

Ryan Howell / Youth Group

Acts / Acts 21:1-36

Recap: Acts 19 & 20

For the last two chapters of the book of Acts, Paul has been in the city of Ephesus. The church in Ephesus was one that he planted and began. Paul wrote the book of Ephesians to the church in Ephesus during his first imprisonment in Rome which is going to happen in the coming chapters. Ephesus was one of the only churches that Paul wrote letter of encouragement to, not letters of correction like Galatians and Colossians.

When Paul first arrived in Ephesus, he introduced the disciples there to the baptism of the Holy Spirit which they had never known. Paul stayed in Ephesus for a good while and God had done many powerful things through the ministry of his teaching. God empowered Paul to perform many miracles of healing for sick and demon possessed people. Of course, all of this work stirred up opposition at some point. Worship of the goddess Diana, or Artemis, was very common in Ephesus before the gospel was spread to Ephesus. There was a silversmith in the city named Demetrius who stirred an uproar in the people against Paul's ministry because he crafted shrines to the goddess Diana. After leaving Ephesus because of the things that were going on there, Paul made brief pit stops in Greece and Macedonia before ultimately deciding it was time for him to go to Jerusalem. In the last half of Chapter 20, Paul calls the elders of the church in Ephesus to come and meet him so he can say his final goodbyes to them. Paul knew that they would never see him again after this trip to Jerusalem.

Chapter 21 is the start of a new chapter of Paul's ministry. It's important to keep the events of Acts 19 & 20 in mind as we begin in Verse 1:

Acts 21:1-16 ESV

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. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. 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.

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. 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. 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." 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.

Keeping the events of Acts 19 & 20 in mind as we look at Verse 1, where it says, "When we had parted from them"; this sounds to us like Paul and his companions just left, but a more literal translation would be that "they tore themselves away from them". It was not an easy thing for Paul to say his final goodbyes to his brothers in Ephesus. He spent many months in that town pouring his heart out to them, and they poured out their hearts to him in return. It is hard to leave friends, family, and places you love. Yet, Paul went through with it anyway because he was focused on being obedient to God's will for his life.

After leaving the Ephesian elders, he eventually ends up in a city called Tyre where he stayed with the believers for seven days. They were given a word by the Holy Spirit that danger

awaited Paul in Jerusalem. Then Paul ends up in Caesarea and meets up with Philip the Evangelist. You'll remember Philip from Acts 8 where he leads a eunuch from Ethiopia to faith in Christ. Evangelism apparently became a large part of Philip's ministry which is evidenced by his title: "The Evangelist". While staying with Philip, a prophet named Agabus comes and prophesies to Paul about the dangers that are waiting for him in Jerusalem. Both in Tyre and Caesarea, Paul was urged by his brothers and sisters in the Lord to not go to Jerusalem.

This shows us an important truth. There is no doubt that the believers in Tyre and Agabus the prophet received a prophecy of danger regarding Paul's life. However, this does not mean that their urgings for him to not go to Jerusalem were inspired by the Holy Spirit. The urge for Paul to not go to Jerusalem, which came after the divine warning of danger from the Holy Spirit, was the human interpretation and application of the Holy Spirit's warning. They believed they were given the warnings of danger by the Holy Spirit **so that** they could urge Paul to not go to Jerusalem while in fact the Holy Spirit gave these warnings for an alternate purpose.

Which brings us to a very important lesson:

Listen To The Word Of God, Not The Opinion Of Men

Paul responded to these warnings saying, "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" and it continues on to say that the people warning him eventually gave up the warnings and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done". As believers, it's so important for us to remember that we are meant to live surrendered lives unto Christ. We do not live our lives for ourselves, we live them for Christ. Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatian church:

Galatians 2:20 ESV

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Paul is saying here, I am no longer the one calling the shots when it comes to my life, but God is. The life that he now lives on earth (or in the flesh) he lives for Christ and not himself. If that truly is your heart's desire, then it will also be your heart's desire for God's will to be done in your life over your own will or someone else's will. This attitude of surrender and obedience

was also shown in the life of Jesus. You'll remember that Jesus asked the Father in the garden of Gethsemane for the cup of suffering that was before Him to pass from Him if it were possible. But the most important part of that prayer was how Jesus ended it by saying, "Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours be done".

There is a will of God for each of your lives. There is something that God is calling and leading you to. There is some kind of work that God wants to do through you for His kingdom. That calling may lead you to places you, and the people around you, never expected.

I can remember when I was first called to the ministry and called to go to Bible College. I had made the decision to go to CBI which was all the way out in California. At this point in my life, I had never traveled further than Laredo, Texas and that was only to go to mission trips in Mexico. Going into the CBI program meant that I would have to live in California for 10 months. I put in my application, I got accepted, and you know who was not at all on board with my decision? My mom. She wanted to search for colleges that had online curriculums because she did not want her baby to move across the country and be away from her. She expressed to me many times that wasn't what she wanted me to do, but I did it anyway because I knew for sure that God had called me. In that, God presented me with a choice: Obey His calling or obey my mom's wishes. Obviously, I made the choice to obey His calling on my life and both me and my mom were blessed because of it. When my grandma first got sick, we went and got dinner after visiting her in the hospital. She poured her heart out to me and I got the opportunity to point her to the Lord in her fear and her grief. She said, "It's weird because you're my son but sometimes I need you to be my pastor". I wouldn't have been able to do that had I not obeyed God's call upon my life.

Eventually, my mom came around and was on board with what God had called me to. But it goes to show that God's will over our lives won't always line up with the preferences and opinions of people around us. In those moments we have a choice to make: Obey God or obey men. Making the choice to be obedient to God and go against the wishes of people around us that we love can be very difficult, but know this:

The best place you could ever be is right in the center of God's will for your life.

Paul understood this. It was more important for him to be obedient to God because God was more important to him than anyone else. These warnings of danger that were given to Paul were given by the Holy Spirit to *prepare* Paul, not *discourage* him.

“To choose to suffer means that there is something wrong; to choose God’s will even if it means suffering is a very different thing. No healthy saint ever chooses suffering; he chooses God’s will, as Jesus did, whether it means suffering or not.” - Oswald Chambers

Regarding the urgings of Paul’s companions to not go to Jerusalem because of the danger, David Guzik said:

“It is easy to do – and a source of trouble – when we add our interpretation or application to what is thought to be a word from God, often thinking that it is also from the Lord.

We often find it too easy to judge God’s will for someone else.” - David Guzik

As it was for Paul, it is the same for us how important it is that we listen to the word of God, and not the opinion of men.

Continuing in Verse 17:

Acts 21:17-26 ESV

When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. 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, 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. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; 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. 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.” 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.

The Christians which were in Jerusalem were different than most of the Christians that Paul had encountered previously. They were all Jewish converts to Christianity. They were Jews that acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah and believed in Him. We call these people Messianic Jews today. The Christians in Jerusalem told Paul about false rumors that had spread about him which said he was preaching an anti-Jewish message and acknowledged that would eventually become a problem. Paul never preached this message because he himself was a Jew. Paul's teachings more accurately said that the Jewish customs and rituals were beneficial for those that were Jews, but they were not the source of salvation, which is what Jews who rejected Jesus as the Messiah believed. The Jewish Christians in Jerusalem proposed Paul take a vow with four Jewish men that was relevant to the Jewish law to show that Paul, as a Christian, was not an anti-Jewish teacher but that he also observed the law like the rest of the Jewish Christians did.

Paul's agreement to follow through with this shows an important lesson about evangelism:

We Need To Identify With The People We Are Evangelizing Without Compromising The Truth Of The Gospel

It's important to know that the Jewish Christians didn't believe that these rituals were the source of their salvation or a way to gain a better standing before God and they did not wish to impose these same things upon Gentile believers. If they leaned to either of those two points, Paul would have rightly objected, but Paul agreed because their heart was in the right place on these things.

Paul's identification with the Jewish people in Jerusalem would get rid of any unnecessary walls or boundaries that would be put up by traditional Jews he was attempting to evangelize. In his evangelism to Jews, Paul said this in his letter to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 9:20 ESV

To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law.

When we're spreading the gospel to non-believers around us, it gives us an advantage to identify with them in some way because it will naturally make them more receptive to the message we have to give them. This does not mean that we compromise ourselves and join

with them in sin. That will actually hurt your attempt to spread the gospel. I once heard a very naive Christian say that it shouldn't be unacceptable to share the gospel with someone over a beer at a bar. Absolutely not. If we compromise who we are, our message loses its power. But it is our advantage to make ourselves relatable to them.

One of the examples of this that really resonates with me is people who love the rock/metal genre of music, because I love the rock/metal genre of music. Most of the people you see at rock and metal concerts are probably not saved. Many rock and metal songs preach very bad messages and some of them are often anti-God messages because the entire genre is built upon a rebellious spirit. To those who love rock and metal music, their taste and preferences in music are usually very important to them and there is not much in modern contemporary Christian worship music that would appeal to them. So how do we evangelize them? Well, a really great way to do that is to make rock and metal sounding songs with a Christian message. Heavy amounts of distortion on a guitar, fast beats on the drums, and aggressive vocal styles like screaming are not satanic things. They are another avenue of human expression. It is our advantage to use that form of expression which resonates with them to present the gospel to them in a way that resonates with them. The mutual interest and enjoyment of the sound of rock and metal music gives us an avenue to present the gospel to them in a way that resonates with them. There are a lot of Christian bands that do this and I can say for the Christian metal bands that are out there, many of them are held in regard as great bands to unbelievers because they really enjoy their music. There are also those who testify that their relationship with the Lord began by listening to the gospel message preached by Christian metal bands.

It is our advantage to identify with the people that we are evangelizing, but we must never compromise the message of the gospel in order to do so. Paul does this perfectly by agreeing to partake in this purification ritual.

Continuing in Verse 27:

Acts 21:27-36 ESV

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, 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." For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the

city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. 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. And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. 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. 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. 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. And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, for the mob of the people followed, crying out, "Away with him!"

While Paul was in the temple, he was recognized by Jews from Asia that laid false and baseless accusation on him saying that he had brought Gentiles into the sacred part of the temple. It was extremely important that Gentiles not go past the outer court of the Gentiles in the temple. Going farther than that was punishable by death and even the Romans allowed this rule to be enforced even if the trespasser was a Roman citizen. As the Jews were about to kill Paul, the Roman commander of the garrison of soldiers stationed at the temple came out and arrested Paul for his safety. The Roman soldiers didn't sympathize with Paul, they were simply trying to diffuse the uproar. Paul was arrested with two chains which mean that he would have been chained to a guard on either side of him.

One very important thing to note in Paul's arrest here. Paul was the other side of this situation when Stephen was martyred in Acts 7.

At this point in time, Paul had not yet been converted to Christianity and he was apart of the Pharisees that persecuted Christians. Now here he is on the other side of things. God did not put him through this as a way to punish Paul for what he had done prior to his conversion to Christ. God does not work like that. Rather, it likely served as further confirmation to Paul that he was right where he needed to be.

That shows us a very important lesson:

Following God's Will For Your Life Will Likely Lead You To Places You Never Expected To Be In

In all of this that has happened in Paul's arrest and what's going to happen throughout the rest of this book, it's important to look at all of this with the understanding that God is the one that is leading Paul into these situations. These tense and what may seem to be negative situations were actually all apart of God's plan for Paul's life. Very rarely, if ever, do our ideas of what's best for our life line up with God's ideas of what's best for our life. Following and being obedient to His will may put you in dangerous situations, but if it's will for you to be in a dangerous situation, that's the best situation you could possibly be in.

One of the best applications of this truth is seen in the mission field. I know and have met many missionaries whose ministries are in dangerous parts of the world like Iran and Afghanistan where having faith in Jesus is punishable by death. Some of their American supporters would ask them, "Wouldn't you rather do ministry in the United States where it's safe?" I know one missionary who replied, I would rather be in the center of God's will for my life even if it means losing my life than be supposedly safe in the United States and outside of God's will for my life.

You may never have to make a decision that extreme, but the biggest lesson for us in this is to have open hearts to whatever God wants to do in our lives, even it means getting a little uncomfortable. Ultimately, His way will always be infinitely better than ours.

To close, I want to share with you all a poem I recently saw that has really resonated with me. It's entitled, "Your Way Is Better".

His Kingdom is vastly different than mine.

I want to rule.

He tells me to serve.

I want to be first.

He tells me the last will be first.

I want to destroy my enemies.

He tells me to love them.

I want to be self-made.

He tells me to surrender.

I have tried to build both kingdoms.

It cannot be done.

Every brick laid for one is a brick taken from the other.

So let mine fall.

The kingdom of ego.

The kingdom of control.

The kingdom of self.

Tear it down.

Brick by brick.

And with the rubble of what I thought I wanted, build something better.

Your Kingdom.

Your Way.

Not because it's easier.

But because Your way is better.

Let's pray...