

Acts

Acts 21:1 to 23:11 - A lesson in trusting the Holy Spirit

Paul was dead set on going to Jerusalem, despite the disciples he met in the city of Tyre urging him “through the Spirit” not to go, **Acts 21:3-4**. And in Caesarea, just over a week later, “a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea” (verse 10), who, in a clear message again to Paul from the Holy Spirit, “took Paul’s belt and tied his own hands and feet with it” and told Paul that “In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles,” **verse 11**, which stirred up another plea for Paul “NOT to go to Jerusalem” (verse 12).

Paul, however, replied, “Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I’m ready not only to be bound but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus,” **verse 13**. Well, here’s a real ‘test case’ in how we judge a situation or person, because it looks like Paul is blatantly ignoring, or even disobeying the Spirit’s lead, right? But go back a bit to **Acts 19:21** and we have “Paul resolved in the Spirit...to go to Jerusalem” (RSV), and one chapter later, in **Acts 20:22**, he felt “**compelled by the Spirit**” to go to Jerusalem. In other words, he felt he had the total support and lead of the Spirit in going to Jerusalem, knowing that “in every city the Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me” (Acts 20:23), so what was so different about going to Jerusalem to everywhere else he’d been?

And seeing this again **through Paul’s eyes**, he desperately wanted to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost (Acts 20:16), because it was a great day of celebration for Jews from all over the Roman Empire, and Paul was still very much a Jew. Not only did he love his people, he was also deeply saddened by their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah.

It was a source of “great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart,” he wrote, and so much so he wished “that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race,” **Romans 9:2-3**. Add to that the feeling he and the other apostles had that Jesus must be coming soon, based on the tension heating up between the Jews and the Romans, along with Jesus’ dire warning of impending disaster for the Jews - the likes of which the world had never seen up to that point (Matthew 24:21) - and you can see why Paul longed for this last opportunity “In the hope I may somehow arouse my own people...and save some of them” (Romans 11:14).

No wonder he said to those trying to stop him going to Jerusalem, “You’re breaking my heart” in Acts 21:13. So what would you say to Paul, or to any fellow Christian who was determined to do something you didn’t think was very wise? And especially when **the Spirit** had advised Paul not to go to Jerusalem at this time too. The Spirit could have stopped Paul, just like he’d stopped him in Acts 16:6-7, but no such word came from the Spirit, so the response of those people to Paul was, “The Lord’s will be done,” **Acts 20:14**.

In other words, they trusted God, rather than try to argue Paul into changing his mind. The Spirit could do that job much better than they could anyway. So off Paul went and on arrival in Jerusalem he was warmly welcomed (Acts 21:17). And to begin with it seemed like a good time for him to be there and meet “James and all the elders” so he could “report in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry,” **verses 18-19**, as well as clear up a growing misunderstanding that he was “teaching all the Jews who lived among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, not have their children circumcised,” and not “live according to their (Jewish) customs,” **verse 21**.

Actually, Paul wasn’t teaching any of that to the Jews. He was teaching **Gentiles** they didn’t need to follow Jewish customs to become Christians. The Jews could continue with their Jewish rituals and law keeping if they wished. But to convince the Jews that Paul was fine with that too, it was suggested he join four men going through “their (Jewish) purification rites” (verse 24), and “pay their expenses” too, so they could all “have their heads shaved” at the end of the rites (verse 24). Which must have been **as much a muddle for Paul** as it is for us now, with Paul having to go through these Jewish rituals when he’d been sent by God to the Gentiles to teach them that **NO** such rituals were required of them (verse 25).

So the Holy Spirit was right. This wasn’t the time for Paul to be in Jerusalem, and by Paul ignoring the Holy Spirit’s lead and wisdom he found himself in this muddle. Had the Holy Spirit got these four men going through a Jewish ritual at this exact time, then, to get that point across to Paul?

And, what’s more, going through that ritual didn’t accomplish anything anyway, because some visiting Jews **still accused Paul** in **verse 28** of “teaching all men everywhere against our people and our law,” which Paul hadn’t been doing, and they claimed that he’d “brought Greeks into the temple area and defiled this holy place,” which he hadn’t done either. But, as usual, they stirred up a crowd, got the whole city in a mad fury, and dragged Paul out of the temple area, shut the gates and set about beating him to death (30-31).

And it would have happened if “the commander of the Roman troops” and his “officers and soldiers” hadn’t intervened. Even then the violence of the mob was so great, the soldiers had to carry Paul to their barracks (33-35), which is when Paul “asked the commander, ‘May I say something to you?’” - which surprised the commander because Paul had spoken in Greek (37).

He thought Paul was a well known Egyptian revolutionary (verse 38), but on hearing Paul was a Jewish citizen of the highly regarded region of Cilicia, he gave Paul permission to speak to the mob. And amazingly they quietened down when Paul spoke in their native Aramaic (21:38 to 22:2).

Paul then repeats the story of Jesus confronting him on the road to Damascus, with special emphasis given to his **own Jewish training** (verse 3), and to Ananias (verse 12) being a “devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews (in Damascus)” and the person whom God had chosen to explain to Paul what his mission was (15-16). So, again Paul was showing he wasn’t against the Jews. But he did add one thing, that he’d also been told by Jesus to “leave Jerusalem immediately, because (the Jews) **will not accept your testimony about me,**” **verses 17-18.**

Now Paul is treading on dangerous ground, and especially when he says in **verse 21**, “Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go, I will send you far away to the Gentiles,’” because that got the mob yelling, “Rid the earth of him; he’s not fit to live” (verse 22). Well, back in Acts 21:13, Paul had said he was “ready to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus,” but have to die **so soon** - and without having said much about Jesus at all so far? This was not working out as he’d hoped at all. **If only he’d trusted the Spirit....**

Mercifully, however, the Spirit is like a GPS system - if you don’t listen and take a wrong turning the Spirit adjusts and gets us back on track, which is exactly what the Spirit does next for Paul. The Roman commander orders a centurion to have Paul flogged, without even knowing what the fuss is all about (24), and that’s when Paul asks in **Acts 22:25**, “Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen, who hasn’t even been found guilty?” Well, no it wasn’t legal, which deeply alarms the Roman commander, who immediately orders Paul to be released in readiness for a proper trial in the main Jewish tribunal, the Sanhedrin, to give Paul a chance to defend himself (verses 26-30).

And that’s when Paul makes another mistake that gets himself into more trouble when he calls the Jewish High Priest, acting as judge at the trial, a “whitewashed wall,” **Acts 23:3.**

Paul was immediately reprimanded for “insulting God’s high priest,” when Exodus 22:28 had clearly stated, “Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people,” Acts 23:5. Again, this wasn’t going well for Paul, because he wasn’t being persecuted for preaching about Jesus, he was being called out for his own ignorance in not knowing the high priest was the high priest (verse 5).

But the Holy Spirit gets things back on track again by Paul calling out, “My brothers, I am a Pharisee....and I stand on trial because of **my hope in the resurrection of the dead.**” And that was the track Paul was supposed to be on, “preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18). But this time it had the added advantage of “a dispute breaking out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees” over their differing beliefs on the resurrection (Acts 23:7-8), which led to the Pharisee teachers of the law, who supported the notion of a resurrection, vehemently yelling out their support of Paul. Paul was caught in the middle of this battle and in obvious danger of being “torn to pieces,” so the Roman commander ordered his troops to pry Paul out of there, and get him back to the safety of the Roman barracks (verse 10).

And all this because Paul had not followed the Holy Spirit’s advice. It must have been a horribly disheartening lesson for Paul. But so typical of the Holy Spirit - that instead of letting Paul curl up in a ball of self-recrimination “stood near Paul (the following night) and said, ‘Take courage; as you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome,’” Acts 23:11.

So it hadn’t exactly gone the way Paul had imagined things to be, but now he had the Holy Spirit’s assurance he was back on track - and with a practical reminder to trust the Spirit in future, because the Spirit **had Rome in mind for Paul**, not Jerusalem. Rome wasn’t **Paul’s aim** at the time, though, because he’d so desperately wanted to be with his fellow Jews, teaching and saving them, but he’d been told by Jesus back in Acts 9:15 “to carry my name before the Gentiles” too, and Rome was now the Spirit’s goal.

In line with all this, I remember during the 1980’s wanting desperately to be back in England to be with my fellow Brits serving them, and for years I pestered the powers that be to transfer me from Canada to my home country. And eventually, in 1990, I got my wish. But what I dreamt of was nothing like what happened. England felt like a foreign country, and the four churches given to me to care for so exhausted me I was ready to head back to Canada, job or no job. At that point all my years in the ministry could have gone up in smoke, but suddenly out of the blue the powers that be transferred us back to Canada, and with a job waiting for me too. So I believe the Spirit got me back on his track, just like he did Paul, so I could learn the same lesson, that **it’s much better trusting the Holy Spirit than pushing for what we want.**