

Acts Series Part 58

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 14 August 2011

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] you could turn with me to Acts chapter 21. And very particularly, if I could ask you to focus your attention on verse 4, and I'm going to read again from the middle of the verse through to the end of verse 5, or really through to the first half of verse 5. And what I want you to do is, as I read and as you follow the reading, I want you to spot the problem. I think there's a problem in these words that I want you to identify. And I'm sure many of you, even as we read it, will notice something that requires explanation and I think can reasonably be described as a problem.

We read, through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. These are the believers in Tyre. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way, understood, to Jerusalem. Do you see the problem? The Christians at Tyre, we are told, through the Spirit, through the Spirit of God, urge Paul not to go to Jerusalem.

But Paul knows better and travels on regardless. Do we have here a clear act of disobedience on the part of Paul? Does he reckon that he knows better than God? Is this the same man who a few days before was waxing lyrical about his great humility in the service of God, as we noticed and considered last week?

How are we to understand what we read here? Through the Spirit, Paul is urged not to go, but Paul, regardless, goes to Jerusalem. What I want to do this evening is, first of all, describe what happens here. We've already done so in a measure just in reading that verse, but fleshing it out a little, describe what happens. That's the first thing. I hope very briefly, simply describe what happens.

Then what I want to do is explain what happened. And I trust, resolve in a measure this problem that we seem to be confronted with in the text. So, describe what happened, explain what happened, and then move on to learn from what happened. Because I do think there are a number of very helpful lessons for us, very particularly in the manner in which we deal with God's Word. This is the issue here. There is a Word from God. How is this Word to be dealt with? How are the Christians to grapple with this Word and understand the meaning and significance of it? So, there'll be description, I trust, a cogent explanation, though I can't promise that, but we'll do our best. And then we seek to learn also from what happened. First of all then, let's describe what is happening here.

[3 : 1 7] Paul and his companions are traveling to Jerusalem. That much is very clear. And Paul is in a hurry to get there. Some of you will remember what we read last week in chapter 20 and verse 16.

Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost. So, there was a time frame. There was a target for him, and he was in a hurry to get there in time for the day of Pentecost. Having bid farewell to the Ephesian elders at Miletus, he is now traveling, we might say, full steam ahead to his ultimate destination. And there at the beginning of chapter 21, we have a description of his itinerary, of the journey that he is making, heading towards his destination in Jerusalem. And as he arrives in Tyre, he is getting tantalizingly close to his destination. Indeed, as the crow flies, he is now only a hundred miles away from Jerusalem as his vessel sails into the harbor in Tyre. Now, at Tyre, there is an unavoidable stop to allow the ship to unload its cargo. We're told that very explicitly. And this unavoidable stop gives Paul and his companions the opportunity to seek out the Christian community in the city of Tyre. And it is while there, among the believers in Tyre, that the believers urge Paul not to continue his journey. Now, why do they do that?

That is where he is going. That is what his journey is all about. Why do they tell him not to continue? Well, we're told, we've read and highlighted the relevant verse. We are told that they urge Paul through the Spirit not to proceed. Now, what is that all about? It seems clear that the language is describing a prophetic word that was delivered within and received by the church at Tyre.

We know that at this stage in the church's development, in the absence of the completed canon that we now enjoy, the gift of prophecy was one means. God used to reveal His will to His people.

And that is what seems to be going on here. There is a prophetic word. And on the basis of this prophetic word, the Christians at Tyre urge Paul not to continue to Jerusalem. Well, so far, so good. The problem is that Paul chooses to disregard this prophetic word, or so it seems, and continues his journey as soon as the vessel was ready. Luke speaks of when our time was up, we continued our journey. Very possibly a reference to the ship simply being ready, and so they can continue to Jerusalem. Well, that is in Tyre.

[6 : 40] Now, as if that were not enough, something very similar happens at his next port of call in Caesarea, where we are told a recognized and bona fide prophet named Agabus prophesies that Paul will be bound by the Jews and handed over to the Gentiles in Jerusalem. And the response of all, both the believers at Caesarea and indeed Paul's traveling companions, which includes Luke, is to plead with Paul not to carry on to Jerusalem. We have that related for us there from verse 10 through to verse 14.

So, there's a prophecy. And Agabus, we've already come across Agabus. He was, as I say, a bona fide prophet, and this word he brings from God concerning the danger that awaits Paul, and yet the response of the congregation, or rather reasonably the response of the congregation, is, well, don't go. But Paul says, no, I will go, and he goes. What is the outcome of it all? Well, we haven't read the passage as it continues to describe us the outcome. But it ought to be no surprise to us that at Jerusalem, Paul is indeed attacked by the Jews. He ends up arrested and in the hands of the Gentiles. That's described for us in verse 30 on through to verse 33. We won't read it for reasons of time. Well, that's a description of what happened. Now, what we want to do is to move on to the explanation. Now, what most requires explanation is Paul's response to the urgings through the Spirit that he received in Tyre.

Was this disobedience to the voice of God? I would suggest that it was not, and I will attempt to explain why I don't think it was an act of disobedience on the part of Paul.

It's very clear that Paul's journey to Jerusalem was in obedience to and under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Listen to a verse that we were considering or certainly read last Sunday, verse 22 in chapter 20.

We read, and now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem. Previously, Paul had spoken of his desire to be there by the day of Pentecost, and we might have said, well, that was his desire. That's what he wanted, not necessarily what God wanted, but the language he uses here in verse 22 is so clear, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem. Not just because I want to, not because these are my plans. These are God's plans that I go to Jerusalem. I'm compelled indeed. You could hardly find stronger language. So, that Paul was meant to go to Jerusalem seems very clear. Do we then have the Holy Spirit changing his mind? At one moment, he's compelling Paul to go to Jerusalem, and then a few days later, through the Spirit, Paul is being urged not to go to Jerusalem. Is he contradicting himself? Well, clearly that is not an option for us. What then? One possibility is that the term that we have here, through the Spirit, is simply to be used as an equivalent term to prophecy. And we know, as the New Testament makes it clear, there can be genuine prophecy, and there can be false prophecy.

[10 : 29] Indeed, the believers are instructed as to the importance of testing prophecy, to confirm that it was genuine. So, one possibility is that, as I say, the term here, through the Spirit, simply is a way of saying that there was a prophecy. However, that prophecy had to be tested. It was tested, and it was found wanting, and so Paul was able to proceed.

Seems to me a very unsatisfactory solution to what is such clear language. Through the Spirit, they urged Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. And indeed, there is nothing in the passage, nothing in what we are told in any case, that would suggest that this was not a genuine prophecy.

This was not a genuine revelation of God's will by His Spirit. Rather, the explanation lies, I would suggest, in distinguishing between the prophetic word itself and the manner in which the prophetic word is understood and interpreted. The word delivered and received was indeed through the Spirit.

We're told that very clearly, through the Spirit, they urged Paul. The question is, what was that word? Now, we're not told. We're not actually told what the word was.

They are entire. However, I think we can reasonably come to an opinion as to what the word might have been. And why can we have that confidence? Well, it seems reasonable to suggest that the word entire, the prophetic word received entire, would have been similar to the prophecy that was delivered by Agabus in Caesarea, that we are told what the contents were. Why can we conclude that it's likely that the prophecy entire would have been very similar to the one in Caesarea? Well, we can conclude that by what we have already been told in the previous chapter. Notice there in verse 22 of chapter 20, we've already read that, but we'll read it again and then read on through to verse 23. And I think there we will have the help that we need to come to the conclusion that entire, the prophetic word that they received was similar to the word that Agabus delivered, effectively a warning concerning the danger that Paul faced in Jerusalem.

[13 : 04] Listen to what we read there in verse 22 of chapter 20, And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city, notice the care with which Luke delivers this information to us, I only know that in every city, the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.

And I think it's reasonable to understand this as prison and hardships will be facing me, not in every city, but in Jerusalem. That is my destination. So, we have already been told that Paul should expect on this journey he is making to Jerusalem, that in every city there will be these prophetic words warning him concerning the danger that he faces in Jerusalem. So, if that is clear, what has happened? Well, I think what has happened is that the believers in Tyre received this prophetic word indicating that prison and hardship await Paul in Jerusalem. They maybe thought, well, maybe it will be more than that. Maybe he'll face death in Jerusalem. Certainly, Paul seemed to be open to that very real possibility. The question is, what does this mean, this prophetic word that Paul is going to face hardship in prison? Well, the believers in Tyre very understandably conclude that this means that Paul should not go to Jerusalem.

Isn't that the point of a warning? You know, we receive warnings. We receive a weather warning, or the police tell us that certain roads are not roads that we should go on because they're dangerous.

Well, the purpose of that is that we wouldn't go on them. And so, the believers in Tyre say, well, we've had this prophetic word, there's danger that awaits Paul in Jerusalem. This is a warning from God.

Conclusion, Paul should not go to Jerusalem. You can understand why they would have concluded in that way. But the prophetic word didn't actually say that. Paul, in possession of a broader understanding of more revelation, of more information, is able to rightly interpret the prophetic word. You see, far from being a warning for him not to go to Jerusalem, it is a confirmation of the Spirit's direction that he should go. It was the same Spirit who had, just a few days before, told him, in every town, in every city, you will receive these warnings. As if to say, don't be put off by them. Far from it, these will confirm my will that you should go to Jerusalem. This was the Spirit continuing to compel Paul to go to Jerusalem. This was not the Spirit telling Paul that he should refrain from completing his journey.

[16 : 03] The matter is more straightforward in Caesarea as we explain what happened. In Tyre, it's more difficult because we're not actually told what the prophetic word was. In Caesarea, we are told. And as we would have expected, all we have is Agabus saying, danger awaits in Jerusalem. Agabus doesn't say you shouldn't go. Agabus doesn't say God is telling you not to go. Agabus, as a prophet should, limits himself to what he has to say. There is danger in Jerusalem. Paul knew that already.

And he expected there to be such a prophecy in Caesarea because he'd already been told that in every town and city such prophecies would be delivered. But there in Caesarea, though Paul is clear, the believers, again, understandably, interpret the word delivered by Agabus wrongably.

They say, oh well, there's so much danger. Paul, you mustn't go. You mustn't go. God is telling us that there's danger for you in Jerusalem. Don't go. They mistakenly interpret the word that they receive. The word is a word from God, but they don't understand the significance or the meaning of it. Which takes us on to what we can learn from what happened. Having described what happened, having, I hope, explained in a measure what happened, very particularly this difficulty of Paul being urged through the Spirit. And yet Paul continues seemingly in contradiction or in disobedience to the prophetic word. I think we have presented why it's reasonable to conclude that this is not disobedience. Far from it. This is Paul better understanding what it is that God has to say.

But we want to move on now in the time that we have remaining to learn from what happened. Now, some might think that we can learn very little. As it might be argued, we live in different times.

We are privileged to have in our possession the completed canon of Scripture, and so it might be argued, do not need to grapple with prophetic words in the way that the Christians in Tyre evidently did have to grapple. And not only in Tyre, but throughout the book of Acts, we find a similar challenge for the believers. But we do have to grapple with the prophetic word today. Yes, we have the prophetic word, but we have to grapple with it. We have to understand what it means. We have to know what it is saying and what it means for us in our own lives, individually and as a congregation. We need to grapple with the prophetic word. And so, in that grappling with the word, let's just notice lessons that we can learn from this incident that we have been considering, recorded for us in Acts chapter 21.

[19 : 02] I think there are five lessons that can be learned from this incident that is related to us by Luke. Luke. The first one is, be clear about what God has actually said. We're going to be engaging in some alliteration this evening, not something I often do, but bear with me as I do this evening. Be clear about what God has actually said. As already commented, our contention is that the Christians in Tyre thought, in good faith, that God had said something He had not actually said. They thought He had said that Paul should not go to Jerusalem, but they were wrong. It wasn't malicious. There wasn't any ill will. They simply got it wrong. Now, we can make the same mistake. We all approach the prophetic word that we have. We all approach the Bible with a series of preconceived ideas and prejudices and opinions. We presume and imagine that the Bible says X or Y, where X or Y usually corresponds to what we would like it to say.

And so, the lesson is that we should be careful. We must be clear about what God has actually said. Always ask the question, is that what the Bible actually says? This is important in listening to sermons, in reading Christian literature, in examining your own opinions, grounded, so you think, on what God says in the Bible. Remember the Bereans who we've already encountered in the book of Acts, who we are told examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

So, the first lesson that we can draw from this incident is be clear about what God has actually said. The second lesson flows from it is this, be careful about what it actually means. Now, having established what it says and being clear on that, we now have to be careful about what it actually means. And this second task is often a much more difficult one to determine what God means by what He says. It ought not to surprise us that this will be often difficult for us. Peter, in one of his letters, in the second letter of Peter, is not in any way embarrassed or ashamed to recognize that he found it difficult to understand some of the things that Paul taught. We read in 2 Peter chapter 3 in verse 16, his letters, that is the letters of Paul, contain some things that are hard to understand. Well, if Peter found what Paul said hard to understand, it ought not to surprise us if we too were clear on what it says. It's there in front of us. We can be careful to make sure, yes, this is what it says. It's a reasonable, a good translation. This is the Word of God. But what does it mean? It can be difficult. We can have two Christians, or more likely two groups of Christians, equally clear as to what the Bible says, equally persuaded that it is the inspired Word of God, and yet coming to different conclusions as to what it means. This is certainly what happened at Caesarea, possibly also at Tyre. At Caesarea, the prophetic Word was clear. We have it here recorded for us. The Holy Spirit says, in this way, the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles. Nobody was in doubt that this was the prophetic Word.

Paul was clear that this was the prophetic Word. The believers in Caesarea were clear that this was the prophetic Word, but what does it mean? There was where the disagreement arose. The conclusions that people came to were different on the basis of the same Word. What to do in such circumstances?

Well, I think this incident highlights two important hermeneutical rules of thumb, interpretive rules that we can apply. There are many, but two are highlighted by this incident.

[23 : 29] The first one is this. Take a step back and look at the big picture. We're still considering the importance of us being careful about what the Bible actually means, and in being careful, one thing we must do is this. Take a step back and look at the big picture. As we've already said in describing and explaining the incident, the big picture was clear for those who had access to all the information. Paul had to go to Jerusalem. He was compelled by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem.

That was clear. The prophecies in Tyre and Caesarea had to be interpreted in that light. It was impossible that the prophecies in Tyre and Caesarea could contradict what the Spirit had clearly already established. So, it was necessary to see the big picture. If the only information you had was what the Spirit spoke in Tyre or in Caesarea, then it would be difficult to know what it meant.

But when you see the big picture, when you bring to the table all of the data, then it becomes much clearer what it is that is being said, what is the meaning of these prophetic words.

And we too must do the same. That's really what we've done this evening. We've come across this verse that we've identified as a problem through the Spirit. They urged Paul not to go, and yet Paul goes. What do we do? Well, we say, well, how do we understand this? We go back. We have a look at the big picture. And as we look at the big picture, so it becomes clearer what it is that God is saying.

But there's another rule that we can draw from this incident that helps us to be careful about what God's Word actually means. And it is this, and it's really related to this first one that we've commented, but we can mention it because I think it's helpful to mention it explicitly. Allow what is clear in God's Word to help explain what is not clear. This is a very important principle of biblical interpretation. The prophetic words in Tyre and Caesarea were clear as to their content, but they were not clear in the absence of auxiliary revelation as to what they meant in respect of Paul's travel plans. The content was clear, but what they meant for Paul was not clear, if that's all the information you had. However, the Word of the Spirit in chapter 20, and in verse 22, compelled by the Spirit, Paul was traveling to Jerusalem, that was abundantly clear in content and in meaning, very clear. And so, that clear revelation was necessary to help explain that subsequent Word that was less clear as to its meaning. And that same principle holds today. And I would urge you to be careful, as I hope I would urge myself. Be careful with stubbornly clinging to a closed and inflexible point of view based on one or two obscure and difficult-to-understand verses. How much trouble there has been in the church of Jesus Christ because some of us say, well, this is what the Bible says on the basis of some difficult-to-understand verse.

[26 : 56] This is what it says, and I'm not prepared to even contemplate any other opinion because this is what it says. Well, be careful. Be careful about what it actually means. So, be clear about what God has actually said. Be careful about what it actually means. But thirdly, be cautious about either going with the crowd or following your heart as you would seek to determine what is meant by a prophetic word, the Word of God. First of all, the danger of going with the crowd. If we take Luke to illustrate this, Luke, we can reasonably presume, was privy to the prophetic word granted to Paul concerning the need to travel to Jerusalem. At some point, he became privy to it. We have it, he writes it in his book. But it seems reasonable that even as he was going on this journey, he already knew that Paul was being compelled by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. He was part of the traveling band. Seems altogether reasonable to presume that Luke knew about this already. Luke knew that the Spirit of God was compelling Paul.

So, he knew this. And it seems he is able to remain firm in what he knows, in Tyre. Notice that it's interesting how it's described to us there in verse 4. Through the Spirit, they urged Paul, they being the Christians in Tyre, not to go on to Jerusalem. But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. Luke is saying, we were at one with Paul. The Christians in Tyre thought he shouldn't go, but not us. We were sure that he should continue to Jerusalem. Well, that's fine in Tyre. But what happens in Caesarea? In Caesarea, the situation changes. We have the prophecy from Agabus, and then in verse 12, we read, when we heard this, that's Luke and the other traveling companions, we and the people there, the Christians in Caesarea, pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. You see, he's changed.

In Tyre, he was clear, no, we must go to Jerusalem. But now he's beginning to wonder, well, maybe Paul shouldn't go to Jerusalem. Maybe I shouldn't go to Jerusalem. You see, his heart is beginning to rule over his head, you might say. Or rather, he is beginning to be influenced by the crowd. Everybody seems to be of the opinion that we shouldn't go to Jerusalem. Everybody seems to think that this is a bad idea. Maybe it is a bad idea. Maybe we shouldn't go. He's beginning to be drawn away from what he knows to be the way of obedience, the way of what has clearly been established by the crowds. The crowds are drawing him in the wrong direction. He's buckled under the pressure of the crowd. They can't all be wrong, he perhaps concluded. Well, they were wrong, and he was wrong to be influenced in that way by them.

So, there is, so be cautious about going with the crowd, but also be cautious about following your heart. And here again, Luke illustrates the point. He knew that Paul was meant to go to Jerusalem, but as they come ever closer to their destination, and as the danger is imminent, his heart takes over.

He loves Paul. He can't contemplate losing Paul. Indeed, Paul himself was not immune to the powerful pool of the heart. Notice how he protests to Luke and the others in verse 13. Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? You see, it was tough for Paul. He was clear that he had to go, but as he sees all of these people that he loves, and they're all saying, don't go, please don't go, stay here, it's too dangerous.

[30 : 45] So, he begins to wonder. Or certainly, his heart is, as he says, is being broken by what he is witnessing.

It was tough for Paul to remain firm in the face of the heartbreak he was witnessing and experiencing. Be careful, be cautious about following your heart. I think a good rule for us in these matters is, don't do what you feel is right. Do what you know is right. And if you don't know, find out.

Don't do what you feel is right. Do what you know is right. And if you don't know, we'll find out. A fourth lesson, we're nearly there, a fourth lesson that we can draw from this incident is be calm when you disagree with other believers on a matter that isn't altogether clear.

Did the Christians in Tyre and Caesarea go off in a huff because their understanding of the meaning of the prophetic word did not prevail? They were sure that Paul shouldn't go, and yet Paul goes.

Did a wee group appear, claiming to be the true church of God in Tyre, holding to the true revelation of God? Quite the reverse. What do they do in verse 5? Once it is established that Paul will continue to Jerusalem. Look at this beautiful picture, this moving picture that is painted for us in verse 5.

[32 : 12] But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray. They had said, don't go, and Paul says, well, I am going. No doubt he gave his reasons.

Were they resentful of their opinion not prevailing? No, they go and they bid him farewell, all of them. They remain calm in the face of their opinion not having prevailed. It's perfectly possible to disagree and remain friends, perfectly possible to hold different opinions on many secondary matters and remain united as a church. You disagree with a decision taken by the General Assembly or the Kirk session of the congregation or something said by the minister, don't lose the head. Be calm.

But notice that it's not just a case of remaining calm in a resigned manner. Rather, with the Christians in Caesarea, put your trust in the Lord that He might order all things in accordance with His good and perfect will. Notice that at the end of verse 14, they've been pleading with Paul, don't go, don't go, don't go. They don't manage to dissuade Him. And what do we read? When He would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, the Lord's will be done. They weren't resigned to a situation that they were very unhappy with. Well, what can we do? The Lord's will be done.

They were willing rather to commend this matter to the Lord's will, even if they themselves were unclear as to whether this was indeed the way to go, even as some of them continued to hold a differing opinion to the one that had prevailed. Be calm. But finally, we're there. Finally, be courageous, having established what is the right thing to do. It was difficult. It was tough for Paul to proceed to Jerusalem. He knew that he must, but it still required courage to do the right thing.

It required courage to stand in the face of a chorus of contrary advice. It required courage to face the violence and possible death that he knew awaited him in Jerusalem. It required courage. On Thursday, we went for a walk in Stonehaven and walked from the harbor to Donauter Castle, and following the shoreline as you go to the castle on your right-hand side, there's a war memorial commemorating the sacrifice of those from the parish who lost their lives in the First and the Second World War. And round the circular memorial that some of you are maybe familiar with, these words are inscribed concerning the men who gave their lives in defense of our country. One by one, death challenged them.

[35 : 10] One by one, they smiled in his grim visage and refused to be dismayed. Well, certainly Paul stared into the face of death, into the face of the violence and danger that awaited him at Jerusalem, and courageously he refused to be dismayed. Grounded in an understanding of God's prophetic word, he knew what he had to do, and he knew that God would honor his obedience. And we too, you too, are called to such courage. For many of us doing the right thing will not carry the immediate threat of violence or death, but may well result in us being mocked or marginalized or misunderstood.

But be assured that doing the right thing, however difficult, is always the way to go. Be courageous and just do it. So five lessons that I leave with you that I hope that you will take with you and that will be of help to you as you and as we grapple with God's word together. Be clear about what God has actually said. Be careful about what it actually means. Be cautious about either just going with the crowd or just following your heart. Be calm when you do disagree, when we do disagree, and be courageous having established what the right thing to do is, to go for it and to do it. Let's pray.