

THE BOOK OF ACTS

Lesson 46, Chapters 20 and 21

We have a little more to cover to complete Acts chapter 20 and then we'll move immediately into chapter 21. Paul is in Miletus, a province of Asia, which is a few miles south of Ephesus. He doesn't think that he has the time to travel to Ephesus to meet with the leadership there because he is in a big hurry to get back to the Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of Shavuot. This pressure to get to Jerusalem is borne from the fact that it is a Biblical commandment that all Israelites are to make a pilgrimage to the Temple for the Feast of Shavuot (and for 2 other Feasts as well). Pay attention to how much time and effort it takes for him to get to Jerusalem for this Feast because this is what every Diaspora Jew faced and why relatively few made the required pilgrimages. So for whatever reasons or circumstances, Paul had elected not to make the trip for the Feast of Matzah, which means he broke the Law. Paul is such a well known figure by now that no doubt the leadership of The Way were concerned that he had not to come to Jerusalem for Passover; all it could do is add to suspicions and rumors that he might be moving away from devotion to **Halakhah**: Jewish Law. Sha'ul sent a message to Ephesus asking the leaders of the congregation of Believers there to come to him, which they did.

Sha'ul feels certain that something bad is going to happen to him when he gets to Jerusalem; it is an intuition that he has that has been confirmed by various prophets in Believing congregations who have warned him of trouble. He also feels certain that whether due to this coming trouble or something else, that he will never again return to Ephesus (nor the other Believing congregations that he has set up in Asia, Macedonia, Greece, and Phrygia). So he gives an impassioned speech to the leadership of Ephesus to remember him as a dedicated, faithful follower of Yeshua who put himself at great risk to bring the truth to them. He also warns them that wolves will come to attack the flock of Believers and attempt to pull them away into spiritual darkness. Thus as leaders they must be on guard for this possibility and be aware that these wolves may even rise up from among the Believers.

Let's pick up at Acts 20 verse 32.

RE-READ ACTS 20:32 – end

As I read and pondered verse 32 it occurred to me that Paul, as a teacher of God's Word and evangelist of Yeshua's Gospel, was quite worried about what would happen when he was no longer present to answer questions, to guide, and to encourage. We've already seen as with Apollos, the Believing evangelist from Alexandria, Egypt, that God's message can be easily (even unintentionally) distorted, or vital pieces of information can be left out. Pagan ideas can be blended with Biblical truth and new Believers, especially, can be susceptible to deception. Paul's answer to the problem was twofold; first was to plead with the leaders to look to the Lord and to temper everything they thought, learned, taught and did with love and kindness. But second is something that Paul will do that isn't mentioned here; it is that Paul will keep his ear to the ground and using messengers and other means he will keep track from afar of what

is going on with these Diaspora congregations. And he will communicate with them by means of letters. It is his letters to the congregations that he will use to exhort them to remain steadfast in the faith he has taught to them; and he will correct them with proper doctrine when they go off the reservation. Although I'm positive that he never envisioned it, these letters to the congregations would eventually form a substantial part of a Christian New Testament that would be added to the Bible about 150 years after his martyrdom. And of course we are fortunate to have this same legacy of Paul's teachings to show us the way in our own time just as it did for the Ephesians, Galatians, Corinthians, and other Believing congregations in Paul's day.

Verse 33 makes an emphatic point that needs to be revived in modern Christianity. Sha'ul says that he used his own hands to support himself and also to help others; he didn't take gold, silver or clothing in payment for his teaching and preaching. In other words he used his craft as a tentmaker as his means of support and didn't seek money from the congregations for his living. So for Sha'ul being an evangelist was not his occupation; it was his passion. His occupation financed his passion.

Paul's message to us then is this: Pastors and Rabbis should work to support themselves where ever that is practical so as not to burden the congregation. But we also need to take Paul's example in light of his times versus ours. Much more is expected of today's Ministers such that in even a modest sized congregation being a Pastor is usually a full time job in itself; that is not something that Paul or the Rabbis of his era faced. Our society is much more structured, more congregational activities are the norm, facilities and services are more elaborate, and members look to the Ministers for a more personal touch. Ministers deserve to make a decent living so that they can care for their families. That said I am disappointed to see some Christian leaders that view themselves as equivalent to business owners, CEOs and senior executives, and expect to be paid on a level equivalent to what the same sort of position might pay in the business world. Every case is different, of course, but the spirit of Paul's example is crystal clear: no more ought to be taken from the congregational treasury than is needed for the reasonable support of Ministers and staff. Making these positions into high paying careers that compete with private industry for talent is one of a number of factors that has shrunk the necessary gap between Believing institutions and the world. But it has also attracted people into ministry leadership and service who are less dedicated in sacrificially serving God with their gifts and talents and are more interested in obtaining a stable, good paying job with nice working conditions.

It is noteworthy that here Paul quotes Christ by saying "there is more happiness in giving than in receiving". Especially for the Christian and Messianic leadership that may be hearing my words, please notice that Paul is not talking to the congregation; rather he is specifically addressing this comment to the leadership. That is not to say that the same thing doesn't go for the membership; but the example of this principle is to first be demonstrated by the leadership.

Once Paul has finished saying all he wanted to say, he kneels with the Elders and prays. He bids them a sorrowful and tearful farewell as they took to heart his belief that they would never see him again. Interestingly, despite his coming ordeal in Jerusalem, Paul was mistaken; this

would **not** be the last time the leaders of Ephesus would see Paul.

Let's move on to Acts 21.

READ ACTS CHAPTER 21 all

This is one of those chapters that I may enjoy more than you do because it has some fascinating theological implications as well as ample opportunity for me to discuss more about the historical Paul. By doing so it opens a window for us to straighten out a few misconceptions that have become reflected in some rather widespread Christian doctrines.

The final words of the previous chapter explain that this melancholy group went with Paul to the port, and at least some of them accompanied him on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The first few words of Acts 21 tell us where the ship made its first port call; it was at Cos. Paul and companions over-nighted in Cos, and the next day sailed to Rhodes, and from there on to Patara. What we see here is the customary island hopping that occurred among most transport ships in this era. These were smaller vessels that delivered goods up and down coastlands, not venturing very far out to sea; they were the local delivery trucks and tended to operate in good weather and mostly during daylight hours. Paul would eventually need to hook up with a larger, more seaworthy vessel to sail across the open waters of the Mediterranean to reach a port in the Holy Land.

Cos was a small island that one passed on the route to Rhodes; it was best known for the medical school founded by Hippocrates 500 years before Paul's day. The Rhodes that is being spoken of here is no doubt the City of Rhodes, located on the island of Rhodes, because that city had a busy port. Rhodes was a much larger island than Cos. Interestingly Greek and Roman historical records indicate that both of these islands had Jewish populations living on them. I tell you this to point out just how widespread the Jews were; there was hardly a place in all of the known world where you wouldn't find at least a few Jewish families.

Patara was back on the mainland of Asia, due east from the Island of Rhodes, in the territory of Lycia; so it was just a short sail. It will be in Patara where Paul leaves the small boat he's been on to find a larger one to take him back to the Holy Land. This would be a journey of 5 days at sea. Let me remind you that there were no such things as passenger ships in these days; passengers were simply live cargo. And notice how much detail we are getting about this journey; that is because we are once again in the "we" passages of the Book of Acts. That is, the writer, Luke, once again includes himself in everything that is being reported because he was present. So whenever Luke was with Paul we find that the amount of detail increases since he is reporting things first hand and he seems to like detail.

So Paul found an appropriate ship and they set sail from Patara; the route took them around the western and southern coasts of Cyprus and they landed in Tzor of Phoenicia. Tzor is another name for Tyre. They stayed there for a week, meeting up with some Believers who lived there. These Believers of Tyre joined the chorus advising Paul not to go to Jerusalem because the Spirit portended something bad happening to him. Paul was unmoved; he was determined to go to Jerusalem no matter the danger. But this brings up an interesting

theological conundrum that invariably winds up being a practical challenge for Believers at some time or another. In Acts 20:22 we're told that Paul was compelled by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. Here in Acts 21:4 the disciples of Tyre, also guided by the Spirit, tell Paul that he should **not** go. God cannot be divided, so what is happening here and why did Paul go anyway? Or, did these disciples not really hear from the Spirit?

It seems that these disciples of Tyre are getting the same warning from the Holy Spirit that the disciples from Asia had received: it is that their leader Paul was going to have something serious happen to him in Jerusalem. What would anyone's reaction be if they knew about this danger ahead of time? It would be to urge the affected party to not go. But on the other hand, Paul says that the Holy Spirit was compelling him to go. Paul sensed danger ahead (perhaps even death) because he told the Ephesian elders that he would never see them again; but that is a separate issue from whether he **should** go to Jerusalem or not. Remember: it was God's Law that every Jew was to go to the Temple in Jerusalem for Shavuot (Deut.16). Essentially Paul was resigned to the fact that he would be walking into danger; but thought that God still wanted him to do it. The Spirit didn't order Paul to stay away from Jerusalem. Rather it was Paul's followers who asked him not to go because of what they feared awaited him. Better to break a commandment of God, they reasoned, than to do something risky.

And there you have it, as uncomfortable as it may be; it is that as Believers there **are** risks that we are supposed to take when we know God is urging us to take them. But in the risk averse West, it seems counter intuitive to do anything that could involve risk or danger to us if we know about it, or have deep suspicions, in advance. So would God actually ask us to do something that He knows, and we suspect, is seriously risky and indeed possibly fatal? For instance; my wife and I have ventured to Israel more times than I can remember, and we continued going to Israel during the violent Intifada of 15 or so years ago when buses and pizza parlors were being randomly bombed by terrorists. Shops were closing by the scores, restaurants were going out of business, and entire hotels were shut down and mothballed. Our family and most of our friends thought us crazy and pled with us not to go to Israel; and it's not that we were naïve of the increased risk or didn't feel some anxiety about it. It's that we knew in our spirits that we were supposed to do this. Problem is, God didn't tell us why and that made it all the harder.

Looking back, I can't begin to tell you how much things have changed for the better between Christians and Jews in Israel as a result of many thousands of Christians just like us who kept going to Israel during those dangerous times. Israeli shopkeepers would ask us bluntly why we'd still come in the midst of all this danger, and then when we told them why some wanted to know more about our faith. Jews on the streets would come up to us, shake our hands, and with moist eyes, thank us. We'd tell them how much we value them and God loves them. We even had Orthodox Jews who, in years past, would change sides of the street to avoid us; but now they'd pause, smile, and nod their heads in acknowledgement of us. Christian and Jewish relations in Israel are very different, and so much better, today than they were less than 20 years ago. A genuine warmth and sense of friendship has replaced a rather cold, unwelcoming and suspicious attitude. So now, in hindsight, I understand why God had us along with many thousands more Believers go to Israel to face real danger despite what in many ways seemed to any reasonable person to be utterly foolhardy.

I also know of missionaries that regularly go to dangerous places, with spiritually grounded friends and family saying that they have flashing red lights going off in their spirits that something is going to happen and so they need to not go or to go somewhere else; this is where discernment comes into play. Sometimes when we know there is great risk in what we're about to enter in to, we need to decide whether God is directing us into that risk so that He can use it to His glory or whether we are foolishly playing with our lives and what we're doing is naïve idealism and is not God's direction at all. I don't have any sure fire way for you to divine the right answer; I only know that God's grand plan for His Believers is **not** to remove all chance of danger or risk for us. Rather I think many times His asking us to go or to do when the circumstances are screaming for us to run the other direction are a test; a test to see what matters more to us: our lives or His will. It may not always involve danger to life and limb; it might be financial risk, career risk, even social risk that is at stake. Paul was right to continue to Jerusalem where indeed bad things were going to happen because the Lord had bigger plans for Paul than he knew.

Sha'ul said goodbye to the worried Believers of Tzor and he, Luke and apparently some who came with him from Asia (likely with the collection of funds for Jerusalem) went to Ptolemais. Ptolemais is known in modern times as Akko. There were Believers there who greeted them and offered hospitality for the night. Notice how everywhere Paul went there were Believers, or he made some new ones. That is how fast and wide belief in Yeshua had grown in the perhaps 25 years since Christ was executed. The next day they continued on their journey towards Jerusalem and came to Caesarea Maritima, the jewel of port cities in the Holy Land. Interestingly Phillip lived there and he greeted the travelers. This was the same Phillip from Acts chapter 6 who was part of a group of Hellenist Jewish Believers who didn't think that their widows were getting their fair share of charity; so the leadership of The Way in Jerusalem chose 7 of the Hellenists to be in charge of the distribution to all the widows, Hellenists or Hebrews. This is why verse 8 refers to Phillip as "one of the seven".

It is clear that Paul (or at least one of his party) knew that Phillip lived in Caesarea so they went straightaway to his house; and with Phillip lived 4 of his unmarried daughters. Interestingly all 4 are said to be prophetesses. Now let me go off track for just a moment to explain an interesting Jewish viewpoint about what is happening here. Unmarried daughters is another way of saying "virgins". This didn't necessarily mean that they were terribly young, even children. Typical marrying age was around 15; it was not unusual for a girl to be married as early as 12. But no one was going to trust a prophecy coming from a child, so these 4 daughters were likely in their mid or late teens or twenties. However Jewish documents from that era suggest that celibacy (man or woman) had some connection to the ability to prophecy because the ability to prophecy also had some connection to the level of ritual purity of that person. The idea being that the most ritually pure a woman would ever be in her life was before she shared intimacy with the opposite sex; and this because the act itself automatically initiates a short time of ritual uncleanness. These same documents also point out how unmarried girls still living under their father's roof were segregated from males so that contact with men was very limited and tightly supervised by the father; this was done for the sake of purity and modesty. All of this in the Hebrew culture was seen as the epitome of piety. Thus such girls were all the more likely to be rewarded by the Lord with the ability to prophecy. I'm not saying that this is necessarily how God views it; I'm saying that this is how Jewish society

in Paul's era viewed it and it is without doubt why it was even mentioned here in Acts 21. Because nothing implies that any of these 4 girls actually prophesied to Paul and company.

But then in verse 10, with the idea of prophets and prophecy still the theme, we read of an adult male prophet named Agav who came to visit. It is an odd situation because we're given no clue as to whether it was a coincidence that he and Paul arrived at about the same time in Caesarea, or whether this was intentionally timed to occur this way. What was Agav's relationship with Phillip, Paul, Luke or any of the other Believers? We don't know. Was he a Believer? Nothing indicates it. However this isn't the first time we've run into Agav. Back in chapter 11 we read of him coming to Antioch from Jerusalem and prophesying a famine in the Roman Empire. It happened. So the tie-in between him and the Believers is ambiguous. That said it is clear that he is a true prophet of God and what he says is to be trusted. Agav put on a visual illustration of what Paul can expect in Jerusalem. He borrowed Paul's belt (also called a girdle), tied up his own hands and feet and said that the owner of the belt (Paul) would have this happen to him in Jerusalem and he'd be handed over to the gentiles (meaning arrested by the Roman authorities). Once again Paul is informed (although in more detail) of the danger that awaits him; but still there is no command of God to avoid Jerusalem. So Paul's order from God stands.

Since everyone was present when Agav gave his prophecy, Luke, the group of elders that had come with Paul from Asia and the local Believers in Caesarea once again begged Sha'ul not to go to Jerusalem. Paul told them to stop crying and to stop urging him to NOT do what he clearly knew God wanted him to do. He says that arrest, injury or death are beside the point; whatever happens, happens. Since God has not told him through a prophet to avoid going to Jerusalem, then what Paul needs from them is strengthening and encouragement; not excuses that supposedly allow him to disobey the Lord. They kept it up, though, and finally saw that Paul was not going to be swayed. They concluded: God's will be done. In other words, they finally came around to the understanding that Paul had had all along.

You know: it sounds so nice and loving to tell a brother or sister in Christ to avoid a risk that they believe God wants them to take. Or to tell them that whatever is the desire of their heart, God wants it too or He wouldn't have put that desire in them. But the truth is that good intentions and properly discerning God's will don't always coincide. All these disciples knew is what God had shown them in so many ways: Paul was going to face serious trouble when he got to Jerusalem. They also now knew from Agav's prophecy that Paul was going to be arrested by the Romans. So I don't see them as wrong minded or demonstrating a lack of faith by trying to discourage Paul from going to Jerusalem. However it does tell us that only rarely does God show us everything from beginning to end. The only additional information that Paul had that the disciples didn't was that he was certain in his spirit that God wanted him in Jerusalem. The disciples reasoned with Paul no doubt saying that he could lose his life if he went. But they had enough respect for Paul to come to the conclusion that in the end this was between Paul and God; so they reluctantly threw in the towel and wished him well.

Understand; Paul was not traveling alone so he would not be going up to Jerusalem by himself. Paul's traveling companions would be with him and whatever fate was going to befall Paul could easily ensnare Luke and the Elders from Asia (guilt by association). So we

shouldn't overlook the faith and trust that they were displaying as well; they knew that they, too, could be at risk. Despite all this, Paul's entourage actually grew as some of the disciples of Caesarea decided to join them as they went up to Jerusalem. Again: let's remember that this wasn't entirely about loyalty to Paul. Shavuot was upon them and these men were required by the Torah to go to the Temple in Jerusalem to sacrifice and worship.

Off to Jerusalem they went and immediately they stopped at the home of Mnason, a Believer from Cyprus, who would provide them a place to stay (meaning that he had a sizeable house). It is clear that these accommodations had been prearranged, and for good reason; Jerusalem would swell to 3 or 4 times its normal size for Shavuot. Finding somewhere to stay could be quite difficult, but the residents of Jerusalem saw it as a duty and a privilege to find a way to accommodate all who came to God's festivals. Even though Shavuot was technically a one day Feast, pilgrims coming from long distances of course didn't come for one day, turn around, and head home. Besides; **Halakhah** had by now put many demands upon those who came to celebrate, and ritual purity was at the heart of those demands because impurity was contagious.

It was a given that those coming from the Diaspora would have to come early in order to go through purification rituals. Even for the Jewish Believers who accepted Peter's teaching that gentiles were not inherently unclean, there was the reality that most gentiles were pagans; and so their idolatry and their non-kosher eating created a great deal of uncleanness (this is why the Jerusalem Council several years earlier had declared certain prohibitions regarding these two issues for gentile Believers). Then there was the gentiles' careless handling of the dead, for which they went through no purification procedures so this produced the worst sort of defilement; and on and on. The Jews who lived in the Diaspora were by definition in constant close contact with these gentiles and so it was assumed that all Jewish pilgrims coming to Jerusalem from the Diaspora were unclean and would need time to perform the purification rituals before they could enter the Temple to present their firstfruits.

Verse 17 says that the brothers (meaning the Jewish Believers of Jerusalem) warmly welcomed Paul and his group. The next day Paul and the entire group of his traveling companions go to see **Ya'acov**, Yeshua's half-brother, who is the supreme head of The Way. **Ya'acov** is called James in English Bibles. I've already covered it but it bears repeating: this Christian tradition of calling him James happened with the creation of the King James Bible. The editors of the Bible changed Jacob's name to James to honor King James and it has stuck ever since; there is no "James" in Hebrew. I will lapse into using the name James just for the sake of familiarity and continuity.

Sha'ul spent some time explaining to James the great success he had had among the gentiles with the Gospel. This was not bragging; Paul had always recognized James's authority and so he was merely presenting him with a progress report. This is a good time to remind you that while James was indeed the head of the Messianic movement (The Way), that did not represent every strand in existence of those who believed in Yeshua as Messiah (although it was the majority). And further, there is no evidence that James ventured outside of the Holy Land. Rather he operated out of Jerusalem and so he was dealing almost exclusively with Jews of the most zealous variety; Judean Jews.

So with that piece of information about James, verse 20 opens with some important words for us to take in: “On hearing it they praised God”. That is, James and the leadership of The Way were very glad and uplifted with Paul’s report. There is a line of doctrine that began in early Christianity that says that James and the Jerusalem Council didn’t care about gentiles or even too much about Jews in the Diaspora. These opening words of verse 20 then are either insincere or they show that indeed the leadership was thrilled about what was happening. In return they were quick to want to show Paul what had been going on in Jerusalem.

The Scriptural record implies that it had been a long time since Paul had been in Jerusalem; anywhere from 15 to perhaps as much as 20 years. And since that time much development of the Believing community in the Holy Land had occurred. James tells Paul to look at how many tens of thousands of Believers there are, and they are all zealous for the Torah. First: in Greek James says to look at how many **myriads** of Believers there are. In Greek the word **myriad** technically means the precise number 10,000. However, there is some evidence that the word was also used to represent just a very big number. Even so the plain wording says “how **many** myriads” so it would seem to be saying “how many ten thousands” of Believers there are in Jerusalem. Even more James calls these specific Believers “Judeans”. It is not unknown for the words Jews and Judeans to be synonymous; but almost always the term Judeans means what it says. It is referring to the Jewish residents of the province of Judea. And since the scene is taking place in Jerusalem of Judea, and since Paul’s report was specifically about Jews and gentiles from the Diaspora, then it would seem we must take James’s word that these tens of thousands of Jews he is referring to are only Jews from Judea of the Holy Land.

But now comes the part that has bedeviled the Church for 19 centuries. James says that all of these Believing Jews parading around the streets of Jerusalem for Shavuot are zealous for the Torah (CJB). In Greek it says zealous for the **nomos**; usually translated into English as the Law. What does this mean? What are the ramifications of Believing Jews who, even 15-20 years after the rulings of the Jerusalem Council of Acts chapter 15, continuing to be “zealous” for the Law? How can that be? According to most of the early Church Fathers, and according to most of the Christian denominations to this day, James abolished the Law. If so, then why is James now so proud to announce to Paul that all these tens of thousands of Believers here in Jerusalem continue to follow the Law scrupulously?

It is a big question and it’s an important question. That is what we will delve into in depth, next time.