

Paul's Third Journey Ends and He is Arrested

Acts 21

Acts 21: *"Now it came to pass, that when we had departed from them and set sail, running a straight course we came to Cos, the following day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. ² And finding a ship sailing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. ³ When we had sighted Cyprus, we passed it on the left, sailed to Syria, and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload her cargo. ⁴ And finding disciples, we stayed there seven days. They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem. ⁵ When we had come to the end of those days, we departed and went on our way; and they all accompanied us, with wives and children, till we were out of the city. And we knelt down on the shore and prayed. ⁶ When we had taken our leave of one another, we boarded the ship, and they returned home.*

⁷ And when we had finished our voyage from Tyre, we came to Ptolemais, greeted the brethren, and stayed with them one day. ⁸ On the next day we who were Paul's companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. ⁹ Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied. ¹⁰ And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" ¹² Now when we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³ Then Paul answered, "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." ¹⁴ So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, "The will of the Lord be done."

¹⁵ And after those days we packed and went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁶ Also some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us and brought with them a certain Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we were to lodge. ¹⁷ And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. ¹⁸ On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. ¹⁹ When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. ²⁰ And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law; ²¹ but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. ²² What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come. ²³ Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. ²⁴ Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law. ²⁵ But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality." ²⁶ Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them.

²⁷ Now when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, ²⁸ crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." ²⁹ (For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.)

³⁰ And all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut. ³¹ Now as they were seeking to kill him, news came to the commander of the garrison that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. ³² He immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them. And when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. ³³ Then the commander came near and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and he asked who he was and what he had done. ³⁴ And some among the multitude cried one thing and some another. So when he could not ascertain the truth because of the tumult, he commanded him to be taken into the barracks. ³⁵ When he reached the stairs, he had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob. ³⁶ For the multitude of the people followed after, crying out, "Away with him!"

³⁷ Then as Paul was about to be led into the barracks, he said to the commander, "May I speak to you?" He replied, "Can you speak Greek? ³⁸ Are you not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a rebellion and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness?" ³⁹ But Paul said, "I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city; and I implore you, permit me to speak to the people." ⁴⁰ So when he had given him permission, Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, saying, Brethren and fathers, hear my defense before you now."

Background Notes

Most Bibles have maps that show the missionary journeys of the apostle Paul, so it's easy to follow this final stage of Paul's third missionary journey. At the end of Acts 20, Paul said goodbye to the Ephesian elders and continued on his way. His intent was to get to Jerusalem in time for the Feast of Pentecost, and to deliver the financial gifts that he had collected for the needy believers of the Jerusalem church.

Paul's return journey first took him to the little island of Cos, and then to the island of Rhodes. From Rhodes, Paul and his team went on to Patara when they found a ship that was sailing non-stop to the town of Tyre, on the Phoenician coast. They stayed in Tyre while the ship's cargo was unloaded, so for a whole week Paul and the team met with the believers at Tyre. What an unexpected blessing for the Christians at Tyre! I wouldn't be surprised if some of these believers had been praying for some good teaching from the Word - and of all things, who should show up but the apostle Paul - sent by the Lord!

From Tyre they sailed down the coast to Ptolemais, which is the modern city of Acco in Israel, and then on to Caesarea. Here they stayed with Philip the evangelist. Philip was one of the original seven deacons (Acts 6). He evangelized the Samaritans, and then led the Ethiopian eunuch to the Lord along the road to Gaza (Acts 8).

Philip had four unmarried daughters who had the spiritual gift of prophecy (v9), and the prophet Agabus (Acts 11) was also at Caesarea. Agabus said *by the Spirit* that Paul would be arrested and bound in Jerusalem. This is exactly what happened, and it brings up an obvious and logical question: Did Paul do the right thing in going up to Jerusalem?

Doctrinal Points

1. Mature believers can make mistakes in determining God's will.

Commentators on the book of Acts are divided as to whether Paul was right to decide to go up to Jerusalem and into the Temple area at this time, or whether Paul made a mistake. My own position (as you can guess from the title of the doctrinal point) is that Paul should not have gone up to Jerusalem - or at least he should not have gone into the Temple area, which was sure to stir up strife and result in his arrest.

However, considering that Paul may have been mistaken, two things must be said and emphasized:

a. *Paul's motives were pure.* Paul had no hidden agenda for fame or money. He was not rebellious and didn't directly disobey, as many Christians do. In fact, it's clear that Paul was willing to give his life for Christ. It seems his motive was to keep peace with the Jewish believers and the elders of the Jerusalem church.

b. *God overruled* in all of these events, and worked all the events together for good.

The obvious reason why I think that Paul made a mistake in going up to Jerusalem is that the believers at Tyre kept telling Paul ***through the Spirit*** not go up to Jerusalem (v4). In addition, Agabus prophesied ***by the Holy Spirit*** that Paul would be arrested and bound in Jerusalem (v11). And yet Paul insisted on going up to Jerusalem - even though Luke and the other believers at Caesarea begged him not to go (v12). In fact, the apostle Paul ignored all of the normal ways God uses to show the believer His will – ***common sense, circumstances, counsel of other believers, and the direct word of the Lord by the Holy Spirit.*** So it seems that Paul's decision to go to Jerusalem was not in line with God's will.

However, it can be argued that Paul did pay attention to the warnings, but he saw them as a prediction of events to come – but ***not*** as *God's direct command not to go*. However, it's pretty clear that the Holy Spirit definitely said, "Don't set foot in Jerusalem" (v4).

Even spiritual and mature believers can make mistakes in determining God's will. They may not be deliberate or defiant mistakes, and usually their decisions are based on good reasons and for pure motives - but any decision is a mistake if it

is not in line with the perfect will of God. Mature believers can make mistakes in determining God's will.

2. Mistakes of mature believers cannot cancel out God's will.

Romans 8:28 says that *"we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose."* Notice that it doesn't say all things are good, but rather that God works all things together for good. But what about when Christians make mistakes? Does that cancel out God's will? No. God overrules, and He works *all* things together for our good. Think of the lessons that we learn from our mistakes. Even with serious moral mistakes, God is able to work it out for our eventual good, because of the discipline and correction that He brings into our lives.

It appears that Paul may have mistaken in catering to the Christian "Judaizers" in the Jerusalem church, placing himself back under the Old Testament Law by taking a Nazarite-type vow, and going into the Temple area. But even if Paul made a mistake here, God's will was not cancelled out. Yes, Paul's decision did result in his arrest. He was falsely accused of bringing a Gentile beyond the Court of the Gentiles in the Temple complex. He was slandered and misinterpreted when he was accused of preaching against the Law and the Temple. But God overrode all of this bad fallout from Paul's decision, and God worked it together for good.

As a result of his arrest, Paul was able to boldly witness before the Jewish Sanhedrin. And, *"the following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as you have testified for Me in Jerusalem, so you must also bear witness at Rome." (Acts 23:11).* Paul boldly witnessed to the governing authorities when he was a prisoner in Caesarea. Then he was shipped to Rome where he was imprisoned again. But from prison he wrote four books of the New Testament: the "Prison Epistles" - Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.

So God overruled! He accomplished His purpose and worked all things together for good. Mistakes of mature believers cannot cancel out God's will.

Practical Application

Try to make good decisions.

It's great to know that even when we make mistakes, God's will for our lives is not canceled. However, this does not justify mistakes. We should try not to make mistakes!

How do you avoid making mistakes? By making good decisions. Since life is one long series of decisions - big decisions and small decisions - you will be following God's will for your life if you make good and godly decisions. So - try to make good decisions!