

Acts 21:1-16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Acts chapter 21 verses 1 to 16. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.

On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the Evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, Thus says the Holy Spirit, This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.

When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned, but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.

And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, Let the will of the Lord be done. After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Nason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge.

[2 : 0 7] Earlier in chapter 20, Paul had interrupted the return journey to Jerusalem at Miletus to deliver a final charge to the Ephesian elders. Now, after an emotional parting, at the beginning of Acts chapter 21, he rejoins the company on the ship, and they continue their journey.

The We section continues here. Luke is present as part of the company, and now they are going to be moving towards Jerusalem together. There is a detailed itinerary here of their journey, as there was in chapter 20, with each brief stop on the way mentioned.

It's perhaps reminiscent of the itinerary that we find on the wilderness wanderings, given in places like Numbers chapter 33 or Deuteronomy chapters 1 to 3. They are moving from the west coast of modern Turkey, round past Korea in the Roman province of Asia, dropping off on the islands of Kos and Rhodes, before landing in Patara in Lycia.

At Patara, they board another, presumably larger ship, to go beyond the islands and out into the wider Mediterranean, travelling towards Phoenicia. The distance from Patara to Tyre was about 400 miles, and has been estimated to take about 3-5 days of sailing.

Their journey seems to be going smoothly. When they arrive in Tyre, they have the time to spend a week with the disciples there. Presumably, they are well on target to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost. The disciples here express concern about the fact that Paul is going to Jerusalem.

[3 : 3 1] It is revealed to them by the Spirit what awaits Paul there, and presumably they infer from that that he should not go. However, Paul's journey to Jerusalem is itself by the constraining of the Spirit, as we see in Acts chapter 20 verses 22 to 23.

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

Such sufferings were always essential to Paul's mission, as we see in the instructions given to Ananias in Acts chapter 9 verses 15 to 16. But the Lord said to him, Paul is being conformed to Christ.

In the Gospels, as Jesus had travelled with his disciples towards Jerusalem, he had revealed to them on a number of occasions what awaited him in the city, and they had sought to dissuade him, as they realised what lay ahead.

Paul experiences much the same thing. On the one hand, the Spirit has told him that he must go towards these sufferings. He is constrained by the Spirit. On the other hand, the Spirit is revealing to the people around him that he is about to go and the fate that awaits him.

[4 : 50] And in the process, the Spirit is actually increasing pressure against him. Now he needs not only to follow the constraining of the Spirit against all the weakness of the flesh within, he also has to follow it against all of the persuasions of his friends without, who have been given part of the picture by the Spirit, but not the full picture.

The Spirit in the process is testing and proving Paul. All of the disciples at Tyre, with their families, go with Paul and his company down to the beach, praying with them before sending them off.

They stop off at Ptolemaeus and visit the Christians there for one day, and then on to Caesarea, where they stay with Philip. Philip the Evangelist was one of the seven who was called back in chapter 6, and it describes him as having four unmarried daughters here who prophesied.

Luke might have several reasons for mentioning the daughters at this point. First of all, it draws our minds back to Acts chapter 2, verses 17 to 18, and the prophecy of Joel as it was quoted by the Apostle Peter in his sermon on the day of Pentecost.

Luke often has male and female pairings. We've seen this at several points in the book of Acts.

[6 : 16] We also see the same thing in the book of Luke, for instance, with characters like Simeon and Anna. In chapter 2 of his Gospel, he describes Anna as a prophetess. These four young girls are not described as prophetesses, but they do prophesy.

Perhaps Luke reserves the terms prophet and prophetess for people who have more established ministries. Whatever is the case, these young women reflect very positively upon their father.

A spiritually gifted father has raised spiritually gifted daughters. And here, their activity of prophesying parallels with the character of Agabus, a male prophet who delivers a message concerning Paul.

Caesarea is for this company the last stop before Jerusalem. This is the point where Paul faces the crunch moment, the temptation to turn back. It is a significant point for Luke as well.

Spending time like this with Philip and his family would give him an extended period of time to spend in conversation with one of the important sources for his book of Acts. Much of the content of chapters 6-8 of the book would rest upon Philip's testimony.

[7 : 20] The prophet Agabus was previously mentioned in chapter 11 verse 28, where he foretold the famine that would come upon the world. Now he performs a prophecy with Paul's belt to symbolize what will happen to him in Jerusalem.

In Luke's account here of the prophecy of Agabus, he's drawing attention back to previous events within his Gospel of Luke. The moment of decision that Paul faces here is being compared to the choice that faced Christ as he moved towards Jerusalem, and then later in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Agabus declares, This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles. This is a somewhat inexact description of what actually happens as the Romans take Paul into custody after their commotion in the temple.

One could make a case that he's not really delivered into their hands by the Jews. However, although Agabus' statement can be defended in its accuracy, its main effect is to parallel Paul and Christ.

We have statements in Luke that are very similar to this concerning Christ. Luke chapter 18 verses 31 to 33. The delivering over to the Gentiles will happen in Paul's case as well.

[8 : 47] When the disciples hear about this, they weep and try to urge Paul not to go to Jerusalem. Paul begs them not to weep. It will only make his journey harder. He must go to Jerusalem. He must suffer for the name of Jesus Christ.

He's ready to be imprisoned and even to die. Here Paul takes up the language of the Apostle Peter that is given to us in Luke chapter 22 verse 33. In contrast to Peter's overconfident and failed commitment, Paul will carry his commitment through.

Eventually they resign themselves to Paul's determination. Let the will of the Lord be done. And this again recalls events from the Gospel of Luke in Luke chapter 22 verses 41 to 42.

Paul is facing his Gethsemane moment here, and he faithfully moves on in the steps of his master.

Looking at the description of prophecy in this chapter, it's worth reflecting upon the way that prophecy can be incomplete. In chapter 20 verses 22 to 23, Paul knows that suffering and imprisonment awaits him, but he does not know exactly how things will play out.

[10 : 07] Prophecy can be inexact as we see in chapter 21 verse 11, as Agabus describes the way that Paul will be handed over to the Gentiles. It may also lead to false conclusions, as we see in verse 4 of this chapter, where the disciples infer from the message of the Spirit that Paul is going to face persecutions and imprisonment, that he should not go up to Jerusalem.

This further suggests that prophecy can be conditional. The prophecy declares what will happen if Paul goes to Jerusalem. The prophecy does not declare that Paul going up to Jerusalem and being imprisoned is inevitable.

Paul has a choice. He could turn back at this point. All of this description of prophecy suggests that prophecy needed to be handled with great care. It would reveal part of the picture, but people could easily be misled concerning it and follow it in false directions.

The prophet also seems to be in danger of giving an interpretive spin upon his prophecy, as we see in the case of those who tried to dissuade Paul from going to Jerusalem, because they mistakenly took the prophecy concerning his imprisonment there to be an indication that he should not go.

Even beyond the discernment between true and false prophecy, then, prophecy seems to have required considerable amount of wisdom in its handling. The prophecy that we see in this chapter is limited counsel.

[11 : 22] It isn't firm, authoritative, and infallible direction. Some of the disciples from Caesarea go up with them to Jerusalem. They bring them to the house of Nathan of Cyprus.

He's an early disciple. Perhaps as a Jerusalem Christian with connections to Cyprus, he would somehow have had connections with Barnabas. They all stay with him, and the fact that they're staying with an early Christian in Jerusalem perhaps serves as an indication that he is another important source for Luke's account of the early years in Jerusalem.

Someone who had been present for the early years in Jerusalem would be able to fill in many parts of the story that we see in chapters 1 to 8. A question to consider.

Where else in the New Testament do we see Paul tested concerning his sufferings in a way that is reminiscent of Christ?