

Paul at Jerusalem

Acts 21:27–40

Toward the end of his third apostolic journey, Paul was traveling to Jerusalem to meet with the believers who were members of the Hebrew church, hoping to observe Pentecost with them (Acts 20:16). Before arriving in Jerusalem, Paul was warned by the disciples in Tyre not to go to Jerusalem.

Acts 21:4 And finding disciples, we tarried there seven days: who said to Paul through the Spirit, that he should not go up to Jerusalem.

Many read this verse and understand that the Holy Spirit told Paul (through the disciples in Tyre) that he was not to go to Jerusalem. They say Paul ignored the Holy Spirit and went anyway, which led to a chain of disastrous events that could have been avoided if he had only listened to the Spirit. They also often point out that he continued in his sin by not forthrightly telling them to put aside their zealous desire to follow the Law and instead live under grace. They say his disobedience led to his unnecessary imprisonment and suffering.

However, they fail to look at a few more details that indicate he was well within the will of God when he traveled to Jerusalem. The first is his testimony to the nation of Israel. He was under compulsion to go to the Jew first (Acts 13:45–46; Romans 1:16). Reaching out to his brethren in the nation of Israel was also a personal priority (Romans 10:1).

Second, the Holy Spirit informed Paul directly that in every city he would be facing bonds and afflictions. However, these things did not deter him from continuing to preach the Gospel of Grace. Being bound in the spirit meant that Paul had a strong desire to go to Jerusalem. He strongly desired to be an effective and faithful minister of the gospel. To accomplish that, he needed to clear up some major misunderstandings they had about what he was teaching, namely that he was telling the believing Jews that they were not required to follow the Mosaic Law. He went thinking only of expanding his ministry and of being a faithful steward of God. The possibility of physical harm was not a factor in his decision making.

Acts 20:22–24 ²² And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: ²³ save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me. ²⁴ But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.

As Paul traveled closer to Jerusalem, he and his party stayed in Caesarea at the home of Philip the evangelist and his four daughters who were prophets. The prophet Agabus came from Judea with a message from God warning Paul that the Jews in Jerusalem will bind Paul and deliver him over to the Gentiles. It is significant that Agabus never commanded Paul, through the Spirit, not to go to Jerusalem, but emphasized what Paul already knew, that he was going to be abused at the hands of the Jews. It is also telling that the four daughters also did not tell Paul to stay out of Jerusalem. Interestingly, although they tried to persuade Paul not to go to Jerusalem, they came to accept what happens as being the will of the Lord.

Acts 21:8–14 ⁸ And the next *day* we that were of Paul's company departed, and came unto Cæsarea: and we entered into the house of Philip the evangelist, which was *one* of the seven; and abode with him. ⁹ And the same man had four daughters, virgins, which did prophesy. ¹⁰ And as we tarried *there* many days, there came down from Judæa a certain prophet, named Agabus. ¹¹ And when he was come unto us, he took Paul's girdle, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver *him* into the hands of the Gentiles. ¹² And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³ Then Paul answered, What mean ye to weep and to break

mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. ¹⁴ And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done.

Finally, we see the Lord Jesus Christ encouraging Paul, reassuring him that He was with him, and that he would be able to continue to spread the gospel in Rome as he had done in Jerusalem. When Paul went to Jerusalem, he had the opportunity to be a witness to many government officials, although he was a prisoner. As he continued on to Rome, he had the opportunity to witness to many more authorities. He was given free passage, room, and board, and was able to preach to many who would have normally been unreachable. This does not sound like the testimony of someone living in sin or defying the will of God.

Acts 23:11 And the night following the Lord stood by him, and said, Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome.

This leads us back to Acts 21:4 which states that the disciples in Tyre were speaking through the Holy Spirit when they said that Paul should not go up to Jerusalem. Since Paul had been directed by the Holy Spirit in the past, it would seem the Holy Spirit would have told Paul directly to stay out of Jerusalem if He did not want him to go (see Acts 16:6–7). It was Paul's spirit that gave him the desire to go to Jerusalem, and he went not knowing everything that would happen to him (Acts 19:21; 20:22). There is no mention of the Holy Spirit directly telling Paul that he was not to go to Jerusalem (see Acts 13:2–4; Galatians 2:1–2).

In order to reconcile Acts 21:4 with other verses that indicate Paul was doing the will of God, I believe Acts 21:4 must be understood differently. Some understand this verse to say that it was not speaking about the Holy Spirit, but about the spirit of the disciples. They were pleading with Paul from their hearts for him not to go to Jerusalem because they knew what he was going to face. I believe that an even better explanation is that the Holy Spirit had revealed to the disciples that Paul would experience hardships in Jerusalem. From this revelation, they pleaded with Paul not to go. Paul was not disobedient to God by traveling to Jerusalem, but was being warned by God of what was going to happen. When the persecution began in Jerusalem, Paul would be encouraged knowing that God knew exactly what was going to happen, and that He was still using Paul to accomplish his purpose. Emphasizing Acts 21:4 without bringing in a number of other verses gives a lopsided view of Paul's experience in Jerusalem.

Paul taken captive

Paul had not even completed the days of purification (separation) to end the Nazarite vow that he had taken when the unbelieving Jews began to stir up the crowd against him (Numbers 6:2–20). The Jews were riling up the crowd by yelling out that Paul was preaching against both the Jews and the Law, and had he had defiled the temple by bringing in Trophimus, an uncircumcised Gentile, with him. Trophimus was accompanying Paul from Corinth as he began his return to Antioch via Jerusalem on his third apostolic journey. He was a faithful companion of Paul's to the very end. Paul had to leave Trophimus sick in Miletus (2 Timothy 4:20). Miletus is the city that Paul stopped at to meet with the elders of the church at Ephesus while on his way to Jerusalem (Acts 20:15–38).

The Jews rushed into the temple, grabbed Paul, and dragged him out of the temple where they began to beat him, seeking to kill him. All of this commotion drew the attention of the commander of the Roman guard who rushed in to take control of the situation. They bound Paul with chains and demanded to know what was going on. There was so much confusion that they were unable to determine what was going on, so they brought Paul to the barracks. Thus begins Paul's ministry to Roman authorities.

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