

INTRODUCTION

Life is hard. We all put on a demeanor of relative contentment: “How are you? – “Fine.” Yet truth be told, we all hide struggles of doubts, fears, sins, weaknesses, unfulfilled dreams and wishes that some things were better.

As Christians, we derive great help from the Spirit within us who gives us strength to face each day, and hope for a brighter life beyond this one. Yet sometimes in our disappointments we verbalize, or at least breath a thought of “it’s not fair.”

It’s times like this that we need perspective – godly, Biblical perspective. And we’re going to get that healthy perspective in the final eight chapters of Acts, which we begin studying today. May we have ears to hear and hearts to receive the perspective that God wants to give.

We’re going to see that the pioneer of our faith – the apostle Paul – goes through unimaginable trials and humiliations to finish his life well. If he, the ultimate Christian (apart from Jesus) lived a life of less than relative comfort and faced multiple struggles to finish strong, should we, his spiritual offspring expect anything different?

Paul found contentment, not in a comfortable life without conflict and doubts, but in knowing that he could do all things through Christ who gives him strength.

Philippians 4:13 “*I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.*”

And he found contentment in knowing that this life was about serving Christ, not in serving self, and that there was a better life waiting beyond this one.

Philippians 1:21 “*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*”

I confess that I’ve always thought that the opening 20 chapters of Acts were the most important part. After all, there we have the ascension of Jesus, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the birth and growth of the Church and the 3 missionary journeys of Paul – all critical developments in the history of our faith, and exciting stories, all. But the great theologian John Stott got me thinking when he wrote the following in his commentary on Acts: “It is beyond doubt that ... the amount of space assigned to Paul’s imprisonment and successive examinations marks this as the most important part of the book in the author’s estimation.” And it wasn’t just John Stott saying this. He was drawing on the thesis of a classic book on the apostle Paul, written in 1895 by William Ramsay, called “St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen,” where Ramsay make the same assertion – that the final chapters of Acts are the most important of all, and that Luke spent these 8 chapters and multi-hundreds of verses because this was the heart and climax of his narrative.

As you know, the book of Acts is Volume 2 of Luke’s two Biblical contributions. Volume 1 is his gospel of Luke, relating the life story of Jesus. In this gospel, Luke writes 8 full chapters (10-17) of Jesus’ final journey to Jerusalem that is unique to all the gospels – that is, Matthew, Mark and John do not include any of this material. In Volume 2, Acts, Luke writes 8 chapters to conclude the book, chronicling in great detail Paul’s final journey to Jerusalem and onto Rome. Just as Jesus’ final journey to the cross to accomplish our salvation is of extreme importance, so it Paul’s final journey to Rome to assure the gospel reaching to the “ends of the earth.”

And the parallels of these two journeys are too similar to ignore that Luke was deliberate in his intent. Note the parallels of Jesus and Paul:

1. Both had a long road to Jerusalem, with companions urging them not to go because of the prophesied danger
2. Both endured great suffering (passion) in accomplishing God’s purpose
3. Both received encouragement along the way from ministry and Christian fellowship
4. Both were arrested without cause, physically abused and endured multiple mock trials

5. Both encountered Jewish opposition and false accusations
6. Both were found without fault by the Roman authorities'
7. Both completed their God-assigned task, finishing strong and triumphant

I believe that in both these parallel journeys to destiny, we are to take courage and gain perspective in our life struggles. Our lives are to be more about accomplishing God's purpose and righteousness than in achieving a relative contentment. And in accomplishing this greater life's goal we will be ultimately more satisfied and joyful in our journey.

So with this bigger picture of what is to come in the final chapters of Acts, let us embark on a look at today's Scripture, Chapter 21, which chronicles Paul's first step in making it to Rome. He must first make it back to Jerusalem, despite many obstacles.



21:1-3 seems to be a page out of Luke's travel log, giving port to port detail. Beginning in Miletus where Paul had bid the Ephesian leaders farewell, follow on the map as I read Luke's account. **READ 21:1-3**

BOUND BY THE SPIRIT

In Acts 20:22 you remember that Paul said that he was "bound by the Spirit" to go to Jerusalem, despite the Spirit's warning that "bonds and affliction" would come. He wanted to reach Jerusalem in time for the Pentecost celebration of the Spirit's coming. And yet clearly, his motivation to get there was far greater. I believe that he knew that the bonds and chains of Jerusalem were his "ticket" to make it to Rome and extend the gospel to the very heart of the known world.

It is in 21:4 that we see the first clear opposition to Paul going to Jerusalem.

***Acts 21:4** After looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem.*

Luke has told us that Paul was bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. Yet here we read that “through the Spirit” he was being told not to go. And we see this apparent conflict again when Paul gets to Caesarea and is staying at the house of Philip the evangelist. Agabus, the prophet comes - and see what happens:

: **Acts 21:11-12** *And coming to us, he took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, “This is what the Holy Spirit says: ‘In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’ “ When we hear this, we as well as the local residents began begging him not to go up to Jerusalem.*

So is the Holy Spirit telling Paul to go to Jerusalem or not to go? At first sight the promptings of the Holy Spirit appear to have been in direct conflict. We certainly cannot conclude that the Spirit contradicts Himself. So how can this problem be resolved? John Stott in his Acts commentary is very helpful at this point. He makes a distinction between PREDICTION and PROHIBITION.

In the case of Agabus, we see that the Holy Spirit accurately PREDICTED that sufferings awaited Paul in Jerusalem (just as Jesus has predicted the same for Himself). The travelling companions want to protect Paul, so they urge him not to go (just as the disciples had urged Jesus not to go).

In the case of v. 4 we must assume the same, even though the language is not as clear. It makes sense to conclude that the Spirit was telling Paul that afflictions awaited in Jerusalem, but not that the Spirit was telling Paul not to go.

By this we conclude that Paul was right in pressing onto Jerusalem, for it was God’s will that he do so, despite opposition to protect him (just as had been with Jesus). God’s will was that the gospel be taken to Rome, and Paul’s best way for that to happen at this point was to be taken there in chains. This was the extent of the courage and conviction of Paul that ultimately brought the gospel to you and to me, two centuries later.

FORTIFIED BY FELLOWSHIP

What fortified Paul along his challenging and risk-ridden journey was the Christian fellowship, which he and his companions experienced in every port.

In Tyre they stayed with disciples for 7 days (21:4)

In Ptolemais they greeted their sisters and brothers and stayed for a day (21:7)

In Caesarea they stayed with Philip and his daughters a number of days (21:8-10)

In Jerusalem the church received them “warmly.” This was akin to Paul’s “triumphant entry”

Along our life’s journey we must learn the immeasurable value of the fellowship of the Church!

CONCILIATORY FOR UNITY

At the Council of Jerusalem we saw Paul willing to instruct Gentiles on kosher eating habits for the sake of unity with Jewish believers. Later we saw Paul willing to circumcise Timothy for the same purpose of church unity. Now in the same tolerant spirit we see Paul undergoing some purification rituals in order to pacify Jewish scruples. (21:23-26). Not only does he go through the ritual, but pays for four others, who apparently cannot afford it, to go through the ritual with him.

Well-known commentator, F.F. Bruce, neatly puts it: “A truly emancipated spirit such as Paul’s is not in bondage to its own emancipation.” **May we learn a conciliatory spirit from Paul**

1 Corinthians 9:22-23 *To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.*

SUMMARY

- 1. May I find strength and encouragement for my journey, from Paul’s journey for me**
- 2. May I realize I am “bound by the Spirit” to struggle for the sake of Christ**
- 3. May I regularly seek the fortification of the body of Christ along my pilgrim journey**
- 4. May my freedom in Christ still allow me to be conciliatory for the sake of unity**