
“On the Way to Jerusalem”
 Acts 21:1-16

This morning we continue in our study of Acts, so turn with me to ch.21. You remember that Luke wrote two books – or scrolls – the first was the *Gospel of Luke* that recorded all that Jesus began to do and to teach, including His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. The Book of Acts is “*The Continuing Words and Deeds of Jesus by His Spirit through His Apostles.*” Jesus is alive on every page of Acts, isn’t He? And He is moving His Gospel out from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and finally out to all the nations. He is building His church, and nothing can stop Him. In ch.21, Jesus is moving Paul to Jerusalem, and from there to Rome, where he will preach to the Emperor himself. Let’s read it together—

- Acts 21:1–16 ¹And 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. ²And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. ³When 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. ⁴And 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. ⁵When 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 ⁶and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.
- ⁷When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. ⁸On 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. ⁹He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied.
- ¹⁰While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹And 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.’” ¹²When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³Then 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.” ¹⁴And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, “Let the will of the Lord be done.” ¹⁵After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁶And 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.

Intro: Jesus and Paul on their way to Jerusalem.

Last Lord’s Day we saw Paul spending time with the Ephesian elders at Miletus before he left them for Jerusalem. He believed he might be killed in that city, just the way they killed Jesus. So he wanted to give them final warnings and instruction before he left – just the way Jesus did with His men in the upper Room before He went to the cross. Paul had spent 3 years with these men. Jesus had spent 3 years with His Disciples. And Luke draws more parallels between Jesus and Paul on their way to Jerusalem to suffer. It was predicted for both—

- Luke 18:31–33 ³¹And taking the twelve, he said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. ³²For he

will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon.
³³And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.”

- Acts 20:22–23 Paul said: ²²And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

And remember that the Disciples protested Jesus’ prediction – Peter said, “God forbid Lord, this will never happen to You!” Paul’s friends pled with him not to go to Jerusalem.

Jesus was bound by the Jews then handed over to Gentiles—

- John 18:12 ¹²So the band of soldiers and their captain and the officers of the Jews arrested Jesus and bound him.

Paul would be bound by the Jews and handed over to Gentiles—

- Acts 21:11 “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.’”

In spite of the danger, Jesus was resolved to go there—

- Luke 9:51 ⁵¹When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.

Paul knew what was in store for him in Jerusalem, but it only increased his resolve—

- Acts 21:13 “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.”

Both Jesus and Paul were rejected by the Jews in Jerusalem, in order that the Gospel might go out to all the nations. It was all part of God’s sovereign plan to get the Gospel to all the nations.

I want us to work our way through this passage, then we’re going to look at two very important questions that come up. So let’s look at Paul’s journey—

I. From Miletus to Jerusalem.

He’s on his way to Jerusalem to deliver the love-gift he’s been collecting from Gentile churches to the needy saints there. He has a dozen or so people with him, including Luke (notice “we”), but he’s not just going there to deliver money, but to establish the bond of fellowship and love between Gentile believers and their Jewish brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. This is what is going to get him in hot water with the unbelieving Jews there.

From Miletus, Luke describes three day-long trips on small ships before they got on a larger ship to make the 400 mile journey to Tyre in modern-day Lebanon. This would have been about a 5 day trip on the open sea – Luke loves to describe sea journeys! When they arrived in Tyre, Luke says they sought out the Christians there. How did a church get planted in that pagan place? This is interesting—

- Acts 11:19 ¹⁹Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews.

Who was part of that “*persecution that arose over Stephen?*” Saul of Tarsus! So Paul was visiting a church that was born out of his persecution of believers. Imagine what that meeting was like! They must have been weeping, hugging, rejoicing in what Jesus had done—

- Some of you remember the story that Pastor Nilo tells of the graduation ceremony for his mobile Bible school where a man gave his testimony of being in the army and fighting against the rebel forces before God saved him. And one of the other graduates was one of those Filipino rebels who realized that he fought against this man in the very same battle before Christ saved him! But now they were brothers in Christ. Tears all around!

And notice that Luke says they “*sought out the disciples.*” They always did that. And Christians always extended hospitality to other believers—

- Acts 21:7 ⁷When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day.
- v.8, in Caesarea, they met up with Philip and stayed with him for *many* days. And when they finally made it to Jerusalem, immediately they were brought into the home Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple – i.e., he had been a Christian for awhile.

There is a supernatural, Holy Spirit bond between brothers and sisters that’s closer than our own family ties. Isn’t that so true? I remember in India, having a big meal at Chris Williams’ home – Stephen’s father – and I was part of the family. Auntie Rhoda took me under her wing and made me special meals (that weren’t so blazing hot) so that I could teach and preach without heartburn!

- I remember the hospitality of Vanensio and his wife Eddie in Uganda; having dinner in their mud hut – dirt floor, no electricity or running water – but she pulled out all the stops to prepare the best food they had. And at MBC we do the same for these saints when they come to visit us

*Don’t miss this when you read Acts: *the precious value they placed on fellowship with one another!* It was just a given to be together. Paul couldn’t have made it to Jerusalem without this love and support from the body of Christ. And we might have interruptions in our fellowship due to viruses, power glitches, and fires, but they can’t last long. We have to be with each other to be the church.

Now look at the second half of v.4—

- Acts 21:4 ⁴And 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.

These dear saints knew that it wasn’t safe for Paul to go to Jerusalem, and Luke says “*through the Spirit they were telling*” him not to go. But that didn’t stop him – but if it was through the Spirit, shouldn’t it have stopped him? *Hang on to this question.* And when the ship was read to sail and their week with these dear folks was up, they all, “wives and children,” went to see them off, kneeling and praying – like Paul did with the Ephesian elders at Miletus.

From Tyre they sailed along the coast to Ptolemais – they met up with the believers and spent a day, then another short trip to Caesarea, where they stayed at Philip’s house for many days.

A. Philip.

This is the same Philip who was one of those 7 men, full of the Holy Spirit, the people chose to help out in serving the widows in the Jerusalem church. It's the same man who preached to Samaritans and who preached to that Ethiopian eunuch – that's why he is called "Philip the Evangelist!" He once was Paul's bitter enemy, but now he welcomes Paul into his home as a co-worker for the Gospel.

B. Philip's daughters.

Philip had settled down in Caesarea and raised a family including his 4 young daughters who were called "prophetesses." I wish Luke had told us more, so we would know what exactly they did with this gift of prophecy. But we do know that the NT gift of prophecy was the gift of receiving and speaking direct revelation from God – it was always infallible, inerrant revelation from God. It wasn't always written down in Scripture, but until the canon of Scripture was complete, prophets spoke revelation from God for the edification of the church until it had the completed New Covenant Scriptures. (Hold on to what I've just said. We'll come back to this.)

*It's possible that these girls gave Luke the Holy Spirit inspired stories about Philip their father that we read in Acts 8 and 9. Interesting to think about. Then another prophet came to visit.

C. The prophecy of Agabus.

- ¹⁰While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea—

We ran into Agabus back in—

- Acts 11:27–28 ²⁷Now in these days prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. ²⁸And one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the world (this took place in the days of Claudius).

Agabus was a true prophet of God, and what he predicted came true. Of course it did, because God doesn't lie. If a prophet's word *didn't* come true, what were the people to do? Stone him to death—

- ¹¹And 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. '"

Agabus was like some of the OT prophets who acted out their prophecies, like Ezekiel. Paul's friends didn't like what they heard—

1. The people's response.

- Acts 21:12 ¹²When we (Luke included) heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.

This is the second time friends and believers have pleaded with him not to go on to Jerusalem. What was Paul's response to their pleadings?—

2. Paul's response.

- Acts 21:13 ¹³Then Paul answered, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? (In Brooklyn they would say, “Quit bustin’ my chops!”) For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”

D. On to Jerusalem.

There was no talking Paul out of going—

- Acts 21:14–16 ¹⁴And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, “Let the will of the Lord be done.” ¹⁵After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁶And 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.

Mnason was from Cyprus like Barnabas. He was a good man and a brave man to take Paul into his home. So Paul is finally in Jerusalem. But I want to spend the rest of our time answering two questions in this passage. The first question is—

II. Was Paul wrong? (Was Paul like Jonah, or like Jesus?)

Here’s the issue: it looks like the HS told Paul not to go to Jerusalem—

- Acts 21:4 . . . And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.
- Acts 21:12 ¹²When we heard this (Agabus’s prophecy), we (Luke included) and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. (And Paul says that they were weeping as they begged him not to go.)

But he went anyway! So was he like disobedient Jonah who went to Tarshish instead of Nineveh as God commanded him? A lot of people think so—

- Outstanding preacher, James Montgomery Boice entitled his sermon on this passage, “*When a Good Man Falls.*” Another one of my favorites, Ray Stedman, entitled this passage, “*Paul’s Mistake!*” They say that Paul was in sin in going to Jerusalem, *but* God blessed him in spite of his disobedience and worked it all out for good.

Or was Paul courageous, like Jesus, knowing what was going to happen in Jerusalem, but going anyway? Now it’s a fair question to ask: Paul was a sinner, just like you and me. He made mistakes. But I don’t think this was one of them. I think he was like Jesus, not Jonah. Let me show you why. Turn back to—

- Acts 19:21 ²¹Now after these events Paul resolved in *the Spirit* to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and *go to Jerusalem.*”
- Acts 20:22 ²²And now, behold, I am *going to Jerusalem*, constrained by *the Spirit.* . .

The HS wouldn’t contradict Himself, leading Paul toward Jerusalem, then telling him the plans had changed because it was dangerous. And Paul believed that Jesus Himself wanted him in Jerusalem too, because he says two verses later—

- Acts 20:24 ²⁴But 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. (including Jerusalem – v.22).

So how do we explain these two verses, v.4 and v.12?—

- Acts 21:4 . . . through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.

I think the Holy Spirit revealed what Paul was going to face at Jerusalem, and the believers reacted in their flesh by begging Paul not to go. I.e., the Spirit revealed a warning – but the well-meaning people took it as a prohibition. It happened again in Caesarea when they heard Agabus' prophecy—

- Acts 21:12–13 ¹²When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.

We get this. They loved Paul and they didn't want to lose their beloved Apostle. But think about this: If Paul had listened and not gone, then Agabus would have been a false prophet! Right?

Paul didn't see suffering as a reason to change his plans: *"For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."* The HS promised Paul: "in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me." His friends saw that as reason not to go. But not Paul—

- Acts 20:24 ²⁴But 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.

So he set his face like a flint toward Jerusalem, just like His Lord did. And he went with a great peace in his heart because he knew what to expect: suffering now, but glory later. Momentary light affliction in this life, an eternal weight of glory in the next life.

*Oh, Christians need hang on to this truth for dear life during these times, don't we? So many Christians are falling by the wayside; pastors are giving up the ministry; I've read of pastors committing suicide because this is such a hard time, and their flocks are so divided. But beloved, half the battle is knowing what to expect, and didn't Jesus tell His Disciples to *expect* hard times? *Expect* suffering, pain, conflict among Christians, inconveniences like evacuations, power outages, endless smoke – and most of these are just annoyances, right? Jesus said to expect *persecution* for the sake of His name – and that's finally happening in our own country:

- You've heard how the city of L.A. is going after John MacArthur and GCC – they revoked a lease on one of their parking lots. And they fined them \$1,000 because a sign about the virus wasn't in the right place. That's harassment. Persecution. So expect it—
- 1 Peter 4:12 ¹²Beloved, *do not be surprised* at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something *strange* were happening to you. Expect it!

But also expect glory in the next life – and justice when Jesus returns, amen?

- 1 Peter 5:10 ¹⁰And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.

Expect that too. And set your face on Jerusalem.

So was Paul wrong to continue to Jerusalem? No. But there is another question here—

III. Was Agabus wrong? (The question of so-called “fallible revelation.”)

- Acts 21:10–11 ¹⁰While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹And 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.’”

Some people say that this prophecy didn’t come true – and hey, Agabus was sinner, like Paul, we can all make mistakes, right? Oh, but Agabus is called a prophet of God, and he claimed to be speaking by the Holy Spirit, so – big difference.

Now this is going to get deep, so you really have to stay with me, but it’s crucial because it affects our whole doctrine of Sola Scriptura. So first, let me explain this issue and then, how Agabus figures into it—

A. The doctrine of Sola Scriptura

The first battle cry of the Reformation was Sola Scriptura – Scripture alone! This was at a time when the Roman Catholic Church had said for hundreds of years that it was the ultimate authority over people’s minds and consciences. And over their faith. Luther came along and said, “*Nein!*” *Scriptura alone* is our ultimate authority. In the Bible God speaks to His people, fully, finally, and nowhere else. This is so beautifully stated in—

- Hebrews 1:1–2 ¹Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, (i.e., Before Christ came) ²but in these last days (i.e., this present time between Christ’s resurrection and His return) he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh, God’s last Word to man – and once Jesus revealed the New Covenant Scriptures through His Apostles, we have in our Bibles, everything God has to say to us until Jesus returns. Jude, the half-brother of Jesus said this—

- Jude 3 . . . I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for *the faith* (he means the *content* of our faith, the body of faith – that was *once for all* delivered to the saints).

Jude says: All that God wants all His people to know and believe has been “*once for all delivered to the saints*” in the completed canon of Scripture. Beloved, that means it’s complete, and it’s sufficient – all we need. And if that’s true then it’s impossible to add anything, because if you could, then they wouldn’t be sufficient – does that make sense?

John said this in the last chapter of the last book of the Bible—

- Revelation 22:18–19 ¹⁸I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, ¹⁹and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

“It is finished!” We sang about it this morning, didn’t we?

*How firm a foundation, you saints of the Lord, Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!
What more can He say than to you He has said, To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?*

Q: Then is God still speaking to Christians today, personally, privately, *apart from the Bible*?

NO. And since the time of the Reformation, Christians have believed this except for a few fringe groups and cults. But a few years ago, some otherwise good, solid theologians – men like Wayne Grudem, John Piper, and D.A. Carson, came up with a novel idea: They said that the Bible is finished. Sufficient, all we need. *But* – the gift of prophecy continues. What? Yes, but not like the OT days when prophets said “Thus saith the Lord,” and it was without error. No, beginning in the New Testament and continuing until today, prophecy is different: Now the revelation isn’t without error. Prophets might make mistakes.

So they want a complete, perfect Bible – but they also want some fresh new words from God – not on the same level as Scripture, but still, revelation from God. Again, “What?”

Wayne Grudem said this—

- “Ordinary congregational prophecy in New Testament churches did *not* have the authority of Scripture. It was not spoken in words that were the very words of God, but rather in merely *human* words. . . it has *lesser* authority . . . it does not threaten or compete with Scripture in authority but is subject to Scripture, as well as to the mature judgment of the congregation. . . Prophecy can be impure; our own thoughts or ideas can get mixed into the message we receive. . . There will be a mixture of flesh and Spirit.”

Do you want to hear words like that? I don’t! “Thus saith the Lord. . . maybe.” Beloved, God doesn’t speak words like that—

- Psalm 12:6 ⁶The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times.

The Heb. word for *pure* means free from all imperfections or impurities. And to make sure we get the point he says it’s like silver refined 7 times in a furnace – 7 is the biblical number of perfection. God’s Word is flawless. We don’t need to test it, or screen it. It’s perfect, without error, and has the authority of God – isn’t that what you want, and isn’t that *only* what you want?

- Let me connect the dots here: These people want a complete, sufficient Bible, but they also want a continuing gift of prophecy that doesn’t compete with the Bible, so they’ve made up this idea of prophecy or revelation that isn’t Bible quality, but it’s still from God. There is no such thing! There are not differing kinds or degrees of revelation from God. So if a person says that their so-called revelation *is* on par with Scripture, he or she is a false prophet. And if they say that their so-called revelation is *not* on par with Scripture, then he or she is a false prophet, because there is no such thing.

There are no more prophets, and there are no more prophecies. Period, end of story, But not end of sermon!

What does all of this have to do with poor old Agabus? Well he got dragged into this controversy, and here's how: If you would ask these Bible scholars, "So do you have *any* examples of this so-called, fallible prophecy in the NT – a prophet who got it wrong?" And they would say, "Well, only one – *Agabus* – what he predicted didn't happen exactly the way he said." I.e., their whole strange idea that prophets of God can give error-filled revelation from God – all hangs on Agabus!

How was he wrong? Well, they say, Agabus said Paul would be bound by the Jews and delivered into the hands of the Romans, and both of those didn't happen. Well let's see —

1.) Luke never implies that Agabus got it wrong. Neither does Paul. No one in church history ever thought that Agabus was wrong.

2.) We have to remember that prophecy *often* uses figurative language and metaphors – no scholars think that Paul was going to be tied up with his own belt! That was just an illustration.

3.) Later in Acts 21, when this whole thing comes down, this is what we read—

- Acts 21:30–33 ³⁰Then 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. ³¹And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. ³²He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. ³³Then 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.

"See, it doesn't say that the Jews bound Paul!" But does it say that they *didn't*? No. And common sense would say that they *did* bind Paul, then the Romans put their own chains on him. "But the Jews didn't *deliver* Paul to the Romans – the Romans just took him from them." That's really weak sauce. And let me show you what Paul himself said later—

- Acts 28:17 ¹⁷After three days he called together the local leaders of the Jews, and when they had gathered, he said to them, "Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was *delivered* as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. ("*delivered*" is exactly the same word that Agabus used in his prophecy. I think Paul ought to know what happened to him!)

4.) Agabus himself claimed to speak from God—

- Acts 21:11 ¹¹And 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.' "

Doesn't that sound just like what the OT prophets said literally hundreds of times: "Thus says the Lord!" Agabus was a prophet just like them: he only spoke pure, inerrant revelation from God, because that's the only kind of revelation God gives. He is not doing that today because the Scriptures are complete and sufficient. All we need!

- So if some well-meaning, dear Christian says, "Well, God spoke to me," what should you do? You pick up a big ole rock. . . No, but you might lovingly correct them. "God speaks in and through His Word. Never confuse your own feelings or impressions with the sure Word of God. We don't

have to wonder about the will of God, we don't have to wonder where to find it: It's all here, and it's only here, in His God-breathed Word." Isn't that good news?

Let's pray.