

Acts

Acts 23:12 to 25:12 - The Spirit who never abandons us

To discover that even Paul didn't listen to the Holy Spirit's obvious direction has to be a little worrying, but what was the Spirit's reaction?

It was **Acts 23:11**, when “the Lord stood near Paul and said, ‘Take courage; as you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.’” So the Spirit made it clear to Paul he hadn't abandoned him, despite Paul hardly doing any “testifying” about Jesus in Jerusalem. Instead, he'd had to revert back to obeying a Jewish purification ritual (Acts 21:23-24, 26), the exact opposite of what he'd been telling Gentiles, that obeying Jewish rituals was NOT required of them (verse 25).

But that's the muddle Paul had got into for ignoring the Holy Spirit's advice NOT to go to Jerusalem at that time (Acts 21:4, 10-12). And going through the purification ceremony hadn't accomplished anything either, because only a week later, and before he'd even got a word out about Jesus, Paul was being beaten to a pulp by his fellow Jews, and only a Roman commander intervening stopped him being killed. And then, when given the chance to defend himself in court, Paul had accused the presiding judge and high priest of being a “whitewashed wall,” in direct contradiction of the law in Exodus that said, “Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people.” And to top that off, Paul had to be rescued by the same Roman commander yet again when the court flew into such a rage that Paul would have been “torn to pieces” (Acts 23:10).

And things are not about to get much better either, because the Jews in Jerusalem, to whom Paul had so wanted to tell the truth about the resurrected Jesus, had “formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath not to eat or drink until they had killed him,” **Acts 23:12**. Toward that end, a group of forty of these conspirators had cooked up a plan with the chief priests and elders to get Paul back into court “on the pretext of wanting more accurate information about his case,” and then, when Paul was on his way to the courthouse, they'd launch their ambush to kill him (verses 14-15).

But again the Spirit hadn't abandoned Paul, because Paul's nephew (his sister's son) somehow got wind of this plot, told Paul about it, and Paul then convinced a centurion to take the lad to the Roman commander to warn him of the ambush coming up (verses 17-21).

By this time the poor old Roman commander had spent so much time putting out fires wherever Paul went, that he decided it was time to get Paul out of Jerusalem away from the Jews and their court, to be judged by a Roman court in Caesarea instead. And to make sure that Paul was safely delivered, he ordered “two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen” to travel with Paul at nine that night, along with a letter to Felix, the Roman Governor in Caesarea, to explain why he’d sent Paul to him (verses 23-30).

So much for Paul’s great idea of going to Jerusalem, because here he was on a horse being forcefully escorted OUT of Jerusalem and on his way to Caesarea instead (24). We can only imagine his thoughts as he bobbed along, but it must have been a mix of heartache, self-recrimination and wondering why this was happening to him when his motives had been so noble. Worse still, could it be that the Holy Spirit **had abandoned him?**

Felix in Caesarea, meanwhile, accepts the need for a trial, and makes sure Paul is securely guarded in Herod’s place (verses 33-34). Five days later the Jewish prosecution arrives led by a slimy lawyer named Tertullus, who knows exactly how to play the game in court, starting with flattery and pretending to be humble (Acts 24:1-4). He then paints an ugly, exaggerated picture of Paul as “a troublemaker stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect, and even tried to desecrate the temple,” **Acts 24:5-6 - none of which was true.** But the witnesses Tertullus calls on confirm that every word of this nonsense is accurate.

The Governor then gives Paul the chance to defend himself, which to Paul must have been a huge relief that **the Spirit had not abandoned him**, because after all the wrong turnings Paul had taken up to this point, the Spirit was now giving him the chance to get back on track - just like a GPS system corrects our mistakes and gets us back on course for our destination.

Paul starts off by denying the prosecution’s nonsense (verses 11-13), because of its total lack of evidence to support “the charges they are now making against me,” **verse 13.** He does admit, however, to being “a follower of the Way, which (his accusers) call a sect,” **verse 14.** But, he adds, “I believe everything that agrees with the Law and what’s written in the Prophets,” because it had provided him with “the same hope in God as these men,” **verse 15.** And then - for the first time on this messed up trip - Paul gets to preach **what that hope he and all Jews had**, “that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked” and that’s what had “kept (every Jewish) conscience clear before God and man,” **verse 16.** And all those Jews listening knew that.

Paul was back to being Paul and his real love, the resurrection (Acts 17:18). I imagine he felt the blood flowing through his body again, encouraged by this obvious chance the Holy Spirit had given him to hammer home the “resurrection of the dead” as the real reason why these Jews were so upset and falsely accusing him (verses 17-21).

And, amazingly, Felix knew about this Jewish hope of the resurrection too, probably because of his Jewish wife, Drusilla (verses 22 and 24). And then, amazingly again, Felix orders the centurion guarding Paul “to give him some freedom and permit his friends to take care of his needs,” **verse 23**. Oh yes, the Holy Spirit God had not abandoned Paul. It was still messy, and not at all what Paul had hoped for, but the pressure from the Jews was off.

The Holy Spirit had not let Paul totally off the hook, however, because back in Acts 23:11 the Spirit had promised Paul his trip to Rome would be much like his trip to Jerusalem, meaning Paul would end up being a **prisoner again**, limiting his ability to preach. But he was on his way to Rome, the capital of the Gentile world, and the best place for Paul to be in reaching the Gentiles, and where he’d dreamt of being too (Acts 19:21).

If only he’d obeyed the Holy Spirit, though, because he could have freely toured Rome like he’d freely toured Athens and all the other cities he’d visited, which were tough at times, yes, but he’d been free to travel, and in Ephesus he’d set up up many little churches serving possibly thousands of Christians which he’d been free to visit too. But now he was a prisoner instead, stuck for two years (verse 27) under house arrest in Caesarea having to put up with Felix’s off and on interest in his teaching (24-25), and even “hoping Paul would offer him a bribe,” **verse 26**, for showing an interest too. It’s not surprising, then, there is no record of Paul accomplishing anything in Caesarea.

Paul’s obstinacy - in doing what his own heart desired rather than following and trusting the Holy Spirit’s purpose for him - had landed him in a lot of unnecessary trouble, but in his five or so years of imprisonment in Rome, chained to a Roman soldier day and night, Paul wrote amazing letters that have changed the lives of millions of people through the ages, **proving beyond any doubt that the Spirit had not abandoned him**. The Holy Spirit has this amazing way of encouraging us even when we’re in trouble of our own causing, so we don’t curl up in a ball and give up, and instead we face the future even stronger, having learnt from Paul in the book of Acts that what got him in trouble was pushing ahead with his own time schedule rather than **waiting on and trusting the Spirit’s timing**. Abraham, Moses and David all made the same mistake too, so this is a big one to be on the lookout for.

And in **Acts 25** we see Paul's courage returning. He's had a bad fall but he's back in the saddle, which is good because the Jews are preparing another ambush to kill him by trying to persuade Festus, who'd replaced Felix, to transfer Paul back to Jerusalem (Acts 25:1-3). And Festus, just like Felix, is all for granting favours to the Jews too (24:27 and 25:9), so Paul is not out of the woods even yet, two years later.

But Festus wants the trial in Caesarea and the Jews accusing Paul to attend in Caesarea too (verse 4). So the court convenes again and "the Jews who'd come down from Jerusalem stood around Paul, bringing many serious charges against him, which (as usual) they could not prove," **Acts 25:6-7**. And Paul (as usual) voices his defence that none of the charges are true. But Festus then drops in a nasty little twist to favour the Jews, by asking Paul in **verse 9**, "Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?" That would certainly please the Jews all right, because on their own territory their chances of ambushing Paul to kill him were so much greater.

But Paul's not falling for that, because in **verse 10** he says to Festus, "I am now standing before Caesar's court, where (as a Roman citizen) I ought to be tried," which Festus knew, and in **verse 11** Paul adds, "I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you (Festus) know very well" too. Which sounds a bit cheeky, but Paul knows Festus wouldn't normally be wasting his time with internal squabbles between Jews unless they threatened the security of Rome, and it was clear "after spending eight or ten days" with the Jews in verse 6 that Festus knew from their charges against Paul that **no such threat existed**.

"On the other hand," Paul adds, "If I am guilty of doing anything deserving death, I do not refuse to die." So Paul is really back in the saddle again, unafraid and willing to die if needs be, just as he was in Acts 21:13. And to top that off, Festus supports Paul's appeal for a fair trial by Roman law (verses 15-17), which means the Spirit has Paul back on track for Rome too.

So despite Paul going against the Spirit's directions, the Holy Spirit never abandoned him, nor his plans for Paul either. So the Holy Spirit is incredibly gracious and merciful, but is there another lesson here, that the Spirit also allows things to get a little messy if we're not willing to wait on and trust in his wisdom? God gave us the Holy Spirit to be our guide (John 14:26, 16:13-15), and the Spirit has all sorts of ways of getting through to us, just like he did with Paul through Agabus in Acts 21:10-12. We can know, therefore, if we're following or resisting the Spirit, and know if we're chasing something that isn't the Spirit's purpose for us. The Spirit did that for Paul - exactly as Jesus promised the Spirit would do **for all of us**, "for he lives with you and will be in you," **John 14:17** - the Spirit who never abandons us.