



Never Been to Spain

The Journals & Journeys of Paul

"Chain, Chain, Chains"

I hear the word "epic" a lot; I've started using it, too. It's currently used to emphasize that something you did, or that happened, was far beyond the norm. Usually it's not something truly "epic." It's an exaggeration for letting folks know you had a great time.

Paul's life was filled with real epic moments but we've arrived in our study at a truly huge turning point. Paul decided to visit Jerusalem a fifth time - but along the way he was warned by prophets that chains and imprisonment awaited him there.

Then, in the Temple, Paul participated in an unnecessary Jewish ritual that put him in a place to almost be killed. Instead he was arrested and remained in Roman custody for the next several years.

Because of the consequences of those two decisions, commentators don't know what to make of it - whether Paul was being led by The Lord or by his own desires.

It's easy to criticize Paul, to say he should have listened to the warnings or, at the very least, to refrain from the ritual in the Temple.

I've taken the approach that Paul was in God's will for his life and knew what God's will for himself was better than anyone else.

Listen to what Paul said of himself in Acts 20:22-24.

Acts 20:22 And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there,

Acts 20:23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me.

Acts 20:24 But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Already there had been testimony from the Holy Spirit that chains and tribulations awaited Paul. He interpreted it as being "bound in the Spirit." Was he being stubborn?

No, he was being a servant. Paul said, "nor do I count my life dear to myself." He wasn't a thrill-seeker; this wasn't a death wish. He was following a certain course - a "race," he called it - and he was committed to finishing it.

The fact that chains and tribulations awaited him was nothing new. It was always a relatively 'safe' prophecy to say trouble was in Paul's future.

A prophecy of trouble ahead isn't necessarily a message to stop or to turn around. It's simply, but wonderfully, a comfort to know that Jesus is with you in and through the trouble.

Acts 21:1 Now it came to pass, that when we had departed from them and set sail, running a straight course we came to Cos, the following day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara.

Acts 21:2 And finding a ship sailing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail.

Acts 21:3 When we had sighted Cyprus, we passed it on the left, sailed to Syria, and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload her cargo.

Acts 21:4 And finding disciples, we stayed there seven days. They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem.

In Tyre you see an example of the way the Spirit was speaking to the church about Paul. I think these prophecies were more for the believers than for Paul. They were to remind them Paul was exactly in the will of God when the tribulations and chains caught up with him.

It's sad, therefore, that the disciples tried to dissuade him from going.

The statement they told Paul "through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem" means one of two things:

1. "Spirit" either refers to their own human spirit which naturally wanted to see Paul kept from harm, or,
2. Spirit refers to the Holy Spirit but the disciples misapplied the warnings. They assumed the warnings were a prohibition when they were really just a forewarning of what awaited Paul.

Paul eventually arrived in Caesarea.

Acts 21:8 ... we... came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him.

Acts 21:9 Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied.

Acts 21:10 And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea.

Acts 21:11 When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.' "

Agabus was what I call a prop-prophet. He used props and was rather flamboyant. It was his style. He was old school, more like the Old Testament prophets.

Acts 21:12 Now when we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem.

Acts 21:13 Then Paul answered, "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."

Acts 21:14 So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, "The will of the Lord be done."

One quick point. The disciples would not have said, "the will of The Lord be done," if they thought Paul was out of God's will. Paul was definitely on the path God had chosen for him. He was definitely being led by God.

The word for "breaking," where Paul says they were breaking his heart, means, *to deprive of strength and courage, dispirit, incapacitate for enduring trials.*

In wanting what they thought was best for Paul - or at least better than tribulations - they were weakening him for the eventual trials that were coming.

Always be strengthening your brothers and sisters because trials are on the horizon. Don't try to dissuade them from doing the Lord's will because it might be uncomfortable, or even dangerous. It only weakens them.

Paul arrived in Jerusalem and found there was a rumor circulating about him.

Acts 21:20 ... And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law;

Acts 21:21 but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.

It is estimated that there were anywhere from twenty-five to fifty thousand Jews who had believed on Jesus Christ. This "myriad" still kept the rites and rituals of the Law of Moses. Among them rumors had festered that outside of Jerusalem Paul encouraged Jews who believed to abandon the Law of Moses and live more like Gentiles.

Regardless the great things God was doing through Paul the believing Jews in Jerusalem were stumbled by these rumors. How sad, really, that even great works of God could not be appreciated because of a narrow vision.

Acts 21:22 What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come.

Acts 21:23 Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow.

Acts 21:24 Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law.

Acts 21:25 But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality."

Acts 21:26 Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them.

If you want to find fault with anyone, maybe you should look to the leaders of the Jerusalem church who made this suggestion to Paul. Why not just tell the Jews that what they were hearing about Paul was false?

Don't criticize Paul. He took the high ground.

Four Jewish believers in Jesus had taken a vow that was prescribed by the Law of Moses. The fact they were to shave their heads indicated this was a Nazirite vow. The fact they needed to be purified indicates they had somehow become ritually defiled during the period of the vow. They would therefore need to offer certain sacrifices in the Temple before they could complete the prescribed period of their vow. It was not unusual

for someone to sponsor you by providing the funds for your sacrifices.

The leadership of the church affirmed, in verse twenty-five, that it was not at all necessary to keep the Law of Moses in order to be saved. But if Jews wanted to continue in their rituals they were not discouraged.

James and the elders felt Paul could participate without violating his own conscience or principles. It seemed a win-win to them.

Again, why fault Paul? We shouldn't.

Paul was thinking what he always thought – about becoming all things to all men in order to save or serve them. In this case he was willing to become as a weak Christian in order to win the weak.

A misunderstanding in the Temple will almost cost Paul his life. It does cost him his freedom as he is arrested and sent to Rome over a very prolonged period of time.

Or did it cost him his freedom? He was the prisoner of Jesus Christ. If as Christ's prisoner The Lord wanted him to be Rome's prisoner, that was fine with Paul.

Something to meditate upon. Paul said, of his incredible trials, "none of these things move me."

What would "move" you, get you off-course from following The Lord?

Truth be told, you don't know what might have the effect of moving you. Be ready for anything and you'll be moved by nothing.