

*This character study / commentary into Apostle Paul is based mostly on Charles Swindoll's "Great Lives in God's Word" series on Paul and FF Bruce's "Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free." Main source materials are based on contents in these books unless otherwise noted.

Sunday July 23, 2023

Lesson 15: When the Spirit Leads...

Reference: Acts 20:7-21:26

When we last saw Paul, he was in Corinth during the winter of AD57, at which point he also wrote a letter to the church in Rome – a letter that was preserved by the Holy Spirit that we know today as the book of Romans. In that letter, he shared his strong desire to visit the members in Rome but must return to Jerusalem first to deliver the donations from various churches for the struggling saints (Rom 15:23-29). Paul will now make that journey back to Jerusalem, a journey that would turn out to be his final visit to that city.

Timeline – The Farewell Tour

As Paul journeys back to Jerusalem through Macedonia, he likely passed through Philippi, which is where we last saw Luke, as he had stayed behind while Paul and Silas left the city for Thessalonica (Acts 17:1). Luke informed his readers that he re-joined Paul's mission team at this point as they made their way to Troas (Acts 20:6). This meant that this mission team now comprised of nine men (Acts 20:4-6).

Final Ministry in Troas (20:7-12)

While in Troas, the mission team worshipped with the Christians in that city (Acts 20:7). "Broke bread" could mean sharing a meal together or observing communion – at this point in time, this phrase carries both meanings. Given the context, both meanings can apply, with the latter meaning validated by Paul preaching a message (20:7) and the former meaning used for feasting together (20:11). Luke noted that Paul spoke for a long time because he intended to leave the next day; this likely meant that Paul knew that he will not be coming back. The reference to "many lamps" upstairs is probably an inference that the room is warm, or that oxygen may have been sucked out of the room. This inference, along with a long message deep into the night, contributed to causing a young man who was sitting by a window to sink into a deep sleep, falling out the window from the third floor (approx. 20 feet) to his death. On Paul's final visit to this city, in his final apostolic act, he brought the young man back to life using the same method used by Elijah (1 Kings 17:21-22) and Elisha (2 Kings 4:34-35).

Final Message to the church in Ephesus from Miletus (20:13-38)

As the mission team left Troas, Luke documented the journey from city to city. However, for reasons Luke did not document, Paul left on foot to Assos by himself – a twenty-mile journey, joining the team in that city before boarding to sail towards Miletus. Luke indicated that Paul opted to sail past Ephesus, hoping to reach Jerusalem by the day of Pentecost (20:16). Luke's reference to the Jewish festivals (days of Unleavened Bread – Acts 20:6) help scholars identify the approximate date of Paul's travels. In AD57, the day of Pentecost would be approximately the end of May.

Having spent 3 years with the Christians in Ephesus (20:31), Paul knew that any personal visit into that city meant that it will be difficult to part ways again (cf Acts 18:20), making it likely that he would not make it to Jerusalem by Pentecost. Thus, Paul requested the elders of the church to meet him in Miletus.

After the elders arrived, Paul delivered a sad farewell that can best be summarized as follows:

- Jerusalem is where he must go (20:22-24) – Unlike his second missionary journey where the Holy Spirit put up roadblocks to his path, here, Paul reveals that the Holy Spirit is directing his path.

- Jerusalem will be the beginning of the end (20:24-25) – Not only has the Holy Spirit directed Paul's path, He has also alerted Paul that God's plans for him is coming to an end; Paul's martyrdom is looming ahead. Paul is letting the elders know that this is a final farewell.
- Paul commissioning the elders (20:26-35) – Much like how Jesus prepared the twelve apostles at the last supper, Paul is now preparing the elders of Ephesus for the mission ahead, reminding them of their responsibilities to keep watch over the flock under their care.
- The Farewell (20:26-28) – Having spent three years together, the prospect of never seeing each other ever again was overwhelming to both Paul and the elder team from Ephesus.

Confusing Message in Tyre (21:1-6)

As the mission team sailed from Miletus, Luke documented their various stops as they make their way towards Jerusalem. The detailed descriptions of the voyage through various cities in relatively close proximity could indicate that they were fighting nature or rough sea conditions. Note how Luke indicated that they spotted Cyprus and opted to sail south of the island towards Tyre where there are more open waters, rather than towards Syria-Antioch (between the island and the mainland).

The ministry team stayed in Tyre for seven days, evidently to unload the cargo and restock the ship. During this stay, other disciples urged Paul – “through the Spirit” not to go to Jerusalem. This message would seem to contradict the message Paul received from the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem. This confusing contradiction was not resolved in Tyre, as Paul and his team pushed on towards Jerusalem.

Message Confirmed in Caesarea (21:7-14)

After leaving Tyre, Luke notes that the mission team ultimately made it to Caesarea, and they stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist for many days. A few days into their stay, a prophet named Agabus came by and confirmed the message that Paul received before, that Paul will suffer by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Upon hearing this prophecy, the disciples again pleaded with Paul not to go to Jerusalem, but Paul will not be dissuaded, citing how God's will supersedes man's will (21:14).

Arrival in Jerusalem (21:17-26)

Arriving in Jerusalem concludes Paul's third (and final) missionary journey, which seems to be focused on raising funds to support other missionaries in Jerusalem. Upon arrival, Paul was told about the misinformation that have been propagated by others about his ministry (21:20-22). This misinformation was evidently influential enough to become an obstacle for ministry in Jerusalem. Apparently, many who embraced Paul's message of salvation by Grace was also led to believe that Paul is advocating for abolishing the OT teachings through Moses. The message from Acts 15 that salvation does not require abiding by Mosaic Law or Jewish custom have been twisted by some, leading “thousands” (21:20) to believe that Paul preaches a message where salvation requires turning away (21:21) from Jewish customs.

The leaders knew that Paul never meant it that way, but nonetheless, thousands were led to believe this to be the case. For the sake of unity and to restore Paul's credibility among these Jewish believers, the leaders asked Paul to oversee the sacrificial ceremony for four men who had taken the Nazirite vow – which is based on OT teachings (21:24). Paul did as they requested, which demonstrated his commitment to Jewish customs, contradicting the misinformation that Paul was against OT teachings.

Analysis – Acts 20:21 – 21:26

The big issue to focus on during Paul's final journey to Jerusalem is the issue on how we understand the message from the Holy Spirit. We were told by Luke that Paul received a clear message to go to Jerusalem,

and be prepared to suffer for the cause of the gospel message (Acts 20:22-23). Later in the same report, Luke tells his audience that the Spirit sent a message urging Paul *not* to go to Jerusalem when he was in Tyre (21:4). Ultimately, we find clarity regarding this confusion when the prophet Agabus shared the Spirit's message again, this time with Luke and others in Caesarea (21:10-11).

Essentially, the message from the Holy Spirit is the same throughout. The difference is in how the people reacted to the message. Paul knew his calling and the consequences of accepting his calling (Acts 9:15-16). Paul was clearly in tune with the workings of the Holy Spirit throughout his missionary journeys, and understood that suffering for the sake of the gospel was part of the package of him accepting his calling. Those who cared for Paul's well-being also very likely understood his calling, but may not understand that suffering for the sake of the gospel was part of the package. Reacting with a human mindset as it relates to following God's will... as long as it is not painful... is simply a reality of our humanity. This is why Paul reacted the way he did (21:12-14).

The takeaway then, is to ask ourselves how far we are willing to go to follow God's will for our life. Specifically, when we are confronted with a life threatening situation while we are engaged in – what we believed – to be God's will, would we still trust God? Or should we listen to sound advice based on human rationale? The key here is to recognize that Paul knew his calling and have accepted his path. In this regard, if we knew our calling and our path, being as certain as Paul is about his calling and his path, and if we accept our calling, how would we react when danger lurks ahead, leading those close to us advising us to turn around (or turn from) the path God wants us to take?

In this context, the following principles can be observed based on Paul's responses to those well-meaning supporters of his ministry:

- **Following the Spirit in our ministry requires trust and courage, especially when danger lurks ahead.** Paul very likely knew from the very beginning that accepting his calling meant that he would have to give up his luxurious life in exchange for a life of hardship and danger. He very likely knew that he will suffer greatly and will likely be martyred. Knowing this reality helped him accept the punishment at every stop in his ministry. He was mentally and emotionally prepared for it. Though not everyone will be called to followed Paul's steps, everyone who is called – and accepted his / her calling – will be expected to be mentally and emotionally prepared to trust God with the kind of courage that will lead them to overcome their fear of danger.
- **Following the Spirit in our ministry requires discernment, especially when receiving counsel from others.** Luke documented that Paul was urged (at least) twice to avoid going to Jerusalem by those who cared for his well-being – even invoking the Spirit's name in one instance. In that specific instance, Luke noted how the team "...knelt to pray" (21:5). The multiple citations and the language of prayers indicate that Paul did not outright dismiss their counsel without taking it to heart. Paul's reaction here was notably different than when he was in Thessalonica (17:10) and in Berea (17:14), where he readily accepted counsel from others to flee from danger. Ultimately, Paul leaned towards pursuing God's will (21:13) in spite of the danger ahead.
- **Following the Spirit in our ministry requires resolve, especially when our humanity is tempted.** It is easy to follow God's will when everything is peaceful and joyful. It is harder to follow God's will when situations before us turns sour. It is most difficult to follow God's will when the situation ahead of us spells danger, if not life threatening. This is what confronted Paul here at the end of his third and final missionary journey, and this is also what confronted Jesus on the night of his arrest. Just as Jesus showed us how our flesh can tempt us to turn away, following God's will requires a strong resolve, especially when we're certain of our calling. Jesus demonstrated this, so did Paul.

Reflecting Upon the Word

Read Matthew 26:36-46. This is the episode where Jesus went to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane.

1. What can we observe about the impact of our flesh in both Jesus' humanity, as well as his disciples?
2. What do the actions of the disciples communicate as it relates to their attitude and understanding of God's will? What does the action of Jesus communicate?
3. What are some principles we can learn from this episode as it relates to our reaction to "danger ahead" in our quest to follow God's will?

Reflecting Upon our World

All of Paul's supporters meant well, as they demonstrated care for Paul, who – when viewed from the world's perspective – wasn't the best at looking after himself.

1. Evaluate your church's pipeline for leadership development. Does it have the support system in place to not only encourage, but also to provide needed counsel to help leaders manage their zeal, their family, or their life?
2. Evaluate your church's pipeline for leadership development. Does it have the spiritual component in place to ensure that your leaders follow the leading of the Holy Spirit over the concern for man's agenda or desire?
3. How does your church (or how can your church) create or maintain a culture that promotes spiritually healthy leaders?

Reflecting Upon Your Spiritual Journey

As this lesson demonstrates, following God's will is easy when everything is peaceful. Following God's will become increasingly more difficult when God's will is pitted against the world.

1. Reflect on a time when you were confronted with making a tough decision between doing things that is right in the sight of God, versus the easy path away from God's path. Did that experience strengthen or weakened your relationship with God? If you are confronted with a similar circumstance today, would you do things differently? Journal your reflection.
2. Reflect on a time when you observed someone who is called into ministry, but acted in a way that you would consider unwise, if not unbiblical – assuming they did so out of ignorance. Did you advise them with wise counsel as an active supporter? Criticize them as a passive critic? Walked away and did nothing? If God puts you in someone else's life today under similar circumstances, would you do things differently? Journal your reflection.
3. Reflect on your own calling. What is it that God wanted you to do or to be in your life as it relates to His kingdom ministry? How is your walk? Have you strayed due to fear of danger? Who are the ministry team members / type of team members that you would like to have in your life who can help you achieve your called path? Journal your reflection and engage in active prayers on your request.