

Acts Lesson 21

We left off last week with the conclusion of Paul's final visit to the church he started in Ephesus. It was a tearful goodbye. The text in our reading today begins with, "After we had torn ourselves away from them" – Luke, the author of Acts, makes it clear this missionary team was *very* attached to the church at Ephesus. A missionary's job is difficult on so many fronts, but one of the tougher tasks is arriving at the point that the Lord has indicated that the work is done in that area, and it's time to move on. Deep friendships – some even stronger than family relationships – get established, and the thought of not being with these people any longer is very difficult.

The verse at the end of chapter 20 says they were grieved at Paul's comments that he would not see them again. In reality, they did – they would see him in the next life – a life free of the persecutions and trials, and eternally secure and in joy by being in the Lord's presence forever. There are so many things that we can praise God about as followers of Christ, but towards the top of my list is that all of us in here are one day going to be reunited together with other cherished members of this study and other fellow believers who have already gone home to glory. We rightfully grieve when loved ones go home to the Lord, but with Jesus as our Savior and His promise of eternal salvation, we never really have to say 'goodbye' to our fellow followers of Christ – we faithfully can say, "see you soon". God is so good. Amen?

Verses 1-3 describe the course of the team's journey as they headed towards their ultimate destination - Jerusalem - to present the financial gifts they had collected in the Gentile churches in Greece and Asia Minor. This was a substantial offering that had taken a year to collect from the Gentile churches. This was a symbol of the grace of God softening the dissension between the Jewish believers and Gentile believers.

Paul would describe this effort in Romans 15:25-27: Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the Lord's people there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings."

In Paul's view, the material offering they had been collecting was an exchange for the spiritual offering the converted Jewish church leaders had given to the Gentiles for the sending out of the gospel.

Looking at the map, they visit several ports in the Mediterranean Sea including Cos, Rhodes, Patara, and they land in Tyre – in the area now known as southern Lebanon.

While at Tyre for a week, they searched out for the disciples there. Interestingly, the church at Tyre was possibly started out of the earlier persecutions of the Jerusalem church that were often led by who? Paul – formerly Saul of Tarsus. The fact that these believers, through the Spirit, were urging Paul *not* to go to Jerusalem indicates what the power of God's love can do to heal relationships. *If* Paul was indeed a participant in the persecutions that led to these people fleeing to Tyre, it would be very easy for them to think, "Sure dude – go onto Jerusalem – I'm sure you'll have *no* problems there." 'What goes around comes around, right?'

That's not God's way – He is a God of forgiveness and restoration. People who are truly following Christ and seeking to model after Him by walking with Him in the Spirit prove this through their *fruit* – material evidence of God abiding in them. The fruit here is the passion these people are displaying to protect Him by encouraging him not to go onto Jerusalem for they feared for his life. If there were bad feelings from these people in Tyre about Paul and his persecuting days, God dug them out with the blood of His Son and replaced those feelings with agape love. May God do

the same in each of us for those feelings of bitterness, resentment, and unforgiveness – dig out these hell-found emotions at their root and replace them with the filling of the Holy Spirit and the sufficiency of God’s love.

So as they are getting ready to leave, we see the entire body of Christ – including wives and children – going out to the beach, kneeling and praying for the team. This is a great display of corporate prayer and support for the brethren. I think it is especially impressive that they get the children involved in the prayers. It’s never too early to get our children and our grandchildren into the habits of praying for others in the church.

In verses 7 and 8 they head back out to sea going down the coast to Ptolemais and then to Caesarea where they would stay with Philip the evangelist who was “one of the seven”. We need to go back to the 6th chapter of Acts to remember the seven deacons who were chosen by the apostles to handle the servicing of the daily needs of the church so as to allow time for the apostles to minister the Word to the people. God clearly rewarded Philip with his devotion to his service as he would grow into an evangelist in the teaching and conversion of the eunuch in Chapter 8.

Remember that Philip was an associate of Stephen’s, but do we remember who was present at Stephen’s stoning? None other than Paul, so this meeting was likely an interesting one.

We’re then reintroduced to Agabus the prophet – we first learned of him in chapter 11 when he predicted there would be a famine over the entire Roman world – which did come to pass. Agabus would deliver the second warning from the Lord about Paul going to Jerusalem – this time with a visual presentation by taking Paul’s belt, tying it around his arms and feet and proclaiming, “The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.’” Luke would say that he along with the others then begged him not to go up to Jerusalem.

There are people who have taken the position that since Paul ultimately did go to Jerusalem, he was being disobedient to the Lord's will. It is important to understand that the promptings of the Holy Spirit were not direct orders *to not go to* Jerusalem – this was the *interpretation* of the people who were relaying what they thought He was telling them. In fact, these promptings were **warnings** from the Lord to Paul that should he decide to go to Jerusalem, he should expect it's not going to be a day at Disneyland.

To further help understand the framework of this issue with the Lord and Paul, we need to go back to what the Lord said to Ananias who was protesting having to heal the eyes of the freshly converted Saul of Tarsus in chapter 9:15-16: "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name." Scripture tells us no other apostle was subject to the volume of persecutions than Paul.

In 2 Corinthians 11:23b-27, Paul gives an accounting of his persecutions, "I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked."

Anyone who says the Christian life is a piece of cake or is preaching the **ridiculous** doctrine of prosperity need only read and meditate on this passage to recognize that truly following Christ is **costly**. Yes, we have amazing rewards in

heaven waiting for us, and we *can* have joy while we're here on Earth serving Jesus. But we are at war, my friends, and war isn't pretty. It isn't prosperous. Freedom comes with a cost, and Jesus paid the highest price for our freedom. As confessed followers of His, we're charged to carry the torch of truth of the freedom Christ offers to others. People carry torches because it's dark – we live in a dark and ever-darkening world, the enemy knows his days are about up, so he is upping his attacks on the saints.

I'm not trying to be a downer, my friends – I'm just telling you what's really going on in this world today. Yet, we need not fear. Let's remember the core truth that John tells us in verse four of the fourth chapter of his first epistle, "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world." We're going to get beat up and bruised the closer we walk with the Lord, but let me remind you that the enemy is no match for the Lord – let me repeat myself... **the enemy is no match for the Lord**. Repeat after me, "the enemy is no match for the Lord." He is a created being, and he is subject to his Creator. The war is won, and we are on the winning side. For those of us who might be in a battle right now – take comfort, the Lord is the victor, and He will deliver every one of us.

While I'm sure Paul appreciated the loving concerns of his brothers and sisters in Christ, he responded to their warnings with, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." He would later more succinctly sum up his commitment to the Lord in Philippians 1:21, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." Was Paul going to Jerusalem against God's will? I don't think so. The Lord is showing His graciousness to Paul in letting Him know what's going to happen when he gets there. He would also reward Paul for his courage and faithfulness as He would continue to open doors to preach the gospel.

The final words of these people who loved Paul should ring a bell, “The Lord’s will be done.” Weren’t these basically the same words Jesus uttered in the Garden of Gesthemane? Jesus knew what was coming, and His ‘not My will but Your will be done’ statement is where each of us need to arrive. It is the ultimate statement of trust in the Father’s goodness, wisdom, and, most importantly, love for us. He knows what’s best for us, and the sooner we surrender our wills and allow Him to be the pilot – not the co-pilot – of our lives, the better off we’ll be.

One final thought on this topic – when it comes to our own sense of understanding God’s will and plan for our lives, we need to ask ourselves are we prepared to remain resolute regardless of the input from our well-meaning Christian brothers and sisters who might challenge our convictions. We recently made a difficult decision that we felt was the Lord’s will, and we had a good peace about it (always a good sign you’re in alignment with the Lord). There are those who would think we are nuts, and, although that may be true in an overall perspective, we have remained resolute that it was the right call.

Conversely, when we hear of the plans of another that sound “outside the box” or don’t make sense, are we more prepared to challenge their position based on our own understanding or do we simply just root them on and tell them to go for it? We need to remember the exhortation in Proverbs 3:5 that we are to Trust in the Lord with all our heart and lean not on our own understanding.

So Paul and the team go to Jerusalem and are warmly greeted by the brothers and sisters. We shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that the narration continues to include “we” and “us”. Luke, Silas, and Timothy have not abandoned Paul – they are truly his companions. We should all be so fortunate as to have such great friends in the Lord who are willing to walk with us wherever the Lord is taking us – no judgments or criticisms – just people who will love you and **not** leave your side no matter what. I

pray that every person in this room will have at least one or more of such a friend like this – they are gifts from heaven.

The team meets with James – the half-brother of Jesus – gives him the offering and reports all the things God has been doing with the Gentiles. The Jerusalem church rightly responded to this news not by praising Paul and his companions, but praising God. We need to be careful of this – when the Lord blesses the efforts of those who are working for Him, we need to deflect 100% of the compliments and praises that are offered to us and give glory to the One who *gives* us the gifts and talents to perform the efforts that He's blessed. Pastor Chuck Smith said that he was taught three specific things not to touch in his ministry: the money, the women, and the glory.

The enemy was not at all amused at the progress of the church through Paul and his team, so he was at work through the legalistic Jewish Christians and inciting them to spread lies about Paul's teaching both the Jews and the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to their customs. These are basically the same claims that were made against Jesus and Stephen. You would think the devil could come up with some new material, but since the accusations ultimately led to the deaths of both Jesus and Steven, why not stick with what works?

The concern for the accusations against Paul by the leaders of the Jerusalem church was strictly for the Jews that Paul was teaching. The doctrine for the Gentiles was not in question as they did not have the Mosaic history overshadowing them. Verse 20 tells us these Jewish believers were "zealous for the law". The Greek translation for the word zealous includes descriptives as "jealous" and "desire and move with envy". These guys could not get out of the bondage of the law – they could not grasp the freedom that comes with grace. God would ultimately have to send a special letter to the Jews – the epistle to the Hebrews. Dr. Donald Grey

Barnhouse used to say, “The book of Hebrews was written to the Hebrews to tell them to stop being Hebrews!”

Warren Wiersbe points out that Paul did warn the Gentiles in Galatians 4 not to get involved in the old Jewish religion, but he nowhere told the Jews that it was wrong for them to practice their customs, so long as they did not trust in ceremony or make their customs a test of fellowship. The accusations against Paul are truly sad when you think of the lengths he went to in order to appease the Jews. He had Timothy circumcised in Acts 16, he took a Jewish vow in Acts 18, and it was his custom to not offend the Jews in any way by deliberately violating their customs or the law of Moses.

So the Jerusalem leadership seeks to appease these legalism-obsessed Jewish Christians by asking Paul to publically demonstrate that he is a nice Jewish boy and join with four men who are wrapping up a Nazarite vow. This vow involved men letting their hair grow long, drinking no wine, eating no grapes or raisins, not touching anything dead, and devoting themselves for a period of time to singular dedication to God. At the end of the vow, they would go into the temple, spend seven days worshipping God, cut off their hair, burn it, and give offerings and sacrifices to God. This was all part of a purification process following a time of separation – this is described in more detail in the 6th chapter of Numbers.

Because this vow would take time away from work and the sacrifices were costly, people wanting to partake in the vow would seek sponsors to cover the cost. Therefore, the leaders asked Paul to take some of the money he brought from his trip to pay for the other four guys as well as himself. I’m certain Paul did not join in on the sin offering, as He knew that was satisfied by Christ. However, there is nothing necessarily wrong with the other offerings such as the peace offering or grain offering. What’s really remarkable in this story is Paul ***agreed*** to it. He knows it’s no longer necessary, but his heart was so passionate that his Jewish brethren come to

faith in Jesus, he would try to be all things to all people in order that he might win some.

The leadership's plan with Paul acting like a Jew to settle the unrest at the mention of his name – well, it didn't work. In the temple there was an outer court, or area, that anyone – Jew or Gentile – could enter. However, there was an inner court that was strictly for Jews – there was even a sign that read “Any Gentile entering in will be put to death.” Gentiles were forbidden from entering. Paul had come to Jerusalem with some Ephesian Gentile believers including Trophimus, so the mob mentality just assumed Paul had brought him into the area of the temple that was forbidden. There's no evidence he did what they were claiming.

The same misinformed mob mentality that made that mob choose Barabbas over Jesus to be spared causes them to attack Paul with the intent to kill him. The commander of the Roman troops gets wind of this and takes his men and step in to rescue Paul.

When Paul spoke to the commander, the commander asked him if he was the Egyptian who started a revolt with some 4,000 terrorists in the wilderness. In the year A.D. 54, an Egyptian, whose name meant “dagger-bearer”, led men to the wilderness to launch a revolt against Rome. Given Paul's ability to speak fluent Greek, the commander was concerned Paul was this guy. Who else would cause such an uproar among the people?

Amazingly, Paul asked if he could speak to the people who were trying to do him in. He's granted the permission, motions to the people to gather round, they all become silent, and he says..... This is what is known as a teaser. You'll have to wait to hear what he says next week with Jim Swaney who I'm sure will do a great job.

As I always do at the end of these lectures, I try to take something from the reading or emphasize a theme that helps make that topic or message applicable to our

lives. In going through this chapter, I began to think of the Apostle Paul. I know of no other individual in Scripture who underwent a greater transformation than Paul. He went from being a zealous persecutor of the church to a zealous proclaimer of salvation by grace through the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul changed like no other, and that is what I want to discuss with you in the last few minutes - the concept of change.

One pastor once wisely said, “If you’re going to believe in Jesus, you better be ready for change.” This makes perfect sense. Imagine you’re in a burning building and you’re trapped. Out of nowhere you see a brave firefighter heading your way to rescue you. He is, in effect, your savior at that moment. Let me ask you something, do you want him to stay there with you while the building keeps burning, or do you want him to lead you to safety? You want to get out, right?

This should also be the case for us spiritually. When we come to faith in Christ, we should have come to a point where we knew we were helpless, there was no way out of our own ‘burning buildings’ – our sin – and we needed someone to rescue us. Do we want Him to just say, “I’m here – I’m your Savior” and then just stay in stuck in a pile of burning embers? Of course not. Sadly, I believe a lot of Christians have done just that – I know have in parts of my life. We’re super pumped on that Savior part of the deal – knowing we can be at peace with God and get to go to heaven. ***But have you really let Him save you from all of what you need saving and healing from?*** Some of these things that we carry around with us are very subtle, but they are so destructive and keep us from knowing the true liberty we have in Christ and maximizing the potential of our relationship with Him.

Maybe it’s a critical attitude? Maybe there’s unforgiveness? Or could it be a fear or anxiety over something or someone? Maybe it’s a secret sin? No matter what it is, please understand two things about it:

1. God already knows about it – there’s nothing secret with God. Psalm 69:5 reminds us, “You, God, know my folly; my guilt is not hidden from you.”

Scripture also tells us He knows the number of hairs on our head – God is completely aware – *even more aware than we are* – of what is hurting us.

2. Secondly, He wants to heal you from this. What was the first thing Jesus told the disciples to tell the people when he sent them out proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is near? “Heal the sick.” He wants to dig out this issue in your life that makes you sick – like digging out a dead or decaying root from the dirt of your life and replace that hole with new soil and new seed – a God-seed that will help grow in you a new and pure root of new life.

For some of us, this thing or these things that hold us down are very familiar to us, and the thought of living life free of this issue, well, that is terrifying. We must realize that this is the enemy talking – ‘you can’t let this go – this is who you are’; ‘you can’t forgive that person, don’t you remember what he/she did to you?’

Does that sound like God? Does that sound like something coming from the same lips of the One who was pinned to a cross taking on our sin and then saying, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”? If we are willing to spend the time to dig into the Bible and discover the character of God as it is displayed in the OT and through Jesus, we are going to find a God Who loves us beyond our comprehension and through and beyond our circumstances. This kind of love has an unending supply of compassion and has a burning desire to restore and regenerate every fabric of our lives – to forgive us, to heal us, and to wipe out the fears and anxieties in our lives. The essence of our relationship with God is the *hope* He offers to each of us – to each of you – to become what He originally designed us to be – to be living in the Garden of Eden – 100% at peace and in constant loving fellowship with Him. This is the path of our salvation.

Getting back to Paul, let’s reflect on his conversion on the road to Damascus. It began with a sudden light from heaven that flashed around him. That’s the beginning of salvation – we’re walking around in the darkness of our sin and the grace of God

like lightning bursts through the darkness – the truth breaks through the darkness of the lies we were believing.

Paul drops to his knees and hears Jesus saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” In effect, when we arrive at the moment that we envision Jesus on the cross dying for us – in essence our sin had persecuted him – had put him on the cross – things are never the same again. We begin to see who we are – before a perfect and holy God – completely helpless and in need of rescue. We then realize He has risen, is alive, and offers new life – He not only offers the truth of salvation, but He is our salvation. Psalm 13:5 states, “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.”

Paul would never be the same again. As I mentioned earlier, I don’t believe anyone in Scripture underwent a greater transformation in the Bible than Paul. Interestingly, some of the things that made him so useful to the enemy’s purposes, became even more effective for the Kingdom of God. His zeal and passion are what drove him as a fire-breathing Pharisee to the early church. Under the influence and the guidance of the fire of the Holy Spirit, that same zeal and passion were now directed at proclaiming the truth.

We learned in today’s reading about Paul’s zeal and passion in his desire to go to Jerusalem. But we also saw in him the newfound presence of grace – in his willingness to be obedient to the leadership of the Jerusalem church and participate in the final activities of a Nazarite vow.

Paul was willing to change because He saw something better – He saw the love of God. He allowed God’s love to infiltrate him, to forgive him, to transform his understanding of the Scriptures, and to empower him to love others.

Do you see something better with God? Maybe the more pressing question is do you want to see something better with God? Do you want to see the hope He offers? Realizing hope doesn’t happen without change. Are you afraid of the change He

wants to make in your life? There's a saying that everybody is in favor of progress - it's the change they don't like. The apostle John tells us in his epistle that perfect love casts out all fear. Paul himself said love conquers all. Change can be scary, but it is ***not scary at all*** if you truly believe that the One who is going to lead you ***through*** that change has died on a cross for you, is never going to leave you, and is going to give you Himself by His Holy Spirit dwelling in you the power to deliver the truth, give you the peace, and drive out the fear of making a change that is going to give you new life.

Each day we wake up with an expectancy and hope that the sun is going to rise and warm the day. Since God is the Creator of this process, shouldn't we also live with the same expectancy and hope for Him to put on ***full display*** His promised love for us? Remember, God can't lie. My friends, there is an amazing liberty and freedom and abiding love when you let the Lord Jesus Christ take hold of those things that the father of lies has led you to believe you can't live without or God isn't going to deliver you from. I challenge you to take a step of faith and listen to what God exhorted Joshua in the 9th verse of his book, "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

This ***is*** change we can believe in. Look what it did for Paul. Imagine what change God can do for you, if you allow Him to do it. Do you want to? I know He does. If you do, just ask Him. He won't let you down.