

Acts 21:1-26: The Lord's Will Be Done

Have you ever been confused about the Lord's will? Does God want me to go here or there? Does God want me to stay or leave? Does God want me to apply for a new job? Maybe we'll find an answer in Acts 21.

21:1-15: To go or not to go to Jerusalem, that is the question.

It was a long journey to Jerusalem. What I want to point out from the journey is how Paul visited believers in every city on his journey.

21:4: And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. The GR verb means to find by diligent search. (It is also used for the shepherds' search for Mary & Joseph and baby Jesus in the manger.)

21:7-8: When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. 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.

Do you diligently search for believers when you travel? If I'm on vacation on a Sunday, then I seek a church to attend. While vacationing in Estes Park Colorado we went to Mountain View Bible Fellowship to worship with other disciples.

Paul felt compelled by the HS to go to Jerusalem even though he knew arrest and imprisonment awaited him: Acts 20:22-23: "And now, 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."

Paul felt compelled by the Spirit, but other believers tried to dissuade him. *21:4: Tyre: After searching for the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem.* I think the believers heard through the Spirit that Paul would

encounter serious trouble in Jerusalem and assumed the warnings meant he should not go.

21:8-11: Caesarea: ⁸ *On the next day we left and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, we stayed with him.* ⁹ *Now this man had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses.* ¹⁰ *As we were staying there for some 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, "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.'"*

The decision belonged to Paul and the HS, even though other believers and prophets told Paul the HS told them the opposite. Who was right? Who was really hearing the Spirit? I think the believers heard Agabus the prophet's warning and assumed it was a message not to go to Jerusalem, but the prophet did not say not to go. The prophet only prepared Paul for what would happen. (It seems the 4 virgin daughters of Philip the evangelist who had prophetic gifts spoke no warning to Paul.)

I believe in the NT gift of prophecy. 1 Corinthians 14 is a whole chapter about how to present and test the gift. The Bible says to test prophecies. 1 Thess. 5:20-21: *Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good.*

Agabus had a reputation as an accurate prophet. He prophesied a famine (Acts 11:28). We can test the prophecy of Agabus. *"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.'"*

Read 21:26-36. As it turned out, Paul was bound, but not by Jews; he was bound by the Romans. The Jews had no intention of delivering Paul into the hands of the Gentiles. They attempted to murder Paul and the Gentiles (Romans) rescued him from the Jews.

What happened with Agabus' prophecy? An acceptable explanation would be that he got the details wrong, but the essence of his prophecy was accurate. My NT professor Wayne Grudem wrote in his book *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, "The best solution is to say that Agabus had a *revelation* from the Holy Spirit concerning what would happen to Paul in Jerusalem, and gave a prophecy which included his own *interpretation* of this revelation." Paul himself had to make the final *application* of the prophecy to his life and what the HS had already told him.

Someone gave me an encouraging prophecy when I was in a transitional year of my life. This person gave me the prophecy without any interpretation, and I had to wait to see how the application of it would unfold.

Dr. Luke, Philip, and all the believers urged/begged Paul not to go. This is human will vs God's will. There's God's will and my will and my will needs to bend to or come into alignment with God's will. So, they finally ceased trying to convince Paul and said, "Let the Lord's will be done."

21:17-26: Zeal for the Law

Paul told the Jerusalem apostles (James and elders) about Gentiles who believed in Christ. James immediately told Paul about all the Jews who believed in Christ as Messiah: "*You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.*"

The problem with the Jews who believed in Christ as Messiah is that they were still zealous for the Law of Moses (i.e. circumcision, food laws, maybe even continued sacrifices in the Temple). That is why Paul had to write HEBREWS. Paul wrote Hebrews for Messianic Jews who were tempted to return to the Old Covenant. Paul explained the superiority of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. Apostasy is not

forsaking the Law of Moses; it is rejecting Christ and returning to OT Judaism and temple sacrifices. The Jews who believed in Christ as Messiah were not much better than the Jews who did not. They were racist. The unbelieving Jews had strong racism. The Messianic Jews who were still zealous for the law had mild racism. They all saw themselves as superior to Gentiles as God's chosen people. They were shocked that God accepted Gentiles who did not observe the Law of Moses.

James wanted Paul to demonstrate he still observed the Law of Moses. "Show that you live in observance of the Law." James referred to the Jerusalem Council decision for Gentiles. (No food or blood from strangled animals or offered to idols and no sexual immorality.) Paul went to the temple to appease James and the Jews. Paul took a vow and made a sacrifice in the temple.

How did Paul justify this? 1 Corinthians 9:20-21: *To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law.*

Should we accommodate ourselves to the demands of others as Paul did to prove he still accepted the Law of Moses? By going to the Temple was he tacitly accepting the now useless sacrificial system replaced by Christ's single sacrifice? It was dangerous for Paul to do this as it could be misunderstood by Jewish and Gentile believers. Even if we have the freedom to do something that does not violate Scripture, we should not do it if it causes confusion about the Gospel.

If I used to drink at a bar with friends and get drunk before I was saved, would it be OK to return and drink with friends (but not get drunk) so I could witness to them?

Application: The Lord's Will Be Done

Paul's friends stopped trying to convince him and said, "Let the Lord's will be done."

This is NOT a statement of confusion or resignation. "Well, we cannot figure it out. The Holy Spirit seems to be sending mixed messages. So, let the Lord's will be done whatever it is!" (We may be tacitly blaming God for not making His guidance more clear.)

It is NOT a statement of exasperation. "Paul, we give up. We cannot convince you. You are a stubborn guy. So, let the Lord's will be done."

This is a statement of trust in God's good plan. "Paul, we know you hear from the Holy Spirit and you are committed to obeying His guidance. We have wrongly tried to dissuade you. So, if that's what the Lord is telling you then let His will be done."

It is a confession of surrender to the will of God. Jesus surrendered to the will of God in the Garden of Gethsemane: Matthew 26:36-42. 42: *Again, for the second time, Jesus went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done."*

This is a good confession or prayer: "Let the will of the Lord be done."

When should we turn this confession into a prayer?

Confess it when you are confused about God's will in a particular situation. Maybe God is not providing the clear guidance or confirmation you are asking for. Have you ever asked God for confirming signs of His will? (Consider Gideon's fleece: what if God didn't respond to Gideon's fleece confirmation? God graciously confirmed His earlier command to Gideon because Gideon's faith was weak.)

Confess it when you are facing something difficult and you have no control over the outcome; like Paul facing arrest and imprisonment in Jerusalem.

It is a confession of faith. It is not a confession of doubt, hopeless resignation, or exasperation. It is a confession of faith in God's good and sovereign control. Recite Romans 8:28 (and keep it in context with the "Golden Chain").

It is not an excuse for not praying and seeking God's will or not seeking counsel from other mature Christians. After you pray and fast and meditate on Scripture, after you have fulfilled your responsibility, then you can confess in FAITH, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

[I have a climbing analogy: It is like climbing at High Point Climbing and Fitness. I pick my 5.10 route and hook the auto-belay ropes into my harness. I climb up reaching for holds and carefully placing my feet. I am using all my strength and my forearms are getting tired, especially going up an overhang. I may rest on a hold and shake out the stress in my forearms. I finally climb to the top of the route. I slap the auto-belay. I look down 40 feet. But I do not worry about falling because I trust my harness and the auto-belay. (It's called "Perfect Descent.") So, I lean back and let go. "Let the will of the Lord be done!" It is about 2-3 seconds of free fall. It is a moment of faith and doubt. I have faith in the auto-belay to catch my fall, but there is also a whisper of doubt, "What IF..." What if my harness breaks? What if the auto-belay breaks and my descent is not so perfect? God is always faithful. "Let the will of the Lord be done" is letting go and trusting God.]

"Let the will of the Lord be done" as a confession is an expression of a Christian's fundamental belief and attitude.

Jesus encouraged (Matthew 7:7-8): "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened." We should not confess this until we have done our part "asking, seeking, and knocking."

These two statements are not contradictory. We ask, seek, and knock while maintaining the fundamental belief and attitude that God is in control and make the positive confession "The Lord's will be done."

Proverbs 19:21: Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will stand.