

SUMMER 6 - Acts 16-28 - Eyes Fixed on Jerusalem

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[0 : 00] and that our lives might be lived in dedication to him and obedience to him. And we pray all of these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, early in the second century, a man in the province of Asia gathered together legends and traditions about the Apostle Paul.

It was an act of honour on his part, that is, he wanted to honour the Apostle's memory and so he collected information from the whole area, in fact, of Paul's activity, from Damascus through to Rome.

And he drew on his own imagination and provided links between the little bits of information that he'd gathered, as often historians do. Well, in this account, he gives a description of the Apostle Paul.

It comes from the mouth of a man called Onesiphorus. Now, Onesiphorus at this particular church had never met Paul and he'd been given the job by his church of meeting and welcoming the Apostle Paul to their church.

So he takes his wife and his children and he sets out to meet the great Apostle. Before long, a figure advanced toward them. And he records that Paul was a short man, I like that little bit, that he was bald.

[1 : 17] Now, I'm coming that way myself. His legs were crooked, I'm not sure about that. Anyway, his eyebrows were thick and they met across the bridge of his nose and his nose itself was somewhat hooked. His face beamed with openness and with friendliness.

Now, I need to say we have no idea at all whether that story is true or not. Nor do we know if the description is accurate. I wouldn't be surprised if it's basically true because it sounds like the description of a fairly ordinary Jewish man.

And my guess is you might be able to describe many other Jewish men in similar terms. But what I want to do tonight is to do some imagining and I want you to sit back and imagine this ordinary Jewish man.

And I want to take you into his world. And I want you to listen to a story that is taken from part of his life. My approach today is going to be slightly different from usual.

I'm going to take passages from Paul's letters and I'm then going to work through the passage that we have for tonight. I'm not actually going to do a normal sort of exposition of it. I'm just going to run through the story because I want you to get a feel for this man.

[2 : 22] I've listed some key elements of what I say and put key verses that you can look up or follow with me. And if you open your outline, you'll see them there. So let's get started. The first thing we find out about Paul is that Paul is a Jew.

He's from the tribe of Benjamin, which is an elite tribe of Israel, as it were. He's a full-blooded Jew, a Jew who has been confronted by Jesus and a Jew who has in response embraced Jesus.

So here he is, a Jewish Christian who's been commissioned by Jesus to speak the gospel to the Gentiles. Now, by the time we reach our particular story, he has spoken the gospel to the Gentiles in most of the western part of the Roman Empire.

If you have a look in your outline, the last page, so turn right to the back, you'll see a map of where, of his last missionary journey. And if you like, if you were to draw a line through Greece and Archaea, which you can see there, and you were to sort of, there's the line you draw vertically, he has basically preached in what he knows of the world east of there.

It's in a massive amount of evangelism that he's done. He's preached, he's planted churches from Jerusalem, all around Asia and across to Greece. His ministry has been so extensive that in many ways he thinks he's run out of places to preach west of Rome, or east of Rome.

[3 : 50] And so he's thought and he's prayed about his future ministry. And he's reached a decision. He has decided that he will go to Rome. And then after Rome, he will head off to the eastern parts of the empire, sorry, western parts of the empire, he'll go on to Spain.

And before he does though, he's got to finish some current business that he's engaged in. And that business is to take a collection that he's been gathering from his churches to the poor Jerusalem Christians.

He'll report to Jerusalem. And so he makes his journey, stopping every now and then to say final farewells to his converts, because he anticipates he may never see them again.

And as he gets closer and closer to Jerusalem, his conviction that he's on the right track in his ministry grows. And so do the indications that Jerusalem will be for him a place of persecution and of pain.

Now, according to Acts chapter 20, verse 17, every time Paul stops in a city or just about every time, the Holy Spirit tells him that imprisonment and persecutions await him.

[4 : 57] But he presses on toward Jerusalem, on toward Jerusalem through Ephesus in Acts chapter 20. Then we reach our passage today in Acts chapter 21, where Paul goes two roads and from there to Patara, verses, verse one and two, past Cyprus, verse three, onto Tyre on the border of the Mediterranean Sea, verse three, and at Tyre, he searches for a group of Christian believers and he finds them.

And through the Holy Spirit, they tell Paul not to go on to Jerusalem, verse four. And Paul listens. But again, he decides that he's, despite the advice, he's going to press on to Jerusalem.

According to him, sorry, after all, according to Acts chapter 20, verse 22, it's the spirit himself who has directed him to journey on to Jerusalem.

You see, it's to the spirit that he's captive. And so Paul presses on in Acts in verses five and six. He prays with his friends, says goodbye, hops on a ship yet again, resolutely pushes on toward Jerusalem.

Next major stop is Caesarea. And, and after a day, he spends, uh, in Ptolemae and in Caesarea, he stays at the house of one Philip, the evangelist, verse eight. And, uh, he meets Philip's four unmarried daughters who have the gift of prophecy.

[6 : 13] And while he's staying there, another prophet arrives from Judea. Agabus is the same prophet who in Acts chapter 11, 28 had predicted a worldwide famine in the reign of Claudius.

Uh, he, you see, he's a man of repute and of standing. Uh, he also is a man who knows the Jerusalem scene well. And it's this man who in verse 11 reaches out and takes Paul's belt.

Now don't think jeans and belts, probably a long, uh, you know, flowing coat, a robe and so on. He takes the, the belt off the middle of it. And, uh, he binds his own hands and feet with the belt in a demonstrated prophecy.

And then he announces its meaning in verse 11. The Holy Spirit says in this way, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt. And hand him over to the Gentiles.

And, and all the Christian brothers and sisters in Philip's household here, and they see this prophecy. And they plead with Paul to have some common sense. They beg him, don't go into the fray in Jerusalem.

[7 : 16] As Jesus would not turn back from God's destiny for him in Jerusalem, nor will Paul though. He's going to press on. He tells him he'll do anything for Jesus. He's ready to be bound.

He's ready even to die in Jerusalem for the name of Jesus. For he has bound himself to Jesus. He's captive to the spirit. He will not be deterred. And Luke records that when he and the others could not, when, that is when Luke and the others could not dissuade him, they gave up and they said, the Lord's will be done.

Now, so it is. Paul leaves and goes to another place, onward toward Jerusalem. There's no doubt, is there? All the voices say the same thing.

Even Paul's own voice. It is not a great fate that awaits him in Jerusalem. There is no doubt what is there. Finally, in verse 17, Paul and his company actually arrive.

And at first, everyone's fears and warnings seem to be quite ill-founded. The welcome in Jerusalem is warm. Paul's greeted, and his news of what God has done through his ministry is hailed with joy and praise of God.

[8 : 19] Verse 19 and 20. But then, the hint of danger emerges. You can see it in verse 21. Can you see it there? Rumors are flying around the Jewish community, here in Jerusalem.

Even some of the Jewish Christians are a bit worried. The news is that Paul couldn't care less about the law of Moses, and has been teaching Gentiles that the law has no place for them.

Now, if you were to read just briefly through Paul's letters, you could see how there might be some weight for such an assertion. Paul is much more nuanced. But nevertheless, at first reading, you might think, oh yeah, perhaps that is what Paul's saying.

And so it wouldn't be hard to come up with a rumor like that. And so Paul and the leaders of Jerusalem church agree that what Paul will do is he'll keep a public vow as a sort of non-verbal demonstration that as a Christian, he has absolutely no problems.

As a Jewish Christian, he has no problems with the law of Moses. And verse 26 tells us that on the very next day, Paul and four other Jewish men walk into the temple in Jerusalem. The days of purification draw on.

[9 : 25] Presumably, Paul continues to visit the temple on a daily basis. And when seven days are nearly over, some non-Christian Jews from Asia, which is where Paul's been evangelizing, see him.

And they obviously have some chips on their shoulders. They know he keeps company with Gentiles. And so they presume, well, he's brought Gentiles into the temple precincts and they cannot control themselves.

Verse 27 says, they stir up a crowd of Jews and they grab hold of Paul. Immediately, they start charging him with having defiled the temple. And so the whole city becomes around us.

Remember, it's a city full of Jews who love the law. And the crowd turns nasty. Paul's seized in verse 30. He's physically dragged out of the temple.

They begin to beat him with a view to beating him to death in verse 31. The whole city now is on edge. Romans get the wind of what's going on because, well, apparently it was not uncommon for them to get upset.

[10 : 24] but, they're getting upset for religious reasons. They rush in. They whisk Paul out of danger. The Roman commander tries to get some sense out of the beaten and I presume bleeding Paul.

However, his voice is drowned out by the screaming and the yelling of rioting Jews. Verse 34. The commander can see at this point he's got something on his hands and that Paul is in danger.

So he orders Paul to be brought back into the barracks where he can be protected. And so to get to the barracks Paul needs to be shepherded through the crowd but this crowd is so angry that the only way that can happen is if the soldiers carry him above their heads.

So you can imagine the scene. They hoist him up and off they go bearing him. And they're just about to take him in when Paul tells them to stop. Verse 37. And he calls out to the commander in Greek.

The commander's startled since he'd assumed Paul was an Egyptian who'd been a troublemaker not too much earlier on. And in verse 39 Paul makes clear that he's not some obscure uneducated revolutionary.

[11 : 28] On the contrary although he's a Jew he's a man of no insignificance. He has good status. He deserves the right to speak. And so the commander allows him to do so. And Paul stands before the crowd.

He speaks to them in Aramaic the language of educated Jews. And the crowd begins to wonder if perhaps this battered heretic will now acknowledge the error of his ways in order to get out of what's coming to him.

And so Paul begins. And he's offering a defence before his countrymen. And as he begins to speak in Aramaic they become quiet. And the story is straightforward.

It begins in verse 2. Paul effectively says he's an educated Jew a Pharisee of Pharisees. He's been educated under the renowned Pharisaic educator called Gamaliel. He's been extremely zealous for traditional Jewish religious traditions.

His zeal had been particularly directed towards this new sect that had grown up in Judaism that is Jewish believers in Jesus. And Paul's zeal had demonstrated itself in the pursuit of Christians.

[12 : 33] And then as it were it doesn't say this in the text but as it were God dropped a brick on his glass house. You see he was confronted by Jesus. And he was told by Jesus to tell the world what he had seen and heard.

He's told by Jesus to go and preach to the Gentiles. It's the thought of Gentiles having access to God that caused the riot in the first place. So you can imagine what it might do when Gentiles are mentioned again.

And at this mention of Gentiles they remember why they are angry. And in verse 22 they start up again. They raise their voices and they shout out rid the earth of him.

He is not fit to live. They shout more. They throw off their cloaks. They fling dust into the air. The commander sees the danger whisks Paul off to the barracks.

Paul's already sore and bleeding from the beating. And then the commander orders him to be tied up and tortured again by flogging. But Paul's had enough.

[13 : 38] He's not going to undergo another beating unnecessarily. This had already happened to him in Philippi. And it's not going to happen this time. So while they are stretching him out for flogging in order to investigate he calls upon his status.

In verse 25 he questions whether it is legal to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't had any formal hearing or been condemned of a crime and the centurion responsible backs off because you know all of this is going to get passed up and down the line.

He knows where the buck's going to end. And so he goes to his commander. The commander is startled. Paul's citizenship you see has not been bought as the commander's had. It is his by right of birth.

And so the tribune realizes, the commander realizes he could be in really serious trouble. Nevertheless he needs to get to the bottom of this whole affair. So he lets Paul go in verse 30.

Then he calls a meeting of the Jewish council that is the Sanhedrin and he brings Paul to speak before them. Paul begins by protesting his innocence. He says my brothers this is verse 23.1 My brothers I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.

[14 : 51] In return he's hit in the face and his own response is swift and angry. He points out in very strong language that he'd been hit in violation of Jewish law.

Someone tells him he's just spoken out against the high priest. Paul realizes he'd been at fault and he apologizes and then he notices presumably he knows the Jews around some of the Jews around quite well he notices that the council consists of two groups of Jews who hold opposing views on the resurrection.

Now Paul holds particular views on the resurrection. He was from one of those groups and not only that he knows Jesus has been raised from the dead and so what he does is it's a very shrewd move he declares he's a Pharisee so he declares he's on one side of this group of people and that he is there before the council fundamentally because of his views on the resurrection.

It's a very good ploy isn't it you see because he's immediately got one set of people on his side. The Pharisees immediately rally behind one of their own and pandemonium erupts tempers fray and the Romans whisk him out again and finally in verse 11 Jesus visits him in prison and urges him to remain firm.

Can you see what he says there verse 11 take courage as you have testified about me in Jerusalem so you must also testify in Rome. You see Paul is vindicated by his Lord isn't he?

[16 : 22] The Christians around about him may have concerns about him coming to Jerusalem the Jews here may be against him the Romans may find him to be a pain in the neck but Jesus knows he's well on track.

He's going where God wants him to be he's going where God wants him to be going he's where God wants him to be. So there's the story. Now most of you will have noticed that I've just simply retold the story emphasising various points.

I think the story is there for a reason. One of the reasons is to give us an example of Christian discipleship. It is to show us a God captured man in action.

Think about it for a moment. Here is Paul. He is a man who according to human standards from his own culture had it all. He was a Jew an elite Jew one of God's people from the tribe of Benjamin a Pharisee educated by the best Pharisaic educators of his day blameless according to the law of Moses and then he meets Jesus.

He's confronted by God in the flesh as it were who's died and been raised and he realises everything else he has pursued in life is like done beside Jesus.

[17 : 34] That's what he says in Philippians 3. From now on therefore he will do anything for Jesus. You see he loves Jesus. He knows Jesus is God and he knows that being where Jesus is is where true life is to be found.

Now this has a profound impact on his life. And you can see it in this passage can't you? You see this passage presents Paul I think as a fool by human standards.

Every sensible and educated person of his age sees Jesus as a man hung upon the cross. If you're a Jew that's especially how you saw him. And a man hung upon a cross is to a Jew an abomination.

A crucified man is a man made ignoble and miserable. and every Jewish person of his age sees Jesus as a man under a curse according to the law.

The law made clear that every person hung upon a tree was under God's curse. Paul though sees Jesus as the Messiah the only way to God. This cursed man somehow the only way to God.

[18 : 42] He describes how he comes to this conclusion and what it means in Galatians chapter 3. he is infatuated with Jesus. And so captive by Jesus and the gospel and the spirit he does something that looks totally unreasonable.

You see he takes this foolish and scandalous message of a man on a cross into the very heart of the religious world that thinks that to be a curse.

Against all reason he journeys to Jerusalem. But the point is that Paul doesn't just engage in ministry against all reason he engages in ministry against all human and godly advice.

I mean just think about it for a moment. I've deliberately in the story emphasised certain things. You see most of us I guess have never had a direct word from God but here is Paul. He is on his way to what he thinks is a God ordained ministry and do you remember what happens as he goes?

As he goes as he journeys he visits church after church and at each point prophets and spirit inspired leaders tell him don't do it. Don't go to Jerusalem because these things are waiting for you persecution and pain and disaster.

[20 : 02] But not only is Paul ministering apparently without reason therefore the spiritual evidence seems to point against him doesn't it? You see words from God seem to point against him going.

They seem to point away from his convictions but still he presses on against reason against advice surrounded by spirit inspired directions that seem to direct him elsewhere surrounded by mourning friends but he's pressing on everything's against him and it all happens as reasoned and as advised he is beaten he is persecuted he is jailed he is mistreated but by the but at the end of it what happens his saviour comes to him and speaks to him and his saviour commends him for his actions he is on the right track.

Can you see what I'm saying? Paul is a model of fortitude of valour of courage and if you like of sheer folly. He is so sold on God and his purposes that he is a fool for God and for his son Jesus Christ.

And listen to him describe himself in 1st Corinthians chapter 4 9 to 13. I slightly abbreviated it but here it is. So listen closely. For it seems to me says Paul that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession like those condemned to die in the arena.

We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe to angels as well as to human beings. He is saying even angels look on. We are fools for Christ. We are weak.

[21 : 40] We are dishonoured. To this very hour we go around hungry and thirsty. We are in rags. We are brutally treated. We are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed we bless.

When we are persecuted we endure it. When we are slandered we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the world. The garbage of the world right up to this moment. Here is a man who is just totally sold out for Christ.

Not doing the reasonable thing. Not doing the expected godly thing. But following the path of the cross of Christ. And I think he is urging the Corinthians to be like him.

To imitate him. Take up the cross. To deny themselves and to follow their Lord as he has done. Remember last what we looked at on Wednesday night.

You see he is a model disciple. Heading off to suffering and death perhaps for the cause of Christ. Now having said this let me say that I think God longs for a few more fools.

[22 : 41] He longs for more and more people to forget reason and expectations in one sense. This world's reason and expectations. And some of the sage advice of Christian people who are more concerned with safety and security than the purposes of Christ.

You see God longs I think for fools for the sake of Jesus and his gospel. For people who are willing to become spectacles and even specimens to the world. Who are willing to be weak, to be in disrepute, to be hungry and thirsty, to be poorly clothed and beaten and homeless.

For a few people are willing to work at ignoble jobs so they can preach the gospel. To put aside certain things so that they can be reviled and persecuted and slandered for the sake of Christ.

For people who are willing to become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things so that Christ might become known. Think back in history to missionaries who have done exactly this and evangelised the world.

For people who are willing to become like the rubbish of the world. Wesley is once reputed to have said, give me ten men filled with the spirit and I'll convert all England. Can you hear what he's saying?

[23 : 51] He's saying, give me ten men, that is, who are so filled with Christ and his purposes and his spirit, and God will convert all England.

Now imagine what we could do with a few people of courage and valour like Paul. A few men and women willing to put their lives and existence and reputation on the line for God and the gospel.

Now let me, at this point, let me tell you that when I, these days I feel uncomfortable with this sort of message. When I get to this point, I begin to feel a bit nervous, I feel uncomfortable and guilty when I ask people to sacrifice security and reputation and well-being for the sake of the gospel.

It's a very hard message today and it seems so unreasonable and it seems to run against all sorts of good Christian advice. There are things, there are those of you here who have no end of good and reasonable reasons for not following in what I say.

And let me tell you there's nothing wrong with some of the good reasons you give. There's nothing wrong with professions and careers. You're right, there's nothing wrong with work. It's good and godly.

[24 : 58] Let me tell you, there's nothing wrong with money, there's nothing wrong with security. You're right. Or you tell me that you're too busy finding, you know, if you're younger, a wife or a husband or that you need to get this final bit of training done.

Of course you're right. All these things are reasonable. But let me tell you that sometimes God is not so reasonable. You see, God is far more concerned not with these things but with the world and its relationship to his son.

He's looking for people of passion, not so much people of reason. There's nothing wrong with reason, friends, but people of passion. With a passion for Jesus and a passion for the gospel and a passion for God and his purposes in his world.

See, in our age, God is pleading for less comfortable, reasonable people in one sense. He's not looking for the wise, the noble, the intelligent. He didn't look for them in the first century. He's not looking for them now.

He's not looking for those who have reasoned him out of their lives. In our age, he's pleading for fools. For goodness sake, let us stop being sometimes so sensible and be a bit more passionate about God and the gospel of his son and, of course, his son himself.

[26 : 21] Now, at this point, some of you are undoubtedly still having problems and voicing silent objections. You hear my language, you hear my hyperbole and you hear my emotion and you say, oh yeah, here he goes again. He doesn't really mean this.

He's just borne along by the language and the emotion and he doesn't really mean that I should act against reason or godly advice and to some extent, you are indeed right. I'm not against reason.

I'm not against godly advice. I'm not against wisdom. But I am against a Christianity that has no heart, no passion, no fervor, no enthusiasm, no courage and no risk.

I'm against a Christianity so reasonable and cautious that it has Christians tied up in safety and security, hedged around by respectability and reason, and whose financial resources are tied into the same things as well.

So that even if they can't go, they can't send others. See, that's not the Paul of Acts 20 to 23, is it? The Paul of Acts 20 to 23 is a fool by human standards.

[27 : 26] He's thrown caution and safety and security and respectability to the wind. And he's borne along by passion. He's a man who is with God and a man whom God commends.

For God knows that ideas alone will not change the world. what changes the world is ideas in the minds and words on the lips of hearts whose people believe them.

And the heart, you know, of people who have hearts that believe it. You see, what changes the world is ideas on the lips of people who are consumed with passion for the Lord Jesus Christ.

And such people look a little bit silly in a sensible world. a little bit like Noah building boats on sunny days. Like Abraham leaving his father's house and setting out in the wilderness because he'd heard a word.

Like Moses confronting Pharaoh in his court and telling him that God wishes Pharaoh to release two million people. Like Elijah and Ezekiel and Jeremiah and Daniel and Paul.

[28 : 37] Like Jesus leaving his father's side to become a baby. born of a woman born under the law, a worker, a Bible teacher and end up dying crucified on a Roman cross.

Friends, I urge you to allow God to overwhelm you with these things. Let him threaten you and don't just back off as soon as he does. And let him take you where you haven't been before.

It could be anywhere. It could be where you are now. But it could be elsewhere. It could be away from your safety. It could be to give away your money. It could be to throw aside your small ambitions or your personal time or your holidays or your retirement or even your careers or whatever it else might that might be restrained you from his service.

friends, your God wants you and he wants your love for his son and he wants you to be passionate for him.

So let's do that and let's pray that we might. Father, we thank you for this picture of this ordinary Jewish man consumed with a passion for your son.

[29 : 56] We thank you that he follows in the steps of the Lord Jesus doing what the Lord Jesus said. He takes up his cross and he follows. Father, we pray that for the love of you and of your son, we might do the same.

And we pray these things in Jesus name. Amen.