Chapter 53: Obedience from the Heart

Acts 21:1–16

On the final legs of Paul's journey to Jerusalem, he encounters two moments in Acts 21:1–16 where well-meaning believers try to persuade him against continuing. Both times, those believers speak on the basis of prophetic revelation from the Spirit; however, both times Paul emerges undeterred as he fulfills the calling of the Lord upon his life. Through Paul's example—and the example of Jesus, echoed in Paul's actions—we see that *the Lord seeks obedience from the heart*.

Obedience (Acts 21:1–6)

In the first part of this story, Luke narrates another sequence in Paul's travel journeys. There are other passages like this (e.g., Acts 14:24–28; 15:36–41; 16:6–10; 18:18–23; 20:1–6), but this one is unique in two respects. First, most of the journeys we have seen thus far narrate travel for how Paul reached the next site of his missionary journeys. Wherever he went, he would preach the gospel; however, here, we simply read that Paul went from place to place to place. Second, the purpose of this journey is to go to Jerusalem, where he will suffer for the sake of Christ. One commentator puts these themes together, writing that "This section contributes nothing to the description of the geographical and cultural spread of Christianity, which has often been taken to (be) the essential theme of Acts, but concentrates on Paul's imprisonment and trial."[1]

How, then, are we to read and study such passages that seem to "contribute nothing" to the spread of the gospel in Acts? At one level, the prolonged narrative marking the travel itinerary establishes the historical reliability of a real man traveling through real places to get to Jerusalem. At another level, the repeated statements of cities along the way prolong the narrative to heighten the poignancy of seeing Paul sail away to his doom, much as the story of the journey of Abraham and Isaac to Moriah narrates the great length, during which time Abraham would have had to bear the weight of what he was headed to do ("on the third day…from afar"; Gen. 22:4).[2] Even more closely, Paul's journey to Jerusalem corresponds to Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, where our Lord knew that he would suffer and die.[3] Paul had already stated that "the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me" (Acts 20:23). Does the Holy Spirit continue to testify to him about his sufferings in Jerusalem at every one of these stops? Paul does not tell us.

Yet, in Tyre, when Paul stays with disciples for seven days, the Spirit does speak. Luke states that

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[1] R. Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1982), 12. Cited by Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 574.

[2] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King, vol. 1 (1847; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 565.

[3] Polhill, *Acts*, 431–32.

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"through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem" (v. 4). Commentators struggle with how to take this, even going so far as to understand this as a contradictory message to Paul from the Spirit.[4] This interpretation does not, however, fit the context of the passage. Peterson rightly interprets that "As his friends became aware of the implications, they were moved by a Spirit-given love for Paul to urge him not to go….The Spirit did not prohibit Paul from going to Jerusalem through their urging but continued to warn him of the dangers."[5] Again, there is a very close correspondence between Paul's journey to Jerusalem and Christ's journey to Jerusalem, in that the disciples also warned Jesus not to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die (especially Peter; Matt. 16:22). Peter had also received divine revelation, both from the Father (Matt. 16:17) and from the Son (Matt. 16:21), and Peter also misinterpreted the revelation he had received so much that he rebuked his Lord. As Peter did not dissuade Jesus from the cross, so these disciples do not persuade Paul from Jerusalem. Luke reveals the depth of their love for Paul in their affectionate goodbye (vv. 5–6).

From the Heart (Acts 21:7–16)

Again, we have more travel details, from Tyre to Ptolemais, to Caesarea (vv. 7–8a). In Caesarea, we unexpectedly come to the home of a familiar figure: Philip, "one of the seven" deacons appointed back in Acts 6:5, a man who had been instrumental in bringing the gospel into Samaria back in Acts 8. The last we had seen of him was in Caesarea (Acts 8:40). Apparently he had settled down with a family—and a family of four unmarried daughters who prophesied, nonetheless (v.9). Importantly, we learn in this passage that Philip was not only a deacon, but also an "evangelist" (v. 8). Calvin comments that "the evangelists, in my judgment, were in the midst between apostles and doctors. For it was a function next to the apostles to preach the gospel in all places, and not to have any certain place of abode; only the degree of honor was inferior" (Eph. 4:11).[6] Smyth adds, "Evangelists were extraordinary officers, suited to the infant state of the church, who were commissioned to travel under the direction and control of the apostles, that they might ordain ministers and settle congregations, according to the system laid down by Christ and his apostles."[7] In confirmation of this point, we note that Philip had moved from Jerusalem into Samaria and now to Caesarea. While he was in Samaria, he had operated under the authority of the apostles (Acts 8:14–25).

While in Caesarea, another prophet "named Agabus came down from Judea" (v. 10). In the context of the passage, I wonder whether there might not be an echo of 1 Kings 13:1, when "a man of God came out of Judah" to prophesy. That story illustrated the dire consequences of failing to heed the word of the Lord, first by Jeroboam, whose hand is dried up when he cries out against the

[4] e.g., "The best interpretation takes the text at face value; what is identified as an utterance of the Spirit… is the word not to go to Jerusalem. Paul hears that warning and receives it as a revelatory word; yet without doubting the Spirit's inspiration, he concludes in his assessment that it does not invalidate the earlier revelation of the Spirit that he must go to Jerusalem even though it would mean imprisonment and persecution" (Schnabel, *Acts*, 854–55).

[5] Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 578.

[6] Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:270.

[7] Thomas Smyth, *An Ecclesiastical Catechism of the Presbyterian Church: For the Use of Families, Bible-Classes, and Private Members* (Crocker & Brewster, 1841), 39.

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man of God (1 Kgs. 13:4) and then by the man of God himself, who disregards the Lord's word in failing to return him by a different direction (1 Kgs. 13:21–24). The involvement of the old prophet of Bethel is interesting, since he claims a different revelation than the one the man of God from Judah knew: "I also am a prophet as you are, and an angel spoke to me by the word of the LORD, saying, 'Bring him back with you into your house that he may eat bread and drink water.' But he lied to him" (1 Kgs. 13:18). If this echo is indeed intended, then the background context of that story only underscores how important it is for Paul to resist obeying the voices of those who claim to speak for the Holy Spirit when their exhortations conflict with what the Holy Spirit has constrained him to do.

Here, when Agabus prophesied that Paul would be bound in Jerusalem and handed over to the Gentiles, he does not lie to Paul, but only gives him the truth. The word for "bound" appears again in Acts 21:33, when Paul was "bound with two chains" (although it is the Roman tribune who binds him after stopping the Jews from beating Paul). Then, the word for "handed over" is the same word often used to describe Judas's "betrayal" of Jesus. On this point, Polhill cites Matthew 20:18; Luke 18:32: "The parallel to the fate of Jesus could hardly be more explicit."[8] As in Tyre, the believers in Caesarea (along with Paul's travel companions, such as Luke ["we"]) "urged him not to go up to Jerusalem" (v. 12). Yet Paul, having been prepared for the sufferings that awaited him, gently reproved them and insisted upon his readiness to suffer for the name of the Lord Jesus (v. 13).[9] Then, in the final parallel to Jesus' journey to the cross, the people cease from their urging, saying, "Let the will of the Lord be done" (v. 14). Here we find an "echo of the Lord's own prayer in Gethsemane [Luke 22:42].)"[10] From here, the disciples headed off, lodging with Mnason of Cyprus along the way.

Discussion Questions

1. To how many places does Paul travel in this passage? How much do we learn about any individual location that Paul visits? Why do you think that these details are included at all? Where is Paul ultimately headed? What would happen to him there (Acts 20:23)? How is this trip different from the many other trips on which Paul has journeyed thus far? Why is Paul willing to go through with this trip?

2. What does Luke mean when he writes that "through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go to Jerusalem" (v. 4)? How does that instruction correspond to how the Spirit had "constrained" Paul previously (Acts 20:22)? How does this story resemble the story of when Peter rebuked Jesus for declaring his intent to go to Jerusalem (Matt. 16:22)? How did Jesus respond to Peter (Matt. 16:23)? How does Paul respond to the temptation here?

3. Who is Philip (v. 8)? When had we last seen Philip (Acts 8:40)? What had he been doing up to that point in Acts 8? What was an "evangelist" in the early church (cf. 2 Tim. 4:5)? What were their

[8] Polhill, *Acts*, 435.

[9] Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, 2:272.

[10] Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, 425–26.

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roles? Who were "the seven" (v. 8)? What was their role? Where did the prophet Agabus come from (v. 10)? How might his prophecy echo the story from 1 Kings 13? If so, what theme is highlighted here?

4. How does the prophecy of Agabus echo prophecies about what would happen to Jesus (e.g., Luke 18:32)? Why was Jerusalem a place of persecution for Jesus and for Paul? Did Agabus tell Paul not to go to Jerusalem? Why did the people urge Paul not to go to Jerusalem (v. 12)? How did Paul respond (v. 13)? How do the people resolve their fears about Paul's fate (v. 14)? How does this echo the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane (Luke 22:42)?

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