

# THE PATH OF MOST RESISTANCE

SERIES: SENT: LIVING THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH.



Catalog No. 20170430  
Acts 21:1–22:29  
29th Message  
Paul Taylor  
April 30, 2017

*Acts 21:1–22:29*

When I was in high school, I was on the wrestling team. But the reason that I wrestled was always a bit of a mystery to me. I really didn't like wrestling. I liked being part of a team, but I didn't enjoy the sport all that much. It didn't help that I lost most of the time.

One of the things that I liked least about wrestling was travelling to out-of-town tournaments. I'd have to wake up early. Really early. I'd show up at school. Get on an old school bus. Travel two or three hours to a different city (and without a phone to entertain myself along the way). Arrive at an unfamiliar gym where all the high schoolers looked like Olympians. Then after all that, I'd have to wrestle. Most likely lose. Wait around for the rest of my team to lose. Then get back on the bus and go home.

I never enjoyed those days. The feeling that I remember in particular was sitting on the bus, riding to those tournaments. I remember the feeling in the pit of my stomach. The feeling was the dictionary definition of dread: to anticipate with great apprehension or fear. That's what I was doing. That's what I felt in my stomach.

I've felt that feeling at various times in the years since and it always brings me back to sitting on an old, bumpy school bus early in the morning traveling to a wrestling tournament.

I hope that isn't how you feel this morning as I begin this sermon. Today we're continuing in our series called *SENT: Living the Mission of the Church*. We're nearing the end of our time walking through the story of the book of Acts and asking how God's work among the earliest believers is a model for God sending us out into the world.

Today, we'll see the story of Paul returning to Jerusalem after the last of his missionary journeys. But as he does so, he is aware that nothing good awaits him. He knows that he is headed into a difficult situation. He is repeatedly warned. But still he goes forward. Still he goes to Jerusalem. And sure enough, what awaits him there is chaos and conflict and confusion.

After all that Paul has already done for the sake of the Gospel, he now begins his final journey. Eventually this journey will bring him to Rome. What amazes me is Paul's willingness to do what he knows is going to be an incredibly difficult task. There are easier ways to get to Rome. But it becomes clear that this is the way God has asked Paul to get there. And it turns out that God has not called Paul to an easy task, but to the path of most resistance.

We don't know whether Paul felt that sense of dread that I felt on my way to wrestling tournaments. He might have been the kind of guy who looked forward to being misunderstood, stirring up a riot, getting beaten, and arrested. But I doubt that he looked forward to the pain that was involved. He was headed for something very difficult, and he knew it.

Paul may have been the kind of person that looked forward to suffering. But I'm not. And I'm willing to bet that you aren't either. What do we do when we face difficult situations? How do we handle it when God asks us to do something that we are afraid of? How do we muster the courage to walk into a situation that we know very well might blow up in our face? What can we expect of God in those situations?

I don't know what kind of situation you might be facing this morning. I don't know what you're wrestling with. But I think this story can encourage you. It might have been the path of most resistance, but we're going to see how it becomes the path that God has chosen. We're going to see God's goodness and his direction, even amidst the conflict.

## Getting to Jerusalem

The story we're focusing on this morning is from a large block of Scripture—most of chapters 21 and 22. We'll be taking snapshots from the text as we walk through everything that happens.

### Acts 21:1-3:

**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. 2 And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. 3 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.**

This part of the story is the written version of those videos where you move through scenes very quickly. It's almost like time-lapse. Cos to Rhodes to Patara to Phoenicia to Cyprus to Syria to Tyre.

But the story slows down two different times. Both of those cases are people trying to get Paul to change his mind about heading to Jerusalem.

### Acts 21:4:

**And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.**

The disciples in Tyre were telling Paul, "through the Spirit" not to go to Jerusalem. Then we hear of several other cities that Paul passes through before the action slows down again in Caesarea.

### Acts 21:11-12:

**And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" 12 When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.**

In two different places, Paul is warned by people speaking through the Spirit that terrible things await him in Jerusalem. His friends desperately beg him not to keep going. Why would you knowingly go somewhere when you know that it is going to be filled with grief and pain? Nobody can understand it.

Finally, Paul responds to all these warnings.

### Acts 21:13-14:

**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 in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." 14 And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."**

On the one hand, God is making it clear that suffering awaits him in Jerusalem. On the other hand, God is also making it clear that Jerusalem is exactly where he is supposed to go.

Paul's response to this situation is to say that he is ready to do whatever it takes for him to follow Jesus. He is willing even to lay down his life if that's what it takes.

This response is one of the distinguishing marks of a follower of Jesus. Most people spend a lot of their energy trying to avoid suffering. Find comfort. Ease pain. Make life easier. But Jesus said something about his followers being willing to take up their crosses, just like he did. Jesus said something about laying down your life as the most powerful demonstration of love.

In fact, the path that the apostle Paul is following in this section mirrors the path that Jesus takes in his last days. Jesus went to Jerusalem, knowing that God had the worst possible thing waiting for him there. Jesus wasn't looking forward to it. But he followed God's call to Jerusalem.

Paul is doing what Jesus did. He is doing what anyone who follows Jesus must do at some point. Walk toward suffering instead of away from it. Knowing the pain that waits for him, he goes to Jerusalem.

What are you facing? Where is God asking you to go? Maybe it is a relationship that you know you need to work on, but you just don't want to face it. Maybe it is an effort that you don't know whether it will be successful, but you sense you have to give it a try. Maybe it is a conflict that you need to walk into and sort out. Maybe it is faith itself. Maybe you sense Jesus calling you to put your faith in him. But you're just not sure you want to give up control.

Whatever it is, you can say the words that Paul's companions said: "Let the will of the Lord be done." You can walk toward suffering instead of away from it. You can go to Jerusalem.

The recent movie *Hacksaw Ridge* tells the story of a young soldier named Desmond Doss. Desmond joins the army as a medic. And after one particularly terrible battle, he heads back into enemy territory to rescue his injured brothers in arms. Over and over again, he heads back into the danger of battle to do what he has been called to do as a medic.

It's a powerful story of how following Jesus gives people this amazing willingness to face suffering. To courageously go to places where we know pain waits for us.

The surprising thing about this kind of willingness is that it isn't fierce determination. It isn't a gritted teeth, clenched fist insistence to force yourself to go where God wants you to go.

Somehow, and this is the mystery of God's Spirit, he gives you the willingness. The willingness to go to Jerusalem is a gift. It's a gift that you can't manufacture. You can't create it yourself. You can't force yourself to be willing to go to Jerusalem.

God gives this to you. That doesn't make it easy. That doesn't take away the suffering or even lessen the sting. And it is still a choice you have to make. But you have this willingness to follow Jesus into hard places.

Whatever you're facing, ask God to give you a new perspective. Ask God to give you the willingness to go there. Ask Him to go there with you. He's been to the darkest places of suffering imaginable. He'll go with you wherever he's asking you to go.

Where is your Jerusalem? Are you willing to go there?

## Facing Conflict

Paul is willing to go to Jerusalem. When he gets there, the first thing he does is to meet with the elders in Jerusalem and report to them everything that God had done during his travels. In particular, he tells them about all that God has done "among the Gentiles through his ministry."

This is how they respond.

## Acts 21:20-22:

**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, 21 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 walk according to our customs. 22 What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.**

Have you ever come to your spouse or a friend or a coworker with some great news that you're really excited about? You got the job, or the project worked out, or your application was accepted? You're hoping for enthusiasm, but you get something less than what you hoped for? It seems like whoever you are sharing with has their own problems they are dealing with that prevent them from really being excited with you?

I can't help but think that is what Paul must have felt about the elders' response in Jerusalem. He has seen the power of God in ways that he never thought possible. He never imagined God would include the Gentiles in his plan of salvation. This is incredible!

He shares the good news with the elders in Jerusalem. And they say, "That's great. But all of that great stuff happening among the Gentiles is causing a huge headache for us."

The elders in Jerusalem are scared. They believe that God is doing something among the Gentiles, but they are scared. They are afraid of all the conflict that is being caused. So they ask Paul to help smooth things over. They want him to pacify all the Jews in Jerusalem by doing a "good Jew" kind of thing. They ask him to fulfill a vow at the temple and pay for several other people fulfilling their vows as well.

So he does it.

This decision is almost as incredible as his willingness to go to Jerusalem in the first place. In fact, many critical scholars say that this part of Acts can't possibly be true because the real apostle Paul would never do this. The author of Galatians and Romans who talked about freedom from the Law would never submit to the Law and put on this kind of a show.

But Paul wasn't submitting to the Law. He was submitting to God. He'll do whatever it takes. He isn't just a Gentile to the Gentiles. He's a Jew to the Jews. So he did what they asked to avoid a huge meltdown. He tried to minimize the conflict. He did all that he could to bring peace to the situation.

But he failed. After seven days, Paul was spotted near the temple. Read what happened as a group of Jews make accusations against him.

**Acts 21:28-30:**

**“Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even 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, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. 30 Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut.**

Paul did all that he could to avoid conflict. But still “all the city was stirred up.” Despite his best efforts, everything blew up in his face. The riot was so great that the Roman tribune had to intervene. Paul was arrested. The crowd was crazy and violent. Paul had to be removed for his own safety.

Has this happened to you? You knew something might happen, so you did your best to make sure you avoided it. And then despite your best efforts, it blew up anyway. It's like watching a train wreck in slow motion. The very thing that you were afraid of, the thing that you worked so hard to avoid, the worst possible outcome. Nothing you could do would stop it.

I think Paul knew this would happen. I think he knew there was nothing he could do to avoid the conflict that God's inclusion of the Gentiles would cause. But again, he was willing to face it. He was able to face the conflict.

I don't like conflict. I don't like saying difficult things to people. I like things to be smooth. I want my family and my friendships and my church to be easy and peaceful. I hate that feeling in the pit of my stomach when people are upset, and I don't know what to do to fix it.

Honestly, that makes being sent into our culture really difficult. The very idea of being a Christian in this area is filled with assumptions and misunderstandings.

Politically, people make all sorts of assumptions about Christians. Intellectually, you lose more than a few respect points for believing in Jesus. There are questions about the treatment of women. Conflict over positions that Christians have taken about same-sex relationships and marriage. Theological questions about the role of other religions.

Being sent into our culture is not that unlike Paul being sent to Jerusalem. It's impossible to mention the name of Jesus Christ without being labeled, prejudiced, and misunderstood. You might do everything in your power to bring peace and clarity, but it still might blow up in your face. You just can't win.

Recently I found an article giving seven different steps to avoid conversations about religion. The suggestions ranged from faking a phone call, to taking an emergency trip to the bathroom, to making a joke about losing religion after your sports team lost their big game.<sup>1</sup>

The reputation of the evangelical church in America seems to me to be at an all-time low. Particularly in our area of the country. People make all sorts of assumptions about our politics, personalities and prejudices if we acknowledge that we attend an evangelical Christian church.

So how is it possible for us to be sent into our world with a message about Jesus Christ when it is so likely to cause conflict? How can we manage to avoid being misunderstood? How can we navigate all the assumptions that people make about us because we go to church?

Well, you can avoid it. You can refuse to talk about it. You can save your spiritual life for Sunday morning. You can keep your faith in your heart and your home. That works pretty well. If your goal is to avoid conflict, that strategy works pretty well.

But that's not what Paul did. He faced into conflict. He didn't go looking for it, but he was ready for it. And as he does, he gives us some help in how we might face into it as well. Somehow, even in the midst of a violent, angry crowd who had falsely accused him, Paul managed to see the purposes of God and respond in love.

## Reflecting the story of Jesus

He begins by asking to speak with the angry mob.

**Acts 22:1:**

**“Brothers and fathers, hear the defense that I now make before you.”**

But Paul’s defense is not defensive. Even though people are mad at him and misunderstand him and have falsely accused him, Paul sees this not as an opportunity to defend himself, but to proclaim the life-giving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

**Acts 22:3:**

**I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day.**

Remember that this whole situation began because some people assumed that he brought an Ephesian named Trophimus into the temple. That would have been a huge violation of Jewish custom. But he didn’t do that. He did everything right. He was falsely accused.

If you had an angry mob that wanted to kill you for something that you didn’t do, what would you say to them? Wouldn’t you start by explaining that they’ve got it all wrong? They don’t have to be upset because you didn’t do it.

You have probably never had an angry mob that wants to kill you. But you might have had angry friends or upset parents or a hurt spouse or a confused co-worker. And isn’t your first instinct always to defend yourself? To explain that they misunderstood you? Or if you did do it to show them why it made sense at the time?

Paul doesn’t do that. His defense is not defensive. Instead, he tells his story. But not just his story. He tells the story of Jesus.

Paul starts by sharing his almost perfect resume for a Jew. He is a Jew of all Jews. He is one of them. He wants them to know that he is just as passionate as they are about the things of God. Having established himself as a faithful Jew, he goes on to describe how he met Jesus.

**Acts 22:6-8:**

**“As I was on my way and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone around me. 7 And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’ 8 And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.’**

By telling his story, Paul is doing something brilliant. He’s inviting his listeners to put themselves in his place. He shows them that he was just like them. Then he tells them what happened when he encountered Jesus. It forces them to consider the question, “What would I have done? How would I have responded if I encountered Jesus in that way?”

One of the most powerful things that we have is the power of our own stories. Maybe you’ve met Jesus. Maybe you are investigating faith. What is your story? How have you seen God at work?

We don’t have to defend ourselves. We don’t have to explain the misunderstandings. We don’t have to convince people to think the way that we think. But conflict gives us an opportunity to tell our story. We can go back to our encounter with Jesus. Conflict gives us an open door to reflect our story with Jesus.

What is your story with Jesus? Who were you before you met him? How has Jesus made himself real to you in your life?

Think again about our culture. All the confusion about politics and gender and sexuality and theology and history. When we face into those kinds of conflict, do we really want to try and explain all of those intricacies so that we are well understood? Is our goal to defend ourselves and defend the system of Christianity? What if our goal were to invite people to encounter Jesus for themselves through our own stories?

Many of the people around us couldn’t even imagine going to an “evangelical church.” But we are not that different from them. We are from the same kinds of families; we work in the same kinds of jobs; we have similar views on politics and economic policy and international priorities. It’s just that some of us here have encountered the risen Lord Jesus. And that has made all the difference.

Most of us who follow Jesus don't do so because we agree with everything about the evangelical church. We may have many of the same questions that the people we know are asking. We don't offer a perfect air-tight system to the world. We offer the person of Jesus Christ.

But more than that, we offer them our story with Jesus.

Next weekend we won't meet for worship here in this building. Instead, we will worship out in our community as we participate in projects at several local schools. But make no mistake about what we are doing. Beautiful Day is not about renovated playgrounds and freshly painted rooms.

The whole purpose of what we will do next week is to offer the community that we live in the story of Jesus. In practical ways, we will show them how Jesus comes into broken situations and heals them. Our paint and mulch and gift baskets will be a representation of the healing and redemption that Jesus offers to everyone he encounters.

We go to schools because Jesus went to the places that people cared about the most. Around here, schools are the perfect intersection of children, family, government, neighborhood and community. And if there is one thing that people care about more than anything else around here, it is educating their children.

Some have asked why we are going to a school in Palo Alto since they have so much money in their school district. If money saved kids, then we wouldn't need to go to Palo Alto. But having a lot of money certainly doesn't make Palo Alto schools any better off spiritually. And who is going to tell the story of Jesus in Palo Alto if we don't?

So next week our actions will tell the story of Jesus. It will give us the opportunity for our words to do the same. We are working side-by-side with teachers, principals, facility staff, parents, and children. Much of that work has already taken place. Our incredible Beautiful Day operations team and project leads and sub-leads have been sharing the story of Jesus for months as they listen and respond and face last minute changes and do everything they can to show God's love.

In fact, if Beautiful Day were only the prep work and we never got to the actual work, it would still be worth it.

Palo Alto and East Palo Alto and Mountain View – these are our Jerusalems. This is the community that God has called us to be sent into. Next week we go. Facing the confusion and misunderstanding and skepticism of our culture not with defensive explanations, but with a tangible demonstration of the story of Jesus.

What's your story with Jesus? How can you reflect it?

## Conclusion

Paul is willing to go to Jerusalem. He is willing to do his best to pacify the Jews. He is willing to face into the conflict. He is willing to speak to this angry mob. He avoids the temptation to defend himself, and he simply tells his story with Jesus.

But even his story with Jesus eventually gets to the difficult part. When he tells that crowd that God has sent him to the Gentiles, everything blows up again. At that point, they rise up and demand that he be put to death.

This gets him arrested by the Roman tribune. Then he claims his status as a Roman citizen. That kicks off the next part of his journey: the one that eventually brings him to Rome. Even when it blows up again and again and again, God's purposes can be served. All of this conflict and division and anger and misunderstand was all being used by God to get Paul to Rome.

God's purposes are always bigger than our own. Our little stories of courage and conflict all take place within the much larger scope of the work of God in the world. Whether we are "successful" or not doesn't matter. Through it all, God's purposes will prevail.

I think back to those days in high school when I would sit on a bus travelling to out of town wrestling tournaments. I remember the deep sense of dread that I had. For some reason, I was willing to submit myself to those experiences even though I didn't like them.

Looking back, I'm glad I faced that dread. I'm glad for those miserable bus rides. Because I do believe something good came of it. Character building or determination or something.

But anything good that came of my very unsuccessful wrestling career pales in comparison to the good that comes when we follow Jesus into the hard places that he asks us to go. When we follow Jesus into the difficulty or conflict or reconciliation that he asks us to face, the result is eternal. The Gospel of Jesus Christ takes one more step forward. The purposes of God are served. And people hear the life-giving message of Jesus Christ.

Following Jesus in Silicon Valley is not the path of least resistance. If you're looking for that, you're in the wrong place. In fact, the life of a disciple can sometimes be the path of most resistance.

But it is a path that leads to glory. It is a path that is filled with beauty. And it is a path that is driven by love. Follow Jesus where he leads you, even if it looks like it's going to hurt. He will give you the willingness. You are part of His work in the world. Your effort will be worth it.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> "How to Avoid Uncomfortable Conversations About Religion."  
*wikiHow*, [www.wikihow.com/Avoid-Uncomfortable-Conversations-About-Religion](http://www.wikihow.com/Avoid-Uncomfortable-Conversations-About-Religion). Accessed April 2017.