Study of Acts – Discussion Notes Chapter 21

Introduction
Under my leadership as pastor, this congregation is becoming a bunch of spiritually confused Christians. On Sunday I preach about living under the leadership of the Holy Spirit and all the rewards associated with doing so. I speak often about experiencing newness of life and the blessings that are in store for us when we seek and surrender to the will of God.

Then on Wednesdays, we study Acts and we observe the trials and near death experiences of poor Paul as he does just that; surrender to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. On Sunday you must be thinking “Yes Lord, I want to follow you” and on Wednesday you must be thinking “Lord I don’t want any part of that.”

I don’t think any of us would want to sign-up for we see Paul going through. Fortunately God does not call us to do anything for which He does not equip us to handle. Paul was God’s man for the day. God knew what Paul could handle and Paul knew God could handle anything.

Content

What was Paul’s interpretation of what the Holy Spirit was leading him to do?
Paul considered himself bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. His eyes were wide open to the fact that he might face great afflictions. Never the less, he was committed to doing what the Spirit led him to do. Remember chapter 20 verses 22-24:
22 “And now I am on my way to Jerusalem, bound in my spirit, not knowing what I will encounter there,
23 except that in town after town the Holy Spirit testifies to me that chains and afflictions are waiting for me. 24 But I count my life of no value to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of God’s grace.

What was the interpretation of others about what the Spirit was telling them?
In Tyre and again in Caesarea, Paul was greeted by good well-meaning believers; men who dearly loved and respected him. The Spirit told them what struggles Paul was in for. They tried everything they could to discourage Paul from proceeding to Jerusalem.

Were they getting different messages from the Holy Spirit?
No. They were getting the same true and correct message from the Holy Spirit. They were not getting conflicting guidance. They were being revealed the same prophecy of what was to come. However their interpretations were different. Paul knew what he had to do. But his close friends were interpreting the Spirit as the need to prevent Paul from going.

Though these friends meant well, they were not being very encouraging at the moment. In fact, they were wearing Paul down with their good intentions. This leads Paul to say I verse 13:

“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.”

God was again using Paul to teach them the meaning of being “Bound in the Spirit.” This leads the men to say in verse 14, “The Lord’s will be done.” This is the correct conclusion but you can’t blame them for being concerned for Paul’s life.
What are the lessons for us to learn from this?

- Sometimes we must press on and trust God even when others do not agree.
- Our good intention in protecting others is not always the best thing for them.
- Ease of living is not always an assurance we are in God’s will. Too often we equate being in the Lord’s will with everything working out happily.
- We must be careful to not be sloppy or selfish in our interpretation of the Spirit.
- We need not fear death for we have the assurance we will live forever.

2. The heartbreak of betrayal and disloyalty (vs. 15-32).

How did the church leaders respond to Paul’s report of the Gentile ministry?

Our text tells us they rejoiced and glorified God for all He had done through Paul. They seemed genuinely excited about the work among the Gentiles. But the time of praise was very short as they told Paul of the storm that was brewing. They proceeded to tell Paul that the rumor was spreading that he was discouraging Jewish converts from keeping traditional Jewish practices. Furthermore, it was professing believers, Jewish converts who were up in arms with Paul.

What did the church leaders ask Paul to do in order to appease the Jewish leaders?

Nothing, they did not ask anything. They commanded Paul to take the Nazarite vow and to sponsor four other men in the process. They were to shave their heads, refrain from certain foods and spend the next 7 days in the temple. The hope was that this would show Paul’s continued commitment to the Jewish law and quiet the gossip.

How do you think all of this made Paul feel?

One can only imagine how Paul must have felt. The very people who should be rejoicing with Paul were the ones raging mad in the church at Jerusalem. Paul was accustomed to the non-believing Jews attacking him but now he had fellow Christians betraying him. It is when our fellow believers and church members criticize us that it hurts the most.

Imagine the pain Paul must have felt upon returning from the dusty dirty travels of sharing Christ only to be questioned and criticized. After sacrificing so much while others sat in the comfort of their homes, now Paul was being called on the carpet about his teaching. And then Paul finds himself being made to perform this ritual to prove his loyalty to the Jewish practices.

One would think these church leaders who were so happy to hear of Paul’s missionary work would have already stood up for him. They knew about the decision by the Jerusalem council as it related to the Gentiles. They knew Paul’s heart and his loyalty to the Jewish customs. They knew of the sacrifices Paul had made for the gospel. And yet they had not stood up for him. They should have already silenced the criticism. They should have spoken up and said, “That is enough! We know our brother Paul and these rumors are false.”

Sometimes doing nothing is worse than doing something bad. Martin Niemoller, a Protestant minister who survived the concentration camp once wrote the following about his experience.

“In Germany, they first came for the Communists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn’t speak up because I wasn’t a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn’t speak up because wasn’t a Catholic. Then they came for me – and by that time no one was left to speak up.”
As Christians, we are obliged to speak up for the truth. We are obligated to stand up for others and especially our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Too often our churches are ripped apart because a handful of professing Christians criticizing the work of others. It has been my observance through the years that it is usually the “do nothing” folks who want to criticize the work of fellow Christians who are striving to serve God.

**Conclusion**

Paul shows a special kind of kindness that few of us could honestly say we would have. Most of us would come out swinging over such trumped up accusations. But Paul goes along with the burdensome and expensive sponsorship of the Nazarite vow. Paul was willing to compromise for the unity of the church without sacrificing his unity with his beloved Savior.

I can only dream of having the courage, commitment and faithfulness of Paul. In this chapter, we saw the strong courageous Paul willing to face whatever was before him. We saw the enormous faith of Paul willing to stay the course of the Holy Spirit while others try to dissuade him and protect him. And we saw the gentle spirit of Paul, able to live with the demands of others for the sake of church unity.

May we pray that we too can exhibit these qualities in our lives.