

Standing firm even in difficulties

Littlebourne - 17th September 2023 - Acts 21:1-16

At this point in Acts, it's roughly 59 AD, and Paul is ending his third missionary journey. Last week, we saw him say farewell to the Ephesians, where he made clear that he wouldn't again see them face to face.

Verse 22 of chapter 20 told us that Paul has been guided by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem, and that wherever he goes, he will face persecution. So Paul is single-minded in this mission now, to follow God's way, even when it's hard.

v1-3

And when we had parted from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos, and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. 2 And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. 3 When we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload its cargo.

We start off with more travelling around, by ship. Notice first, that the narrative is now about 'we' - so Luke joins Paul on this stretch of the journey, from Miletus to Jerusalem.

They set sail from Miletus, a coastal town, where he's been talking to the elders from Ephesus, and head quickly along the coast through the islands, to Rhodes, then on to Patara. No stopping off at Rhodes, despite being a large and important place - Paul is heading for Jerusalem with minimal delay.

Patara was a major port and so it was a good place to find a ship to go onward towards Syria and Palestine. Phoenicia was the strip of coast-land north of Judea, where Tyre, Sidon, Ptolemais, etc. were located. This is where they head to.

They don't even stop at Cyprus, where they've been before - they just keep on going to Tyre, a journey from Patara of about four hundred miles or five days by boat back then.

v4-6

4 And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. 5 When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed 6 and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.

After the long journey by boat, they do stop for a week while at Tyre, and meet with the disciples there.

The disciples tell Paul not to go on - and they do this 'through the Spirit'. Now the Spirit has told Paul to go to Jerusalem, that we've seen in the previous chapter. Here, what is the Spirit saying?

I think the Holy Spirit, being the unchanging God, has not changed His mind - no, the believers in Tyre are getting much the same message as Paul - that going to Jerusalem will mean persecution and suffering.

Paul and the others have different interpretations - Paul has been given a fuller view of things. The Holy Spirit back in chapter 20 verse 22-23:

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and affliction await me.

So for Paul, the testimony of the Holy Spirit is that he should travel to Jerusalem, and wherever he goes, he faces affliction. The disciples weren't telling him anything new - he knew what he was facing.

Again, just as in Miletus, everyone sees Paul and company off as they set sail again. The final act together is to pray at the seashore, much the same as the departure from the Ephesian elders.

v7-9

7 When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. 8 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. 9 He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied.

Next stop, Ptolemais, a port twenty-five miles south of Tyre, where they stay for a day. Then, on to Ceasarea, which is thirty-two miles south again. We've seen Ceasarea before - it was the capital of the Roman province of Judea, a seaport city built by Herod the Great.

Here, they meet Philip, once of the seven who were appointed in Acts 6, the deacons that held responsibility for the distribution of food in the early Jerusalem congregation. This is the Philip who also preached to the Samaritans, met the Ethiopian eunuch and ended up in Ceasarea at the end of chapter 8.

Philip's four daughters are mentioned, and it's said that they prophesy. Nothing more is heard of them, so why the mention? Well we've seen throughout this trip, that the Holy Spirit has been showing what is coming, and the presence of more prophets on the way underscores this. There's no way that Paul doesn't know what's coming, but he goes anyway.

v10-11

10 While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 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.'"

Now we see another prophet - this time one that we've met before. Agabus showed up in chapter 11 (v28), having travelled from Jerusalem to Antioch where Paul was and prophesied a coming famine. This was around fifteen years earlier in Acts.

As if to underscore what is coming for Paul, we now have a prophet with a proven track record, that Paul has met before, and he shows Paul that persecution and arrest await Paul in Jerusalem.

Agabus relays that the Holy Spirit is saying that Paul would be bound by the Jews and delivered to the gentiles. This is more or less what happens in the coming chapters of Acts - Paul goes to Jerusalem, goes to the temple and he is attacked by the Jews, that is those Jews that still don't accept Christ, and then the gentiles, the Romans, take Paul into custody.

Agabus might seem like he's over-dramatic about it - he demonstrates visually how Paul will be bound hand and foot. But it's not unusual for God's prophets to use a sign, a demonstration, of things to press the point home. Isaiah goes around barefoot for three years as a sign (Isaiah 20), Jeremiah wears a yoke as a sign (Jeremiah 27), Ezekiel digs through the wall of his house (Ezekiel 12), amongst other things, as a sign. Though God can certainly work through just words, He also uses people to demonstrate things, to better show the truth of matters to those that see them.

In this case, the people certainly believe Agabus.

v12-14

12 When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. 13 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." 14 And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

Luke and the gathered people understand what is coming for Paul - that it won't be pleasant. So they try to dissuade Paul of his plans to head for Jerusalem. Not unreasonable, they don't want Paul to suffer.

Paul's response shows that he cares for their opinion and that he is grieved too. But he is also ready to do whatever the Lord so decides should happen, be it imprisonment or death.

Paul's attitude is not of stoic acceptance, or being hardened. He doesn't face down suffering as if it doesn't affect him. He finds it hard, but also knows that God's way is best. He trusts in God to bring him through whatever is to happen, and knows that whatever occurs, is God's will for him. His confidence is not in himself, in his own ability to withstand things, but in God. He is willing to suffer, not for nothing, but for the name of the Lord Jesus, as he says.

v15-16

15 After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. 16 And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge.

Paul's intention was to, if possible, reach Jerusalem by Pentecost (Acts 20:16). The day is probably fast approaching and Paul sets off for Jerusalem, joined by others from Caesarea. Once they get there, they find lodgings in the house of Mnason, an early disciple - one of those that was left in Jerusalem.

It's interesting that Jerusalem, once a place that would have been home for Paul, and welcoming to him, is now a place of danger for him. What was the beginning place of the church, has turned into a place of danger. We saw back in chapter 8, Paul, prior to his conversion, was instrumental in scattering the church from Jerusalem and leaving few Christians left there. Jerusalem at this point, is going downhill. As we saw, Jerusalem was the site of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, and later, when Paul returns to Jerusalem

after his conversion, he faces death threats too. It seems that when Paul returns this time, it's not much better - he will be attacked, and then there will be a plot to murder him whilst he's in Roman custody.

As history records, and Jesus prophesied, Jerusalem would face judgement for its rejection of the messiah. In AD 70, around ten years time from this point, Jerusalem would be besieged and destroyed by the Romans. The Christians would miraculously escape, because they remembered Jesus' words and saw the signs that it was time to leave. But the Jewish leaders, those that most vehemently opposed Christ, would all be trapped in the city and slaughtered or enslaved.

The general in charge of the siege and future Roman emperor, Titus, returned to Rome after the campaign and refused the wreath of victory, because he said that it was not his victory, he had merely been in instrument of God's wrath.

Conclusion

Paul knows he's entering the lion's den. But he also knows that God is in control. Likewise, we need to know that God is in control. Paul trusted God - even when things looked grim.

Is there something in life that we know we need to do, but know it will be difficult? We might not face the same things as Paul does - but that doesn't mean we don't have things to do that we don't want to do. Let's follow Paul's example, who did what God commanded, even when he knew it was difficult and dangerous.

Paul also went against the crowd, when it was right to do so. He will go against the crowd in Jerusalem, preaching Christ to those that don't accept Him. He is outnumbered and knows that his words won't go down easily.

Maybe it's easier for us to imagine standing up to our enemies and doing the right thing. But also, Paul did the right thing when his friends were trying to persuade him otherwise. Now we need to be careful - if those around you all try to persuade you against something that ordinarily means you need to examine yourself and what you're doing. But in Paul's case, when he knew that what he was doing was God's will, he was not dissuaded by the words of his friends - he was steadfast in doing what God wanted, and understanding with them when they thought he was making a mistake.

Today, we might face this situation in the church - there is often a tendency to doing things the way we've always done them, or to doing the easy thing rather than the right thing. Nobody wants to be accused of rocking the boat.

But if we feel convicted that God wants things a certain way, we should be people of conviction. Like Paul, we should strive to be understanding and compassionate to the people around us, but also do what we believe to be right. Not usurping authority, but in what we are doing, doing the right thing.

One way in which we might go against the grain, even in church, is in having that Pauline attitude - in believing that God is actually in charge of what is happening. In believing that He has a plan for things. In trusting Him completely. Unfortunately, that's something that often not just counter-cultural outside the church, but also in it.

To conclude, are we following Paul's example? Are we trusting that God is in control? Are we grasping the nettle when we know that God wants us to? We know that whatever we face, we are not alone - God is with us. The Father has a plan set out, the Son has died for us, that we might be free from all suffering in the end, and the Holy Spirit is with us now, guiding us.

We don't face what Paul faced - so when we have difficulties that are far less, how much more should we be able to stand firm and trust God.