

BEWARE OUR NATIONALISM

Acts 21:1-26 / May – June 57 A.D.

Paul wraps up his third missionary journey by coming to Jerusalem and delivering the financial gift from the Gentile churches. Four years have passed since Paul's last visit to Jerusalem. Paul should have been celebrated by the Jerusalem Church, but instead he was met with hostility.

We pick up the story as Paul and his companions conclude their visit with the Elders of the Ephesian Church in Miletus and continue their journey to Jerusalem.

Acts 21:1-14 From Miletus to Jerusalem

Philip was one of the original seven deacons chosen to oversee the distribution of food to the widows in the early days of the Jerusalem Church (6:1-6). It is this Philip who evangelized the city of Samaria and the Ethiopian dignitary (8:4-40).

Did the Apostle Paul disobey the Holy Spirit by going to Jerusalem?

Paul revealed to the Ephesian Elders he was constrained by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem and that the Holy Spirit had repeatedly revealed imprisonment and affliction awaited him (20:22-23). Agabus' prophecy may have been the most dramatic, but it was the same message: "Paul, you are going to suffer imprisonment and affliction."

Did the Holy Spirit tell Paul not to go to Jerusalem?

Paul's friends believed the Holy Spirit had given these warnings to stop Paul from going to Jerusalem. Paul believed the Holy Spirit had given these warnings to prepare him for what lay ahead.

No doubt, Paul's friends were reacting out of love for Paul; we don't want our loved ones to suffer. But in this situation Paul modeled for them and us an important Kingdom principle: God works through those willing to suffer for the name of Jesus. God's love for us is not incompatible with God's call upon us to suffer. We need only consider our Lord Jesus. As new opportunities for ministry and missions develop, we need to remember that the possibility of suffering and death are not automatic contra-indicators of God's will. I say this soberly.

Paul stayed the course and arrived in Jerusalem in May of 57 A.D. It had been four years since his last visit.

Acts 21:15-26 Paul and the Elders of the Jerusalem Church

Paul was being slandered amongst believing Jews in Jerusalem. Who, most likely, would slander Paul? The Judaizers. While Paul had been away those four years, the Judaizers had effectively discredited Paul among believing Jews. Why hadn't the Elders defended Paul's reputation: they knew he didn't teach fellow Jews to abandon Judaism. But they allowed this lie about Paul to spread and remain within the Jerusalem Church. This was a serious failure on the part of the Elders to support Paul. While they failed to support Paul, Paul came bearing a significant financial gift which he had raised from the gentile churches to support the Jerusalem Church! Rather than take responsibility for their congregation, the Elders pushed the problem on Paul.

Why did Luke record this? To show that the leadership of the Jerusalem Church did not fully support Paul. We don't see Church leadership helping Paul in his imprisonment or in his various court trials going forward.

I speculate this was passive-aggressive behavior by the Elders who struggled themselves to fully embrace the trans-national nature of the kingdom during what Jesus called, *the mystery form of the kingdom* (Matt.

13). They still believed Judaism was at the center of the kingdom *during this dispensation*. But, as Paul understood and explained in Romans 9-11, during this dispensation of the New Covenant, Israel is in the state of a partial hardening until the Second Coming of Jesus. The trans-national Church is at the center of the kingdom during this dispensation. The Church is made up of one new person – the born-again by faith, fully forgiven, Spirit-indwelt believer in Jesus of Nazareth. Spiritually speaking there is only this kind of person in the kingdom; all the distinctions that would divide us are done away.

But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:25–28 (ESV)

We must guard against equating our cultural practices of Christianity with Christianity itself. Christianity is not centered in American culture and practices. While Christianity will challenge certain sin-based practices in every cultur, there is also freedom to practice Christianity according to forms and methods unique to any given culture.

Voice of the Martyrs Needs for December: fleece blankets and hairbrushes.

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