

Acts 21

Paul and his company sailed away from Miletus, passing by Cos, Rhodes and Patara. At this latter site they found a vessel crossing over to Phoenicia and they went on board and set sail. They passed by Cyprus, once the scene of the labors of Paul and Barnabas on their first journey and which was also the home country of Barnabas. They sailed into Syria, landing at Tyre. One can only imagine the thoughts which must have crowded the apostle's mind as he saw the shores and the houses of this city. He had told the Ephesian elders "and now I go bound in to Spirit to Jerusalem" and he was looking at the mainland where that prophecy would be fulfilled.

The vessel they had obtained passage unloaded its cargo at Tyre. This city was prominent in Old Testament prophecy and Paul found disciples here and tarried with them seven days (21:4). So, there had been opportunity for the messengers and Paul to be with these disciples in their weekly communion. Once more the Holy Spirit warned that Paul "should not set foot in Jerusalem" (21:4). The whole congregation, with their wives and children, went with the band of brethren en route to Jerusalem to a place outside the city and near the dock where their vessel was waiting. Kneeling down they prayed, bade each other a solemn farewell and Paul's company went on board the ship while the brethren returned to their homes (21:6).

The ship was sailing along the coastline now. At length it come to Ptolemais where they disembarked. They saluted the brethren and remained with them one day, apparently spending the night there (21:7). Next morning the brethren departed and later arrived in Caesarea, the seat of the Roman government in Judaea. Paul was likely unconscious that in just a few days he would be back to the city, not only bound in spirit but then in body as well. In Caesarea the brethren entered the house of Philip the evangelist to stay with him. Readers remember it had been many years before when this man was first introduced. He, with six others, were chosen to "serve tables"-- overseeing the distribution of funds given to take care of the widows and thereby resolving the first real problem the church had faced (Acts 6). One also remembers that Philip preached to the Samaritans, fulfilling the Lord's command to the twelve just before he returned back to the Father (Acts 1:8). And, one remembers Philip preaching to the Eunuch and asking him, "Understandest thou what thou readest?" to have the Eunuch reply, "How can I except some man should guide me?" After that preaching

Philip preached through the cities until he came to Caesarea where he remained and reared his family. He had four virgin daughters who prophesied (21:9). Philip had apparently been in Caesarea for twenty or more years.

Caesarea is also remembered as the place where Cornelius the Roman centurion was stationed and to which city the Holy Spirit had dispatched Peter that he might speak words to that noble man whereby he and all his house might be saved (Acts 11:14). That had been a long, long while ago. It had been 8-10 years since the so-called "Jerusalem conference" in which meeting Peter reminded brethren, "Ye know that a good while ago God made choice among you that by my mouth the Gentiles might hear the word of the gospel and believe" (15:7). What had happened to Cornelius? After all these years there was little likelihood that he was still in Caesarea. Did he finish his "tour of duty " and "retired" back in Italy? Silence answers.

Paul and the brethren remained in Caesarea for some time. At length a prophet from Jerusalem named Agabas came down to Caesarea. It is likely this was the same prophet who went down to Antioch of Syria and prophesied of a great dearth which would occur and which prophecy promoted the disciples there, "every man according to his ability, .. to send relief unto the brethren that dwelt in Judaea: which also they did, sending it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul" (Acts 10:29f). If this Agabas is that Agabas, then Paul is no stranger to him. He took Paul's girdle, bound his own hands and feet and said, "Thus saith the Holy Spirit. So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles" (Acts 21:11). The message was not new for the Holy Spirit had warned Paul of this even before he left Asia. Still, the act was very dramatic and Jerusalem was very near and the time for the fulfillment of the prophecy was at hand. All the brethren, including Luke, begged Paul not to complete his journey to Jerusalem. Paul responded "What do ye, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (21:12-13). Seeing that Paul was determined to complete the journey, the brethren ceasing their pleading and resignedly said: "the will of the Lord be done" (21:14).

Agabas' prophecy was fulfilled, although not precisely as one might think. The Jews DID NOT literally bind Paul's hands and feet (they would have done more than this had not the arrival of the Roman chief captain stayed them from their purpose), but from that instance when they seized Paul, he was no longer a free man. They did not voluntarily deliver Paul into

Gentile hands; they were forced to do that by the power of Roman Authority. But, Jews did "bind" Paul and they did turn him over to the Roman, albeit very grudgingly. Let none think that God brought all these things about as something He wished to occur. He leaves the freedom of choice in human hands but, all-powerful as He is, he drew back the veil to the future to see what these men, left to their own volition, would do with Paul.

Why was Paul so determined to go to Jerusalem? The messengers of the churches could have delivered the funds they had for the saints into the hands of the elders there just as easily as he could. There could have been several reasons why Paul was unyielding in his determination to go to Jerusalem but the one which seems most logical to me is that for hundreds of years animosity had existed between Jew and Gentile, broken down by Jesus' removal of the law (Eph. 2:14). Still the hatred remained. And, in addition to that, some who professed to be Christians still clung to the law with all its customs and insisted that Gentiles must not only be obedient to the gospel, they must be circumcised and keep the law. This doctrine had raged for a number of years and none fought it more tenaciously than Paul. Without doubt he had made many bitter enemies even among some of the brethren. This contribution for the needy among the saints was a gift (in the main) from Gentile Christians. Hopefully it would be a contributing bridge to better relations between these two segments of Christianity. Since Paul had been the recognized leader in opposing those who sought to bind the law on Gentiles, perhaps he felt he should be the leader to deliver the gift from Gentiles to Jews.

Whatever the reason, he went and the company arrived in Jerusalem. The brethren received them gladly and likely Paul breathed a sigh of relief for this for he was not certain just what reaction Jewish Christians might have to this gift, needed though it were. He had asked Romans to pray that the gift might be acceptable to the saints (Acts 21:17; Rom. 15:30f). He greeted the brethren and rehearsed in their hearing the things God had wrought among the gentiles through his ministry (21:19). The brethren rejoiced and glorified God.

Jerusalem brethren also knew that among the brethren there were questions about Paul. There were many thousands among the Jews which believed but were still zealous for the law (21:20). Unfounded gossip had reached their ears about Paul; they heard he "taught all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children neither to walk after the customs" (Acts 21:21).

This was a lie but it had made brethren skeptical. The apostles and elders sought to ward off murmurings and problems among the brethren. They had no doubts about Paul themselves and wished to removed the doubts that other brethren had. They knew Paul's arrival would shortly become common knowledge. To eradicate the suspicion of brethren, they asked Paul to participate in certain Jewish ceremonies so that all might see they have been misinformed about him (21:21-24). The brethren assured Paul they remembered and still endorsed the decision made many years earlier that Gentiles were not bound to keep the law nor circumcision. This showed that Jewish Christians kept these rites as matter of custom, retaining and maintaining their national heritage (21:25). Paul agreed. His approval was not weakness, not compromise. While we see that his actions did not prevent unbelieving Jews from successfully causing his imprisonment, we are persuaded that his actions lifted a cloud of dark suspicion Jewish brethren had in regard to him.

As the Holy Spirit had uttered, so it occurred. As he traveled about Jerusalem with some of his companions, certain unbelieving Jews from Asia who knew him from there, spied him and assuming Paul had carried Gentiles into the temple, seized Paul and cried out: "Men of Israel, help: This is the man that teacheth all men everywhere against the people, and the law, and this place; and moreover he brought Greek also into the temple, and hath defiled this holy place" (21:27-28). Their cries inflamed the people. Paul was taken, beaten and would have been killed except for the intervention of the chief captain who had heard that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. He rushed upon Paul's "would-be" assassins and stayed them from their purpose (21:31f). The deed was done. The Holy Spirit had said Paul would be delivered into the hands of the Gentiles and so he was.

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