

## Paul's Mistake

by Ray C. Stedman

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Today we begin the last series of our studies together in the book of Acts. We will pick up the story at the beginning of Chapter 21 and move on into the last section of this great book, where Luke recounts for us Paul's imprisonment in Jerusalem and his voyage to Rome. The book closes with Paul a prisoner of Caesar, living in his own hired house there at Rome. And so we will call this last series *The Prisoner of the Lord*, for here we find Paul in the new and unaccustomed role of prisoner -- unaccustomed, that is, for any length of time -- Paul in chains, languishing two years in the prison at Caesarea and some three years, most scholars feel, as a prisoner in Rome.

As I have studied this passage, and worked with it through the years, I have come to the very deep conviction that it was not necessary for Paul to have been a prisoner.

I know that the Lord Jesus, when he first called Paul on the Damascus road, said that he was to suffer great things -- but not necessarily as a prisoner. Paul had already suffered many things by this time. That prediction had been amply fulfilled in the hardships he had undergone in his journeys around the Roman Empire. And Paul had been thrown in jail from time to time, but never for very long -- usually no more than a day or two at a time.

I know that the Lord Jesus said that Paul would stand before kings and give his testimony, and that it was the fact that he was a prisoner which finally brought him before kings. But, again, it was not necessary that he come before kings in chains. A little later in this very account, the apostle himself, standing before King Agrippa, says, "I would that everyone in this room might be like me -- except for these chains," {cf, Acts 26:29}. That seems to be recognition on Paul's part that the chains indeed were not a necessary part of the process.

I know also that it was from this prison experience that Paul wrote some of the finest letters we have. And yet the greatest letter from his pen, the letter to the Romans, was not written in prison at all. The prison letters -- Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon, and others -- are evidence of the salvaging grace of God, which takes even a man's mistakes and uses them for blessing and to advance God's cause.

One of the most helpful sections we have in the entire book of Acts is the one now before us, introduced by Luke's account of Paul's mistake. It opens with the story of Paul's last journey to Jerusalem. The apostle and his friends left the Ephesian elders on the beach at Miletus and boarded ship:

**And when we had parted from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos, and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard, and set sail. When we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left we sailed to Syria, and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload its cargo. And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. Through the Spirit they told Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. And when our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey; and they all, with wives and children, brought us on our way till we were outside the city; and kneeling down on the beach we prayed and bade one another farewell. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home. {Acts 21:1-6 RSV}**

As you can see, that is largely an itinerary of the progress of the vessel down the coast of Asia Minor and then across a reach of the Mediterranean toward Jerusalem. It is obviously an eyewitness account. Luke was aboard and was recording where they stopped, and for how long, and how they spent their time. During the voyage they came to the ancient city of Tyre, north of Palestine. There they looked up certain disciples who, through the Spirit, Luke records, told Paul that he should not go up to Jerusalem.

Many commentators have struggled with this passage. I suppose we are all reluctant to attribute any wrongful action to the Apostle Paul. These studies in Acts have endeared him to us. We recognize the strength of his character, the fervor of his spirit, the love and compassion that always was near the surface in this great-hearted man, and we have come to love him. It is hard to believe that Paul would ever deliberately disobey the Holy Spirit. And yet, taken at its face value, this sentence indicates a command of the Holy Spirit which the apostle, for motives we shall examine, chose to ignore.

Many people soften the implications of this sentence and say that it was only another warning of trouble ahead. But the apostle hardly needed any such warning. He well knew that trouble lay ahead of him. Back in Chapter 20, Verse 22, in his address to the Ephesian elders, he said,

**"And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, bound in the Spirit, not knowing what shall befall me there; except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me." {Acts 20:22-23 RSV}**

So Paul already understood this. He knew he was heading into trouble if he went to Jerusalem and it seems unlikely that he needed any further warning about it.

Others say that Paul was right and that it was the disciples who were wrong, that they should not have tried to stop him, because Paul was following an inner leading of the Spirit which they should have acknowledged. But that is to ignore three crucial words -- it was "through the Spirit" that they told Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.

We must face the full implications of those words. They were recorded by Luke, who was Paul's friend. He wrote this account several years after these events, and with the advantage of hindsight, he looked back over the whole circumstance that followed. And yet, led by the Holy Spirit in recording this inspired book, he wrote down at this juncture that it was "through the Holy Spirit" that these disciples told Paul he was not to go up to Jerusalem.

The Greek is very strong here -- much stronger than our English text. Literally they said, "Stop going up to Jerusalem!" And Verse 5, which in our version begins with "And" should really begin with "But," for Luke is recording a contrast here. He says,

**Through the Spirit they told Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. But when our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey; {Acts 21:4b-5a RSV Modified}**

Well, there is Paul's mistake. He did not observe what the Holy Spirit said plainly and clearly.

If we are to understand his action, and derive any meaning or benefit from it, we must see where it began. Back in Chapter 19, we have a word about the apostle's thoughts when he was still in Ephesus. In Verse 21 Luke tells us,

**Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome." {Acts 19:21 RSV}**

That was the beginning of Paul's resolve to go to Jerusalem. There was nothing wrong with that at all. Here also Luke records that this was done in the Spirit, that it was perfectly proper for Paul to have decided to go up to Jerusalem at this point. As we have learned from various other passages in Scripture, God does not always guide us with messages sent before we make a decision. He expects us to make decisions, and to step out on the basis of faith to do what looks like the right thing, and to change our minds only if we are impressed by the Spirit or by the Lord that a decision is wrong. So there is nothing wrong with Paul at this point.

A little later on, at the beginning of Chapter 20, we read that he did go through Macedonia and down into Greece where he spent three months. We know that the place where he lived in Greece was the city of Corinth. And it was during this three month period that the apostle wrote the great letter to the Romans. In that letter he

tells us how he was feeling, and what emotions made him so desirous of being in Jerusalem at this time. We will look at that passage in Romans in a moment, but first we need to note Verse 16 in Chapter 20. Paul had come back near Ephesus but, Luke says,

**... Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.  
{Acts 20:16 RSV}**

Why did Paul want to be in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost? This answer is also found in the letter to the Romans. In the first part of Chapter 9 he unfolds to us something of the urgency of his own heart concerning his people:

**I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit [three times he affirms the solemnity of what he says], that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race. They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen.  
{Rom 9:1-5 RSV}**

It is difficult for us, as Gentiles, to understand this emotion in the Apostle Paul. But he was a Jew, and, as a Jew, he loved his nation. He loved their heritage, their background, and their possession of the promises of God. He loved all the ritual and ceremony which had been given to them to teach them about the coming of the One who would fulfill every word of what their observances stood for. He longed to reach them. His heart was broken as he saw their bitterness and frustration, and the hostility and opposition to the cause of Christ which came from his own people, Israel. And he knew that at Pentecost there would be a gathering of Jews from all over the Roman Empire, and there was born in his heart a great hunger to be there.

Something further is involved in this. As we also know from the letter to the Romans, Paul was a prophet. In Chapter 11 he wrote for us a section in which he indicated that he well knew that the welfare of the whole world hung ultimately on what happened to Israel. That is still true. The world will never solve its problems until Israel is in a right relationship to God. Paul makes that crystal clear in Romans 11. Read the chapter and you will see that. We will never solve the ecological problems, the economic problems, the moral and social problems of our day, until Israel is in right relationship to Jesus Christ. And Paul, watching the developing signs of the times in his day, felt that the time of the return of Christ was drawing very near.

We must remember, living as we do 2000 years this side of the apostle's life, that Paul and his associates did not anticipate that this period of time before the Lord's return would be anywhere near as long as it has been. They couldn't have, for the time was not revealed. As Jesus said, the times and the seasons were not for them to know, as they are not for us to know either. It is quite proper that they did not know. God has always expected his church, in every age, to keep looking for the return of Jesus.

Paul seemingly made the mistake which many are making today, unfortunately, of reading the signs of the times in the present indicative tense instead of holding them always in the subjunctive -- of saying, "It is the time of our Lord's return," instead of, "It may be that this is the time." No one can be certain about the time.

Perhaps this reminder needs to be raised at this point. I feel, personally, that this could well be the time of our Lord's return, that we are drawing near to it. I see many signs which so indicate. But no one can say precisely, "This is the time." It is instructive that even these apostles -- as they neared the end of their lives and watched the increasing problems of the Roman Empire, saw struggle and strife breaking out in Israel, and knew that the Romans would soon be moving to destroy that nation, as indeed they did in A.D. 70, a time which was drawing near -- might well have thought, "This is the hour when the Lord Jesus is about to return."

Paul did, and he *determined* to be involved in it. He longed to be an instrument to reach his people and, moved by the anguish of his heart, he began accordingly to plan to be in Jerusalem on that day when the Jews would be gathered from all parts of the earth, so that he might have a part in proclaiming to them the Kingship

and Lordship of Jesus Christ over that nation. Now, there was nothing wrong with that part of his motive, absolutely nothing at all. It was a perfectly proper feeling on his part. But the account here makes clear that God had chosen otherwise; that God, in his great wisdom, saw that it was not needful to have Paul in Jerusalem at this time. He had given him another ministry. Although Paul had a ministry to Israel and witnessed to them in every city to which he went, his ministry was primarily to the reaches of the Roman Empire, to the Gentiles, and it is clear that the Spirit of God does not want him here in Jerusalem. Paul's mistake lay in insisting, out of mistaken zeal, upon doing what his heart longed to do for the glory of Jesus Christ. You see how subtle this was, and yet this is what was moving him.

A second motive is revealed in the next section Luke records for us:

**When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais; and we greeted the brethren and stayed with them for one day. On the morrow we departed and came to Caesarea; and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. And he had four unmarried daughters who prophesied. While we were staying for some days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us he took Paul's girdle and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this girdle and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" When we heard this, we and the people there begged him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "The will of the Lord be done."**

**After these days we made ready and went up to Jerusalem. And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge. {Acts 21:7-16 RSV}**

Had Paul obeyed the Holy Spirit at Tyre, Luke undoubtedly would simply have recorded here what he once wrote about another occasion in Paul's life. He would have said, "We tried to go up to Jerusalem, but were forbidden of the Holy Spirit," just as once he recorded that the apostle tried to go into Asia and Bithynia; but was forbidden by the Spirit {cf, Acts 16:6-7}.

But now a rather painful scene followed. At Caesarea they came into the home of Philip the evangelist, whom we have met before in Acts, the man who led the Ethiopian eunuch to Christ. There Agabus, a well-known prophet of the Lord, whom we have also met before, in that dramatic, visual way by which Orientals illustrate truth so beautifully, took Paul's sash from around his waist and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit is saying to you, Paul. If you go on to Jerusalem, this is what will happen to you. You'll be delivered into the hands of the Gentiles. They will bind you, and you'll be a prisoner."

Taken in connection with the previous paragraph, it is clear that this was the last effort made by the Holy Spirit to awaken the apostle to what he was doing. Agabus was joined in this by the whole body of believers. The whole family present urged him not to go, Luke included. We read, "When we heard this, we and the people there begged him not to go up to Jerusalem." So even his close associates recognized the voice of the Spirit, to which the apostle seemed strangely deaf. He refused to listen.

And in Paul's reply to them we can detect that, without quite realizing what has happened, he has succumbed to what today we call a "martyr complex." His words are brave and sincere and earnest. He meant every word of them. He said, "Why are you weeping, and breaking my heart? Why do you make it difficult for me? I'm determined to go on to Jerusalem, and I'm ready to die there." We can find no fault with the bravery and courage expressed in those words. But it was not necessary for him to go, and the Spirit had told him not to go.

Here we see what can happen to a man of God when he is misled by an urgent hunger to accomplish a goal which God has not given him to do. The flesh had deceived Paul and evidently he saw himself as doing what the Lord did in his final journey up to Jerusalem. The Gospel accounts say that Jesus steadfastly set his face to go there, determined to go against all the pleading and the warnings of his own disciples. Paul must have seen

himself in that role. But Jesus had the Spirit's witness within that this was the will of the Father for him, while Paul had exactly the opposite. The Spirit had made crystal clear that he was not to go to Jerusalem, had finally put in almost the same terms employed by the angel toward Balaam, who, riding upon his ass, was determined to do his own will: "Stop going up to Jerusalem!"

When Paul refused to be persuaded his friends said, "Well, may the will of the Lord be done." That is what you say when you do not know what else to say. That is what you pray when you do not know how else to act. They are simply saying, "Lord, it is up to you. We can't stop this man. He has a strong will and a mighty determination, and he's deluded into thinking that this is what you want. Therefore, you will have to handle it. May the will of the Lord be done." The will of the Lord was done, and that is what the rest of this account will trace for us.

In the next section we learn of the welcome Paul and his party received in Jerusalem.

Here Luke makes clear what Paul's mistake was not.

We have already seen what it was: A blind urgency to accomplish what he thought God wanted done, despite clear directions otherwise. Some scholars feel that perhaps his difficulty was created by a doctrinal error on his part. But I think Luke has been especially led of the Holy Spirit to record this next section in order to show us that such was not the case:

**When he had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James; and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed; they are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs." {Acts 21:17-21 RSV}**

Many have misread this and concluded that Paul's mistake was that he did not boldly acknowledge that he did set aside Moses and the Law, that he did reject circumcision as of no value whatsoever, as you read in his letters to the Colossians and Galatians, for example. But the key phrase is, "that you teach all the Jews" to do so. That charge was totally false. Paul never taught a Jew to abandon Moses, or not to circumcise his children. What he strongly taught was that the Gentiles should not be made subject to these Jewish provisions. He utterly would not allow them to come under the Jewish Law and insisted that they did not have to follow any of these Jewish provisions. But he did not set aside the ritual for the Jews.

Rather, he pointed out to them that this was all symbolic, was all a picture, and that it was all pointing toward Christ. The very rituals they were performing and the sacrifices they were offering were all telling them of Jesus in no uncertain terms. Jesus' coming had fulfilled, and filled out, the picture that the Old Testament sacrifices had drawn. Thus, in the very process of carrying them out, the Jews were simply retelling themselves of the coming of the Lord Jesus. These observances were very much like the Lord's table is for us today.

We go through this ritual every so often -- about once a month here. We know that we are dealing with symbols. There is a sense in which those symbols are telling again the story of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Doing this does not add anything spiritual to us. In itself, it does not make us any better, but it reminds us.

This was the function of these Jewish rituals. They were reminders of what the Lord Jesus had come to do, and had done. All through the book of Acts we see Jewish Christians going into the temple and offering sacrifices, just as the Lord himself had done. There is no suggestion that they should have stopped, or that it was wrong for them to do this. Until God took the sacrifices away they were permitted this means of expression. The sacrifices ended when the temple was finally destroyed in A.D. 70, when the words of Jesus were fulfilled and Roman armies came and laid siege to the city. His words of warning were, "When you see

Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then flee into the mountains, for then shall be fulfilled all that has been predicted," {cf, Matt 24:66ff, Mark 13:14ff, Luke 21:21ff}. The city was taken and the Jews were carried away captive, exactly as the Lord Jesus said. But that was several years still in the future from this point in history. So there is no compromise on Paul's part when, as we read in this next section, he took upon himself certain Jewish practices.

James said to him,

**"What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you but that you yourself live in observance of the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity." Then Paul took the men and the next day he purified himself with them and went into the temple, to give notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for every one of them. {Acts 21:22-26 RSV}**

Here Paul was following his own announced practice. He said that when he was with the Jews, he became as a Jew; when he was with the Gentiles, he became as a Gentile; and when he was with the weak, he limited himself and became as weak as they -- all in order that he might reach them on their level, through the medium and culture to which they were accustomed. He was simply declaring again the freedom he had in Christ. He was free -- free to live as a Gentile among the Gentiles, free to live as a Jew among the Jews, free from the Law, but free also to keep the Law if there were certain advantages to be gained by so doing.

So he adopts this Jewish practice, and there is absolutely nothing wrong in that. He is willing to become as a Jew, along with these others, in order that he might clear up a misunderstanding which had a totally false basis. It is interesting that, as you read the account which follows of the trouble he met in Jerusalem, you can see that not one bit of it was ever a consequence of his Jewish practices. The trouble which broke out, as we will see in our next study together, was due simply to his presence in Jerusalem, where he had no business to be.

There is a deep lesson here for all of us, one which strikes particularly deeply into my own heart. It is that experience, long continued Christian experience, and spiritual insight, and understanding of Scripture, are no guarantees against failure, against missing the mind of God. That is why we often see men and women who have been greatly used of God for years and years, decades even, suddenly fail in some way and cast a blot upon their ministry, sometimes terribly so. This again indicates to us the deadliness of the enemy we are up against. The flesh can bide its time. It can wait out long periods of subjugation, of our victory in Christ, and then can catch us off guard -- especially by awakening a desire which seems to be right, seems to be exactly what God would want done.

Now, the Spirit of God, as he was with Paul, is always faithful to warn us. We need not stumble blindly into this trap, any more than Paul needed to, but what this great study shows us is that we must be very careful to be obedient to the Spirit's voice. When he checks us, clearly and unmistakably, we are to obey. Otherwise we simply open ourselves up to unnecessary heartache, unnecessary limitation and restriction, as the apostle did here.

But God did not abandon him, did not forsake him. He picked him up and used him in great power, turned those very limitations into opportunities for the advance of his cause. But Paul himself had to undergo deprivation, heartache, and suffering which he need not have endured, had he been obedient to the Holy Spirit.

God help us to learn this -- that even a mighty apostle can fail in faith at times. Scripture is always honest with us and records for us the failures of even a man like Paul. May this serve as a lesson to us that only as we walk in obedience to the voice of God and to the clear directions of the Word of God, only then can we find our way through all the pitfalls that await us throughout life.

## Prayer:

This is a serious moment for us, Father, as we see that we cannot take our strength for granted, and that sin does not die of old age, but that we are always exposed to the possibility of failure as long as we are in this life. We thank you for recording so faithfully for us even this failure by the apostle, partial as it was. It is so helpful in letting us see how we must rely not upon the arm of the flesh but upon the arm of the Spirit. Teach us to walk in obedience, Lord, and not to venture out upon that which would be merely the fulfillment of a great desire on our part -- especially against the warnings of the Holy Spirit. We ask in His name, Amen.

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Title: Paul's Mistake  
By: Ray C. Stedman  
Series: The Prisoner of the Lord  
Scripture: Acts 21:1-26  
Message No: 1  
Catalog No: 445  
Date: February 7, 1971

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