

DON'T GO BREAKING MY HEART

ACTS 21:2-16 NOVEMBER 18, 2020

In World War 2, the *Eager Beavers* were a ragtag B17 crew in the Pacific theater. They were known for volunteering for dangerous recon assignments, some of which would even be considered suicide missions.¹ On the morning of June 16, 1943, the *Eager Beavers* accepted a mission no one else wanted.² They were to fly to the islands of Buka and Bougainville to gather photo intelligence for the upcoming Allied invasion. There were some problems, though: They'd have to fly hundreds of miles *unescorted* into enemy territory. And, to get usable pictures, they would have to fly *steadily* for 20 minutes, undoubtedly while being engaged by enemy fighter planes.

At 4am the beat up and battle-scarred bomber took to the sky for what General George Kenney would later call "a mission that still stands out in my mind as an epic of courage unequalled in the annals of air warfare."³ They reached their target, were engaged by at least 20 enemies, and fought through 45 minutes of continuous combat. 2nd Lt. Joseph Sarnoski was one of two men to receive the Medal of Honor for his efforts on that flight. The pilot did as well. The rest of the crew received the Distinguished Service Cross for their part and nearly all of them were awarded Purple Hearts for injuries sustained. Lt. Sarnoski gave his life in the fight, even waving off medical attention so he could stay at his gun. Two minutes after he downed one of the enemy fighters he succumbed to his wounds. Sarnoski would've been sent home just 3 days later. Records show that he didn't *have* to join the mission, but he felt it his duty to go and do his part, not counting his life dear to himself.

In war we understand that stories like that. We honor the courage of those who do not make personal safety their life's goal. We accept that, at times, people will be sent to make the ultimate sacrifice because there is a greater mission being accomplished. And, if every soldier, sailor, marine or airman said "No, my *personal* security is more important," then there would be no victory.

The problem for us is that so often it doesn't *feel* like we're on the front lines of an all-important war. Day-to-day life with its many distractions can keep us from seeing how God is leading us. And, as we live our regular lives, we can start to forget what our *spiritual* objectives are. We start to focus on safety, security and success in a way that might actually *hinder* the advance of the Gospel and discourage others in their walk with Jesus.

These were issues in play as Paul moved ever-closer to Jerusalem in Acts 21. As we read through the travel log, we sense that the story is building to a dramatic climax. At the same time we also see a lot of Christians, Godly Christians with grace and gifting and passion for the Lord, living out their regular lives, but in *this* case, losing a bit of perspective when it comes to how they were counseling Paul. There are a lot of places where we could insert ourselves in the story tonight. And we can see how God can use regular Christians, doing regular Christian things to accomplish His amazing providence. At the same time, we'll see that a loss of perspective can lead us into wrong steps which contradict God's leading and discourage others along the way.

We begin at verse 2.

Acts 21:2 - ²Finding a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, we boarded and set sail.

¹ https://www.jacksonprogress-argus.com/news/a-veterans-story-the-eager-beavers/article_05bf2ae6-bfc4-11ea-acf2-93041211882f.html

² <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/world-war-ii/in-1943-several-us-airmen-went-on-a-suicide-mission-two-men-were-awarded-a-medal-of-honor-for-separate-acts-of-heroism-in-one-cursed-bomber.html>

³ <https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/Visit/Museum-Exhibits/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/196216/zeamer-and-the-eager-beavers/>

Keep your eyes open for providence in this section. Providence is God *providing* for His will to be done in this world. Dr. J. Vernon McGee defines it as “the means by which God directs all things.”⁴ How is it possible that Israel was able to survive and produce the Messiah when Pharaoh systematically tried to destroy them and Haman and Herod and all the rest? God *provided* the way. Providence, however, does not mean that God *causes* everything to happen. God is not the author of evil. God does not tempt you. God, in His strength, has given human beings a freedom to choose. He freed the wills of Adam and Eve and He has freed the wills of each human afterward. But, despite our freedom, He *will* accomplish His purposes. And we find that, in God’s will, there are areas of *wiggle* room. For example: Mordecai said plainly to Esther: “God is giving you the opportunity to be used to deliver His people, but *if you won’t do it*, then deliverance will arise from somewhere else.” That’s providence as opposed to what we would call determinism. Think of Moses, *also* used by God to deliver Israel. Yet, at one point before Moses even made it back to Egypt, God confronted Moses and planned to *kill* him because he had failed to circumcise his son.

In this passage, we’ll see some wonderful, tender providence. Wherever Paul lands, God provides shelter and supply for him in the homes of loving Christians. But, here in verse 2 we see that they hadn’t been told *which* ship to take. They went and found one. Would they take a smaller vessel that hugged the coastline? Or would they board a larger liner that would sail straight across the sea? They made a choice and then through it God provided what was needed.

Acts 21:3 - ³After we sighted Cyprus, passing to the south of it, we sailed on to Syria and arrived at Tyre, since the ship was to unload its cargo there.

Paul *knew* he was headed for arrest and suffering. He had said so in the last chapter. Knowing that he was definitely headed for hard times, maybe to his own death, it probably was a hard thing to pass Cyprus without stopping. There were friends there - many people he was a father to in the faith. This route they were taking would also bypass Antioch, his home church, full of friends and family who he loved so much. But, this was the mission. Remember, God the Holy Spirit was *compelling* him to go.⁵ There was something for him in Jerusalem. Not to mention that he and the 8 brothers traveling with him were bringing financial aid to the struggling church there.

Paul didn’t prioritize his own emotional wants and needs. None of these guys did. These were not the kinds of guys who believed that line you hear sometimes: “You have to love yourself *first* before you can love someone else.” That’s an impossible formula, because real love always includes self-sacrifice. Instead, as they passed Cyprus and Paul, I’m sure, felt that twinge of disappointment or heartache, he was able to strengthen himself in the Lord and be reminded that he was following a trustworthy God, who is good and loving and full of grace.

Now, as we read this section, we note that sometimes Dr. Luke will skip over *years* of time and then sometimes he zooms in on a few days. That’s what’s happening here. And so much of it seems very routine. And that’s a good thing because we are *not* apostles. We do *not* find ourselves in the middle of some miraculous revival. We’re living what we would call regular lives. And that’s what we see happening among the Christians in these various cities. A lot is going on with Paul, but as he passes through we see believers in Tyre and Ptolemais and Caesarea living normal lives. People with homes and families and spiritual gifts and a desire to honor God. And what we’ll see is that even though we’re not apostles doesn’t mean we’re not an important part of God’s work.

⁴ <https://www.oneplace.com/ministries/thru-the-bible-with-j-vernon-mcgee/read/articles/providence-is-the-hand-of-god-11044.html>

⁵ Acts 20:22

Acts 21:4a - ⁴We sought out the disciples and stayed there seven days.

Paul and his companions went and found the Christians living in Tyre. There's a very simple devotional question for us to ask: Could someone find us as the Christians in our neighborhood? If someone was in need, whether they were fellow believers or nonChristians seeking help, if inquiries were made, would we be marked as disciples?

The Church in America has not been driven underground yet. And, certainly, in times of violent persecution things are a little different. But right now, despite the pressures we face, we are still *allowed* to be Christians. There's no need for us to be camouflaged about it. We're to shine like light in the dark, a city on a hill, radiating the love and the truth of Jesus Christ to the world around us.

The second part of that devotional question is: Once found, are we ready to serve? This was probably a surprise visit for the believers there in Tyre, but they were *ready* to extend help and support when it was needed.

Acts 21:4b - Through the Spirit they told Paul not to go to Jerusalem.

Some commentators suggest that Paul, throughout this whole portion of his life, was completely out of step with God. That he was actually in sin for his refusal to *listen* to the Holy Spirit. They use this verse as evidence. But, here's what we know: We know that the Holy Spirit had authorized Paul to tell all the Christians of the church age: "Follow me as I follow Christ."⁶ We know that the Spirit had compelled him to go to Jerusalem. And we know that, after he gets there, Jesus Himself will appear to him and say, "Take courage [Paul]! For as you have testified about Me in Jerusalem, so it is necessary for you to testify in Rome." So Jesus signed off on this trip.

So what should we make of this statement in verse 4? Well, as Paul has already said, in every city he was receiving messages from the Lord, telling him that chains and afflictions were waiting for him at the end of the line. What the Spirit was sending as a "heads up" the Christians were delivering as a "hold off." It's going to happen again in a few verses.

Now, before we move on, let's think about this: The Gospel came to Troas as a result of Paul's pre-Christian persecution of the Church. *That's* providence! The man who sought to destroy God's people has now been redeemed, transformed, and is being ministered to *by* the very people who were driven out of Jerusalem by his violence. Sharing a meal and a room in the house might seem small compared to planting churches, writing Scripture and working miracles, but it was such a blessing and a help to Paul. You see, in towns like Tyre, the inns frequently doubled as brothels.⁷ Jesus promised that even a cup of cool water has eternal merit in heaven's record books.

Acts 21:5-6 - ⁵When our time had come to an end, we left to continue our journey, while all of them, with their wives and children, accompanied us out of the city. After kneeling down on the beach to pray, ⁶we said farewell to one another and boarded the ship, and they returned home.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:1

⁷ IVP Bible Background Commentary

Some of the most meaningful ministry is done in the home. What a beautiful thing to see these families together in prayer and togetherness. If you have plans for how you want to serve God and they don't include your family or your local church, you're missing something essential. We want to be creating opportunities for our kids and families to pray and serve together.

Acts 21:7 - ⁷When we completed our voyage from Tyre, we reached Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and sisters and stayed with them for a day.

God provided *another* group of caring friends at the next stop. Our culture tends to be more skeptical and standoffish. It's good for us to be reminded that the world will know we are Christians by our love for one another. It's ok to have differences of opinion and certain boundaries and all that, but we want to let the Lord grow a kind of love in us that gives food and shelter to the guy who killed some of our friends. That's what's happening here. That's who Paul was.

Acts 21:8-9 - ⁸The next day we left and came to Caesarea, where we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the Seven, and stayed with him.

It's been 20 years since we last saw Philip in Acts. He's already been such a fine example to us of faithfulness and boldness, but here he shines again in his forgiveness and humility. Paul's sin had personally impacted Philip's life. And now *that* Paul had become the great apostle! Philip doesn't complain or withhold or make passive aggressive comments. He brings Paul into his house and introduces him to the family.

As the team relaxed in his house, Philip would've been an *incredible* resource to Luke, who was gathering accounts and testimonies for the books he was writing. To Timothy, who was called to be a pastor and would be told by Paul to "do the work of an evangelist." Around the table they would've heard the stories of revival in Samaria and the conversion of the Ethiopian Eunuch. At the same time, we realize that, despite his history and the amazing way that he had been used by God, despite his gifting as an evangelist, Philip wasn't too important to still wait tables. His house became a B&B for 9 weary travelers, headed toward Jerusalem.

Acts 21:9 - ⁹This man had four virgin daughters who prophesied.

Again, Luke draws our attention to the family ministry. Raising kids in the Lord isn't less important than being an evangelist. We don't need to rank service to God. And it's not about picking one or the other saying, "I did *this*, so I did my part." It's about calling and gifting and God's leading in your life. God called Philip to evangelize and raise kids. He called Paul to evangelize and write Scripture. He calls you and I to certain duties and opportunities. And they will not only be *outside* the home. Our service to the Lord begins in our own house.

A word to young people before we move on: Seek out your gift. If you were being listed in the book of Acts, how would you be described? Would you be included as a prayer or a servant of God?

Acts 21:10-11 - ¹⁰After we had been there for several days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹He came to us, took Paul's belt, tied his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him over to the Gentiles.' "

We've met Agabus before when he gave an earlier prophecy that a famine was coming to the Roman world. And then you know what happened? A famine came to the Roman world. He was *bona fide*. Leading up to the election some of our brothers and sisters in more charismatic circles were making a bunch of specific prophecies about Donald Trump that didn't come true. One prominent pastor made a public prophecy, then apologized for it being wrong, then removed his apology and now has said, "If the outcome remains the same, I will repost my apology video. If my prophetic word turns out to be right, I will do the chicken dance in my spandex."⁸ The Bible is pretty clear that if you say you're a prophet, make a prophecy and it doesn't come to pass, then you're *not* a prophet. And you should be very thankful you don't live under the Mosaic Law!

Now, what Agabus said here was not news to Paul. But it was shocking to the other Christians at the meeting.

Acts 21:12 - ¹²When we heard this, both we and the local people pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem.

The reaction was the same the fine folks at Tyre had, only this time it included Luke and the other guys traveling with Paul. They were desperately trying to convince Paul to *not* go to Jerusalem so he could avoid suffering. And what we learn here is two-fold: First, that personal safety, security and success is *not* the end goal for a Christian life. And, second, what we want for the people we love is not always what *God* wants. They wanted Paul safe and doing ministry throughout the world. But God did *not* want that at this point. God wanted Paul in front of rulers and kings, ultimately the emperor of Rome. The price for that opportunity was going to be high. It was going to cost Paul a lot of hardship and suffering and loss of freedom. But that's what the Lord wanted.

Now, we're seeing here that even dedicated, Godly, Spirit-filled Christians can make a mistake. As students, we can look at see that they were focused on a wrong priority. God had just spoken through Agabus about what was *going* to happen, and then they said, "Let's *avoid* that." Jesus Himself had said "Remember Lot's wife: whoever seeks to save their lives will lose it." While He was speaking of the end times, He was also clearly teaching that having a temporal, material set of priorities would lead to disaster for a spiritual life. Instead, God's people are commanded to take up their cross daily, dying to self.

When we turn the wheel of our own lives or when we give advice to others, the highest goal of a Christian is *not* "whatever you do, avoid suffering and instead try to be successful." This is an important word for parents who have a duty *not* to raise their kids into material wealth, but into faithful service to the Lord. Don't tell your kid *not* to do something just because you think the paycheck won't be big enough. Teach them to follow the Lord, no turning back. Paul's friends, out of love, were pressuring him to change course, and it was a huge discouragement to him.

Acts 21:13 - ¹³Then Paul replied, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."

People around us are headed for suffering. The Church needs to rally together to *strengthen* each other for it, not undermine each other's stability. We need to have a Biblical approach to difficulty and a Biblical perspective on life so that we can support one another when we're weak.

⁸ <https://www.christianpost.com/news/bethels-kris-vallotton-says-apologized-too-soon-for-prediction.html?uid=ccc26461c5>

Acts 21:14 - ¹⁴Since he would not be persuaded, we said no more except, “The Lord’s will be done.”

These believers *are* mature and Spirit-filled, so despite their short lapse, they snap out of it quickly and once again have a right perspective. They weren’t angry. They surrendered to the Lord and trusted that His will was good and worth pursuing.

As we make decisions or share advice, the thesis of our thoughts should be: What is God’s will? From *that* point we advise and pray and plan.

Acts 21:15-16 - ¹⁵After this we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁶Some of the disciples from Caesarea also went with us and brought us to Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we were to stay.

Though the prophecy centered on Paul, it’s good to see that these other Christians (both the locals and his gang of 8) didn’t chicken out. They knew that trouble was waiting in Jerusalem, and still they walked with him. Verse 15 says: “We packed our bags.” They were deploying with him. And once again God provided friends, shelter and help along the way. Through these verses we see there is a spot for everyone: Kids and dads and moms and wives, the young and the elderly. We’re all part of God’s providence. Our portion may not be “great” in the eyes of men, maybe we’re just providing a meal or two, but it’s great in God’s eyes. It’s part of the victory He’s winning.

The *Eager Beavers* weren’t the ones to drop the bomb and end the war, but their part was necessary. Luckily for all of us, they didn’t shrink from the cost. Some of them paid in full.

You and I may, in one sense, live a very regular, day-to-day life. But, on the spiritual level, we are part of God’s providence and part of a cosmic struggle. It may cost us dearly to do our part, but we can be sure that even the little missions matter. So, we must keep His purposes as our aim. Our lives are not about our own safety, security and success. They’re meant to be much, much more than that. We follow Him into eternal victory, fearing no evil, no turning back.