

PAUL GOES UP TO JERUSALEM

Acts 21:1-39

Key Verse: 21:13

Then Paul answered, “Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”

Today’s passage describes how Paul went up to Jerusalem with an important mission. It was to unite the Gentile churches with the mother church in Jerusalem. Many people advised him not to go there. The Holy Spirit warned him that prison and hardships would be waiting for him in Jerusalem. Nevertheless, Paul was determined to go there. He had a broken shepherd’s heart for the people of Israel. He was ready to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. May God help us to accept one word from this passage!

I. I AM READY TO DIE IN JERUSALEM (1-16)

Look at verse 1. *After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea and sailed straight to Kos. The next day we went to Rhodes and from there to Patara.* It was not easy for Paul to leave his beloved Ephesian coworkers, and the feeling was mutual. Their love relationship was deep and genuine. Luke describes their parting as “tearing themselves away” from each other. The next day Paul sailed straight to Cos, to Rhodes, and on to Patara. There was no hesitation in Paul. He took the most direct route to Jerusalem. They found a ship sailing for Phoenicia (2). It was a cargo ship. There were no amenities for the passengers. But Paul was in a hurry. With no thought to comfort, only to speed, they went on board and set sail. Soon, they sighted Cyprus and passed to the south of it (3). Finally they landed at Tyre (4), putting their feet on the Palestinian soil. While the ship unloaded its cargo, Paul and his companions found the disciples of Jesus. They stayed with them seven days. These Christians were not Paul’s disciples. They probably never met before. However, they were his spiritual family in Christ. Paul loved Christ and fellow Christians wherever he found them. By the same token, the Christians at Tyre loved Paul dearly. They must have heard how God had used Paul for world mission and participated in prayer for him.

Verse 4 says that “through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.” The Holy Spirit compelled Paul to go to Jerusalem (20:22). Now the Holy Spirit seemed to be telling Paul not to go to Jerusalem.

Perhaps the disciples urged him to continue preaching the gospel to the Gentiles since God had been using him so greatly. That would make much more sense. If we get such conflicting signals from God, we are tempted to choose the option that is to our liking and one that is free of hardships. However, Paul was different. He did not choose what was desirable for him. When the time came, Paul went on his way. Paul did not waver in his course. Realizing his firm decision, all the disciples in Tyre, together with their wives and children, cried and prayed together with him on the beach. Then Paul continued his voyage.

Look at verses 7-8. *We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and sisters and stayed with them for a day. Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven.* Philip the evangelist was one of the original seven deacons of the Jerusalem church (Ac 6:5). According to Acts 8, Philip had preached the gospel powerfully in Samaria and then, led by the Spirit, evangelized the Ethiopian eunuch through 1:1 study on a chariot concerning Isaiah's prophecy of Jesus' suffering (Isa 53). Afterwards, Philip went to Caesarea, where he must have lived since then (Ac 8:40). Now he had four unmarried daughters who prophesied. While other teenage girls talked about fashion, shopping and boys, Philip's daughters liked to study the Bible and talk about God and his redemptive work.

Philip's home was spiritual. The word of God was overflowing. There must have been praise, singing and deep fellowship among the believers. It was a good place for Paul to spend time in prayer. He must have confirmed his decision to obey God in prayer. He must have asked God's wisdom his trip to Jerusalem. He probably helped his Gentile coworkers get accustomed to Jewish life. It was a wonderful time of spiritual preparation. It seems that even the careful historian Luke lost track of time, for he does not say specifically how long they stayed. But this stay could not be permanent. It was the calm before the storm.

Look at verse 10. *After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea.* This is the prophet's second appearance in the book of Acts. At Antioch, Agabus had prophesied that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. The church members believed this and sent a relief offering to the Christians in Jerusalem. And indeed, it happened just as Agabus had prophesied (Ac 11:28). Now Agabus came up to Paul, took his belt and tied his own hands and feet with it. Then he said, "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'" (11). Agabus' prophetic words cut to the heart. Everyone realized that Paul would be arrested and handed over to the Gentiles in Jerusalem. How did the journey team react? Look at verse 12. *"When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem."* They pleaded tearfully with Paul not to go. They were near Jerusalem and the reality of the danger to Paul was apparent. They did not want Paul to suffer and die. They loved Paul and wanted to spare him. It is understandable, but their emotions made it more difficult for Paul to obey God's will.

How did Paul respond? Did he use their plea as an excuse to change his mind? No. Look at verse 13. *Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."* Paul's heart was breaking. He could not ignore the tears and pleading of his beloved coworkers. Nevertheless, Paul said clearly, "I am ready to die in Jerusalem for the name of Jesus." Though Paul's heart was breaking, he was steadfast in his obedience to the will of God. Paul had prayerfully decided to submit his will to God's will. Paul's surrender to God's will was complete. Paul was no longer living by his will; he was

dwelling in God's will (Gal 2:20). Despite Agabus' prediction, he did not back down. Rather, he accepted it. He was ready to fulfill God's mission at the cost of his life. Let's read verse 13 together. *Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."*

Why was it so important for Paul to go to Jerusalem? Of course, it was God's will, so he had to obey it. However, Paul's obedience was not a blind resignation. It came from his gratitude for Jesus' grace. It came from his understanding of God's heart. God had chosen Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. God wanted to plant world mission vision in Jerusalem. Paul believed that when Israel turned to God, a great blessing would be poured out on the whole world. He said in Romans 11:11-12, "Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!"

Paul knew suffering was waiting for him in Jerusalem. But he was determined to go there. His decision reminds us of our Lord Jesus Christ who entered Jerusalem, fully aware of the sufferings awaited him. It wasn't easy for him to obey the will of God. Jesus struggled hard. He had to fight a fierce spiritual battle in prayer at Gethsemane. In Luke 22:42 Jesus prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."

Paul said, "I am ready to ... die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" His decision was not sudden. No. He made the decision through deep and continual spiritual struggle. First, he was compelled by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem (Ac 20:22). It was God's will for him. However, God did not make it easy for him. The Holy Spirit warned him that prison and hardships awaited him (Ac 20:23). Paul had to decide to take up the cross that awaited him. Paul must have remembered the words of Jesus to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23). Paul submitted his will to God and was ready to obey.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is respected because of his decision to obey the will of God at the cost of his life. He knew that challenging the racism in American society was dangerous. Just before his assassination, he said, "Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will, and He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight, that we as a people will get to the Promised Land. And I'm happy tonight; I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

How did his coworkers react to Paul's resolute decision? Look at verses 14-15. *When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done." After*

this, we started on our way up to Jerusalem. Some of the disciples from Caesarea accompanied the journey team and brought them to the home of Mnason, where they stayed. He was a man from Cyprus and one of the early disciples (16).

II. PAUL ARRIVES AT JERUSALEM (17-26)

Paul and his companions finally arrived at Jerusalem. How did the church greet them? The brothers and sisters received them warmly (17). This must have been very encouraging to Paul. The journey team included many Gentile delegates from places like Thessalonica, Berea, Derbe, and Ephesus. The church leaders did not show any racial prejudice against the Gentile believers. The journey team was happy, but they did not relax. Nor did they have a tour of the impressive city, even though some of them were there for the first time. Instead, the very next day, Paul and the team met with James and the elders, and he reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry (19). Paul did not talk about what he had done—how he suffered so much for the gospel. Instead, he reported what God had done. Paul was a servant of God through and through. We learn that if we do anything good for the Lord through our labor of love, it is not we, but God who is doing the work through us. We are only his instruments.

Upon hearing Paul's mission report, the church leaders praised God for his work among the Gentiles (20). But something weighed down on their minds. They said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs" (20-21). There was a false rumor being spread among the Christian Jews. It said that Paul was anti-Jewish. It was a lie. Paul never told the Jewish Christians that they should abandon the law of Moses. The truth was that he taught salvation by faith in Jesus alone. He had no problem with his Jewish brothers remaining faithful to the Old Testament laws, as long as they did not impose it on the Gentile believers. Satan used the lie to create animosity against Paul among the Jewish Christians.

What did the church leaders propose to clear up the false rumor? Look at verses 22-24. *What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law.* They asked Paul to join in some purification rites to show that he was a Jew who kept the law. This was a strange proposal, given that Paul was a Hebrew of Hebrews. Still, Paul humbly agreed to this. He was flexible with some cultural matters, while very firm with the essence of the gospel. The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them (26).

III. PAUL IS ARRESTED IN JERUSALEM (27-39)

Did the plan work? Not really. Look at verses 27-28. *When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, shouting, "Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place."* The Jews made false accusations against Paul, starting a riot. It became so violent that Paul's life was in danger. The whole city seemed to participate in it. However, through the Roman commander and his soldiers, God spared Paul's life. Look at verse 33. *The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done.* They arrested Paul and bound him with two chains. So the prophecy of Agabus was fulfilled. In that situation, many people would be so frightened that they would panic. But Paul did not. He was well prepared spiritually. He faced the situation with God's peace and wisdom. The mob was trying to kill him, but he wanted to talk to them about Jesus. As the soldiers were about to take Paul into the barracks, he asked the commander, "May I say something to you?" He spoke to the commander in Greek to get his attention. This opened the way for him to speak to the crowd. As we will learn in Acts 22, he gave them a personal testimony on how he met Christ on the way to Damascus. By faith, Paul turned the chaotic situation into the opportunity to deliver his message. Paul was indeed prepared to die in Jerusalem. We learn that a person who decides to obey God at the cost of his life becomes courageous and wise. When Paul said he was ready to die for Jesus in Jerusalem, he meant it.

In today's passage, we learned that Paul made a decision of faith to go up to Jerusalem, even though he was warned many times that prison and hardships would be waiting for him. He said, "I am ready to be bound; ready to die for Jesus." He was ready to give his life for the gospel of Jesus. Jesus said, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mk 8:35). May God help each of us to be ready to give our life for the gospel as St. Paul did!