

On to Jerusalem

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[0:00] I preached on Acts when I was advancing tab and I realized that when I did it I stopped at chapter 20. I wonder why I stopped at chapter 20.

Maybe it was because chapter 21 was a difficult chapter to get your mind around. It's not an easy one, is it? It's not very much like everyday life in most contemporary evangelical churches. There's something a little bit different about it. It is a journey and the metaphor of a journey is kind of very popular today. Whether it be someone on a talent show talking about seeking to go on their journey to seek some fame and fortune as a singer or a magician or something. Or people who are moving towards a particular objective in their lives seeking to find some form of fulfillment. When teaching people to preach I say that it's a metaphor I don't particularly like. It's kind of overused. But this literally was a journey and it's kind of interesting tracing that journey that we had read to us. Which is a journey of about 620 miles along the coast from Ephesus all the way down to Jerusalem.

[1:43] And it reminds us that when we read these stories about Paul we do need to have a map in hand to get an idea of A to B.

Of course some people pay really good money don't they to take a cruise like that in the Mediterranean. There are even advertised cruises in the footsteps of St. Paul. Of course it doesn't involve the shipwreck or the beatings or the imprisonment. I guess that perhaps people wouldn't kind of pay for those particular supplements to their holiday. But it's a pretty familiar kind of trip that people might have taken in the last few years on a cruise or something. There's a TV program called Race Across the World in its third or fourth series. And at present there's an interesting group of contestants. A teenage couple. A young couple who are boyfriend and girlfriend. A divorced couple who decide to compete together.

[2:51] Which is strange from a number of angles. They have been eliminated. Two young sisters. A mother and a son. And two brothers in their mid to late 60s.

What's interesting about this attempt to go from A to B in China. Is that obviously when you have two people who are making decisions.

There needs to be some kind of flexibility. And sometimes when people are strong characters. One person decides that their decision is best.

And the other person has to struggle to persuade them. It is actually better to do another thing.

That's part of life isn't it? Part of life and relationships. That whenever there's more than one person. It's difficult to make up your mind. About the right thing to do. And even if you're one person. Some people struggle don't they? I used to be indecisive. But now I can't make up my mind. And it can be difficult to make decisions about key things in life.

[3:57] And we need lots of resources to do that. And we need wisdom. We need the word of God. We need the direction of the Holy Spirit. We need wise people around us.

And it's interesting to see how the decisions are made here in this story. So the Spirit of God who has been described as the main character in Acts.

There are three things that are said here in this chapter. Verse 4. That the brothers and sisters urge Paul by the Holy Spirit not to go to Jerusalem.

It's kind of an interesting thing. Very emphatic. By the Holy Spirit they urge him not to go to Jerusalem. And then he goes to the household of Philip. One of the seven from Acts chapter 6.

And we're told that he had four daughters who prophesied. And no more details. Just drop that line. That all four daughters exercised a prophetic ministry of some kind.

[5:05] Now not only was Philip finding it difficult to get into his bathroom. But he must have found it difficult to get in the word in edgeways. With these four girls who prophesied.

And then in verse 9 we have a man called Agabus. Who appeared in chapter 11. The end of chapter 11. Agabus. Saying that there is going to be a famine in the world around Judea and Jerusalem.

And it would be important to provide provisions for the Jerusalem church. And Paul and Barnabas take provisions. Financial provisions. Back to Jerusalem.

And Agabus makes his second appearance in Acts. And he performs a symbolic prophetic act. By taking a belt and using it to indicate the kind of future that Paul might have if he goes to Jerusalem. That he will be arrested. So he acts like the prophet Ezekiel with these kind of great acted parables. So there is this ministry of the Holy Spirit warning Paul not to go to Jerusalem.

[6:18] Christians can differ as to what they think are priorities. Because Paul is on a boat. He's got a ticket to Jerusalem.

That's where he's intending to go. And that's where he believes God wants him to go. More about that in a moment. But thinking about this passage that seems like a strange unfamiliar world to many contemporary evangelical Christians.

Particularly those who perhaps have a position that any kind of supernatural activity of the Holy Spirit ceased. After the closure of scripture.

What's this all about? Well it's kind of interesting isn't it? When you come to the Old Testament.

There's an incident where Moses chooses 70 people to be fellow leaders with him.

And the Holy Spirit comes upon all of them. But then there are two other people in the camp who are not included with the 70. And the Holy Spirit comes upon them as well.

[7:24] And Moses is approached and says. Well you know you ought to stamp this out. You know this could become a bit of a trend. You need to stop this. And Moses' reply was.

I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets. And that the Lord would put his spirit on them. It's kind of an interesting statement isn't it? That Moses wishes. That there would be a kind of sense of spiritual immediacy.

Amongst all of God's people. And of course there's a sense in which. That is fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. When the Holy Spirit is not. Simply moving upon special people like prophets.

And moving upon Jesus. But the Holy Spirit is now moving. Within the whole church. Of Jesus Christ. You know it's almost as if. In the Old Testament.

And in the New Testament. In the ministry of Jesus. There is a sense in which there's this kind of pipe. Coming down from heaven. And the Holy Spirit is pouring into individuals. But then at Pentecost.

[8:26] It's as though the pipe has been turned into a whole irrigation system. And there are now thousands. Millions. Billions of pipes. And the Holy Spirit pours into the lives of every individual.

And we are suddenly in touch with him. And what Peter says on the day of Pentecost is this. In the last days. God says I will pour out my spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions. Your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants. Both men and women. I will pour out my spirit in those days. And they will prophesy.

Now it seems to indicate. There is to be in the last days. Which most people would reckon to be. The period between the first and second coming of Jesus Christ.

A sense in which the people of God. Are a prophetic people. That causes problems for some people. It causes problems because there are some very zany claims by those who claim to be prophets.

[9:29] Someone has said that when prophets claim something which is going to happen. If it's true. It's not significant.

If it's significant. It's not true. And that can often be the case. And people can have their fingers burned. And can be greatly disappointed. By those who claim to be prophets.

But of course. What we have here is. Is not. An addition to scripture. It's not. A revelation of a new doctrine. It is. Kind of. A wise insight.

It's a sense. A gut feeling. And I think that within the church of Jesus Christ. We do have. And it's good to foster. People who develop spiritual intuition.

Who develop wisdom. Insight. A recognition of reading the times. Reading the moment. Sometimes that ability to say.

[10:27] Well I think in this particular situation. We need to do this. Or that. Because often in life. We are. At a crossroads. Where. We're facing two.

Apparently. Equally. Open. Possibilities. And we need wisdom. To. Know. The difference. But here. There are two. Different ways of looking. At this particular situation. So that the brothers. And Agabus are saying. Don't. Go. To Jerusalem. We've got a bad feeling.

About you going to Jerusalem. But. I guess last week. You looked at these words. In chapter. 20. Verses. 20. Through to. 24.

You know that I have not. Hesitated to preach anything. That would be helpful. To you. Taught you publicly. And from house to house. I've declared. To both Jews and Greeks. They must turn to God.

[11:28] And repent. And have faith in the Lord Jesus. But now. Compelled by the spirit. I'm going to Jerusalem. Not knowing what will happen. To me there. I only know. That in every city.

The Holy Spirit. Warns me. That prison and hardships. Are facing me. However. I consider my life. Nothing to me. My only aim is to finish the race.

And complete the task. The Lord Jesus. Has given me. The task. Of testifying. To the good news. Of God's grace. If you've got a. A sophisticated.

Hi-fi system. And you sit down. In front of it. That the system. Will pick out. Some. Left speaker. And right speaker. Things.

I listen to a. Particular record. There are two guitarists. And you hear. One of the guitarists. The rock guitarist. And one guitarist. The jazz guitarist. One in one speaker. One in the other.

[12:22] And Paul is describing. This kind of. Stereophonic experience. That he has had himself. He's had this. Sense of the spirit. Saying to him.

You need to go to Jerusalem. But also. He's had this. The other. The other speaker. Saying. Well. It's going to be. Bad in Jerusalem. It's going to be.

A tough place. For you to go. And it seems to me. That what we have here. In this chapter. Is both those. Channels. Both those speakers.

Communicating. Paul is. Continuing. Continuing. With this sense. He needs to go to Jerusalem.

That he's not going to dodge. The suffering. That is there. Because after all. When he was called. In Acts chapter 9.

He was told. That. There are many things. He would suffer. For. For Christ. But the. The disciples. Who are warning him.

[13:16] Not to go to Jerusalem. Are hearing. This message. That. It's going to be really tough. In Jerusalem. It's going to be really hard. It's going to be. Potentially curtains. For the apostle. And.

And they are. Seeking to. Dissuade him from going. Because they don't want him to go. They want him. To stay. To stay. they're picking up the other side of the message and here they're warning the apostle perhaps God is seeking to strengthen Paul's resolve help him to make the decision to keep going what we do have here is a wonderful example of what we call clononia a wonderful example of believers rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep it's natural isn't it that friends will want to preserve you from difficulty it would be a strange person who says well you know I'm really glad that you're going to get arrested I'm really glad that you're going back there and going to face difficulties yet as someone has said our intuitions and insights need to be wisely assessed and scrutinized the need not to jump to the wrong conclusions we're doomed there is a threat in this message but there's also an opportunity they share their painful awareness of what might await the apostle and quite rightly they are concerned but it's a concern that's born out of love of clononia you want the best for the people that you care for and they want the best for the apostle now there's something very fascinating here about about fellowship and koinonia and there in

verses 12 and 14 you have the words we with the word we when we heard this Luke is writing so Luke is here on the boat when we heard this we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem then Paul answered why are you weeping and breaking my heart I'm not ready I'm ready not only to be bound but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus when he would not be dissuaded we gave up now this idea of fellowship you know Paul traveled with people there's only one instance in Athens where we read of him being alone he traveled with people and because Paul was a people person he loved having people around him just as Jesus loved to have people around him that's the wonderful gift of the church isn't it that we are not alone we have people who stand with us it tells us two things Luke being here it's fascinating that Luke's here he bumps into Philip and later on he bumps into James he's writing a two-part story of Jesus and the church and it's interesting that he bumps into those people who are able to give him those eyewitness testimonies that he says he's giving at the beginning of his gospel it's also fascinating because of the way that the matter is settled we sought to dissuade him but then we realized that he was going to go and we gave up and we said the Lord's will be done that's the ultimate settling isn't it of any dispute and sometimes when I'm praying for people that need direction

I'll pray things like Lord give them your mind help them to sense your will help them to know what you have in mind in this particular situation and sometimes it's not a kind of right or wrong it's a wise or unwise all things being equal kind of thing the Lord's will be done maybe there's an echo of Gethsemane here Luke writes his story in Acts as a journey just as he writes his gospel story as a journey there are similar things in it there are there is this movement towards arrest there is this assertion of innocence of Jesus and we'll see the assertion of the innocence of Paul three times in this book the book of Acts and we have that experience of Jesus in the garden take the cup from me yet not my will but yours be done we're seeing the two speakers there aren't we the speaker that speaks about the way that Jesus was taking as we read in Luke's gospel he set his face to go to Jerusalem and yet there is the shrinking back from the horror of the cross the reality of what was facing him at Jerusalem and that's what we've got here the tension of the disciples saying we just can't bear to be part with you Paul and we can't bear to think of what might come to you if you go to Jerusalem and the apostle affirming that he's going because the ultimate thing is what God wants maybe that's a question that ought to be asked more often in our lives and more often in our churches what does God want you know we know what we want and sometimes we kind of push for what we want but the ultimate thing is what does God want we're not quite finished yet Paul arrives and he arrives to a warm welcome the koinonia continues to be working the welcome continues to be working there in verse 17 and Paul has the opportunity to share with James and the elders and the authorities in Jerusalem the things that he's been doing and we read there that they are they praise God verse 20 because of all that they heard about what God had been doing there but then there is the beginning of disagreement between them and the apostle then they said to Paul you see brother how many thousands of Jews have believed and all of them are zealous for the law they've been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses telling them not to circumcise their children or to live according to our customs now when I was a student at Bible school in my 20s

[20:22] I found the movement that was a movement for reconstruction very compelling not least because of its eschatology an optimistic eschatology about the future which is a great antidote to the kind of pessimism that I've kind of been brought up with but they also people like Rushdune and Banson argued that there should be a restoration of the Old Testament law that the church should restore all of the ceremonial law now kind of think about that it was it was seeking to reintroduce a layer of legalism to the church which the church has been set free from through the gospel kind of fascinating that's the latter part of the 20th century and here the apostle is being told by the folks in

Jerusalem well you know Jewish believers they're believing in the Lord Jesus Christ but they they don't want to jeson all of their their culture and the cultural expressions of their faith and they want to they want to incorporate these two things and these customs not to go beyond the gospel but to kind of live in a in a culturally relevant way in their particular time and and culture what should we do about this you know because you know we've been taught that that you you teach something quite

different what should we do about this now when you're kind of in fellowship with other believers particularly with great mobility and in a place like Brighton you know different people move to different places they come from different backgrounds different faces different places and sometimes they come with different spiritual backgrounds and ideas and sometimes actually getting that to cohere can be a little bit challenging because people can mean different things by the same term some people's understanding of how church operates and how Christians live can be just a little bit different cultural differences what do we do about that how do we help people to blend together as the church of Jesus Christ what shall we do about this well jokingly I think you are free to do what we tell you you are free to do what we tell you so verse 23 so do what we tell you there are four men with us who have made a vow take these men join in their purification rights pay their expenses so that they can have their head shaved and everyone will know that there is no truth in these reports about you but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law and let's be clear they say verse 25 as for the Gentile believers you have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrifice to idols from blood from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality we settle that matter

Gentiles can be included in the church of Jesus Christ they don't need to become Jews they don't need to be circumcised we're sensitive to living in Jerusalem living in Israel amongst Jewish believers and it would be a simple concession for you to do this in order to show your love for your solidarity for these believers here in Jerusalem John Stott said the issue between them concerned culture ceremony and tradition the solution to which they came was not a compromise in the sense of sacrificing a doctrinal or moral principle but a concession in the area of practice Paul writes about this when he writes to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 9 he says to the Jews I became like a Jew to win the Jews to those under the law I became like one under the law though I myself am not under the law to win them those under the law to those without the law I became like one without the law though I am not outside the law of God but am under the law of Christ to win those without the law to the weak I became weak that I might win the weak I became all things to all people that by all means I might save some what we have here is gospel flexibility the willingness to recognise that there are kind of things which you don't flex on who Jesus is the death and resurrection of Christ the authority of scripture you don't flex on those things but there are things that you do flex on cultural issues cultural differences between different Christians now maybe Anya would identify with this when in 1993

[25:59] I first went to Latvia I was told you know you can't preach without a jacket and if you wear a jacket don't put your hand in your pocket of your jacket and I nearly asked my wife to sew up my pockets so I wouldn't be tempted to put my hands in my pockets now those things are not written in the Bible but they were cultural things and I kind of knew that if I complied with those cultural wishes it was a lot easier for people to hear me preaching because they were not thinking all the time that man has not got a jacket on or that man has got his hands in his pockets being aware of cultural things I was also told if you gave flowers to someone you know very important thing give flowers to someone you give them in odd numbers so odd numbers means a happy occasion if you give even numbers it means someone has died so you kind of give a lady a dozen roses in Latvia and it's not the same message as it would be here it's kind of saying who's died you know being aware of cultural difference and being sensitive cultural difference is so very important

Martin Luther said this a Christian is perfectly free lord subject to none a Christian is perfectly dutiful servant of all subject to all the apostle is a champion of Christian freedom but willing to be flexible about the exercise of his freedom and I think this chapter both stories the story of Paul and the brothers and Agabus and Paul and the brothers in Jerusalem reminds us that if you're in the church of Jesus Christ you're called not to live for yourself but to live for other people because after all we are serving Jesus Christ aren't we and the Lord Jesus Christ did not do his own thing he gave himself he did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many the Lord Jesus Christ's flexibility stretches all the way from heaven to earth to the cross to the grave in order to win us if the son of God can exercise such flexibility so can we yet we can cross our arms and say this is where I stand I can do no other now about certain things that's a good thing the things

that are in our statement of faith but it means cultural matters just hang loose hang loose not a biblical term but a biblical idea be flexible spirit loves the flexibility of responding to him as the wind like a like a vessel moving on the waters it sails filled moving in the direction of the tiller the tiller that is being guided by Christ the head of the church let's pray heavenly father we come to you and thank you that you have placed stories like this in your word we believe in

God father son and holy spirit and we believe that you are able to direct your people thank you for the gift of your word scripture and we thank you for the biblical gifts of wisdom biblical gifts of insight that you give to people within the church to help us to understand scripture and to help us to read our times father god we pray for ourselves individually as a church that we might have a greater sensitivity both to you as you direct us by your spirit and to each other and the circumstances that we're in father god we pray that you help us to be inflexible on those things that never change but learn to be flexible about those things that come and go and that are different in various cultures lord we come to you and chiefly we say your kingdom come your will be done on earth as it is in heaven father today perhaps we are in that circumstance where we're wondering what to do what to say what to choose we pray father that we would know your mind your will the lord's will be done for we ask it in

Jesus name amen