

In the Footsteps of Jesus

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[0 : 00] Let's pray. Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight.

Oh God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen. Sometimes you make plans to prevent something happening.

And sometimes it even works. But there are times when it works quite okay.

You've prevented that thing that you had foreseen. And then something unforeseen happens. And it's not so great.

When we lived in Nigeria, one of the difficulties was what we do for holidays. You see, there weren't many affordable, attractive and relaxing places for us to go on holidays.

[1 : 10] But one of the few places that we like to go to was a rundown game reserve called Yankari. It was in a neighboring state.

It was, and probably still is, pretty ramshackle place. It was kind of expensive on the upper end of what we could afford. And it involved a long and often hazardous journey to get there.

But when you did get there, one of the chief attractions, besides all the animals, was a beautiful swimming hole.

Just down the hill from the accommodation, in a little gully, there was a cliff, a sandstone cliff, with a natural spring bubbling out.

And it was warm and sandy and clear and beautiful to swim in. Now, security was such that you dare not leave your valuables in your rooms.

[2 : 18] You had to take them with you down to the pool to ensure that you weren't robbed while you swam, so to speak. But there was a problem with that.

Baboons. Baboons had a habit of taking things left unattended by the pool. There was even this rather ominous sign by the pool.

Visitors, beware of your valuables, please. There's nothing more frustrating than standing at the bottom of a tree, watching while a baboon casually pulls apart your wallet or your phone or your towel.

So we had fixed the problem of security and being robbed. But we had the resultant problem of baboons.

Well, something similar happened to Paul without the baboons. What had happened was that Paul, together with the leaders of the church there in Jerusalem, were in the middle of a plan to demonstrate to Jewish Christians, in very practical terms, that Paul wasn't opposed to Judaism.

[3 : 51] He wasn't intent on subverting that which God had instituted for his people, the customs of the Jews, the very temple and the law.

And it seemed like this plan was working. There is no hint of any problem from the Jewish Christians.

However, there was a problem from a different quarter. Jews from the province of Asia. And they stirred up some trouble.

These people were probably from Ephesus, which was the capital of Asia. Paul had lived there, you'll remember, for three years.

And he would have been very familiar to the Jews that were there. And these particular Jews were no doubt among his opponents there.

[4 : 59] And this verse 27 tells us that they did two things. They seized Paul and they started stirring up the crowd. And as they stirred up the crowd, they also claimed three things.

They claimed that Paul was preaching against the Jews. They claimed that he was preaching against the Jewish law. And that he was preaching against the temple.

They were saying, this show of piety isn't fooling anyone, Paul. We know the real you. And you are always preaching the wrong thing.

And they were telling everybody that this was the case. But they had an additional charge as well. They said, this man has brought a Gentile into the temple.

Thus defiling it. And this was a very serious charge. You see, they would have seen and recognized Trophimus, who was one of the Ephesian delegates in Paul's party.

[6 : 19] They would have seen him around town with Paul. And they jumped to the conclusion that Paul had brought him into the temple. And this was, as I said, a very serious charge.

Only Jews were allowed into the inner part of the temple. There was an area of the temple, the outer courtyard, called the Court of the Gentiles, where non-Jews were allowed to be. But there was a wall about 1.4 meters or 4.5 feet high that separated the two parts. And Gentiles were allowed to go inside under pain of death. Archaeologists have found stones with inscriptions on them.

Now, you won't be able to read that because it's all a bit beaten up and also it's in Greek. But the inscription says, No foreigner may enter within this barricade, which surrounds the temple and its enclosure.

[7 : 32] Anyone who is caught doing so will have himself to blame for his ensuing death. Now, Paul himself would have had to go into the inner court for the purification rites, of course.

But it's inconceivable that at a time when he was wanting to establish and emphasize his own Jewishness, that he would have brought Trophimus the Gentile into that court.

So it's ironic in a way that in a time when he's coming into the temple for his own purification, that he's being accused of defiling it.

And the situation quickly escalates. People come from everywhere and form a mob. The whole city was aroused, it says.

And Paul is seized and dragged out of the temple to the court of the Gentiles. The doors of the temple are slammed behind them.

[8 : 44] There's no help coming from that quarter. And the crowd were beating him up, well and truly.

In fact, they were trying to kill him. This is not just being slapped around. They were extremely violent. And things were getting very ugly.

It looked as though Paul's readiness to die for the gospel, which he had mentioned in chapters 20 and 21, the first part of 21, this readiness to die as he went to Jerusalem is about to be fulfilled. And the Romans had a barracks just next to the temple. This is a model of what the temple looked like. And you'll see this is the court of the Gentiles around the edges here, around the sides. Quite a big area. And over here was the fortress of Antonia, which was the Roman barracks. And they had a staircase leading straight down from the barracks into the court of the Gentiles.

[10 : 00] So, the Roman officer hears about what's happening and he at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd, down the steps.

And when the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. There was a large detachment of soldiers that ran down.

The word translated as officers here actually reads centurions, the commanders of a hundred. There might have been, well, there was more than one of them and all their soldiers. There might have been more than 200 armed troops suddenly inserting themselves into this mob. No wonder the crowd stopped what they were doing and drew back when they saw the commander and his troops.

And they then came up and arrested Paul. Now, the word arrested is the same one as used earlier for seizing Paul.

[11 : 17] We shouldn't get the idea that Paul is suddenly being treated gently here. He is seized again and this time slapped into chains and then interrogated.

Paul is under arrest and actually he'll be in custody of one sort or another just about to the end of the book of Acts from this point.

So the Roman officer tries to sort it all out but the crowd are too wild, too unruly, too self-contradictory to get any meaningful sense out of what was happening.

And so the Roman commander decides, right, I'm just taking this guy back up into the barracks. And in fact, it says that Paul had to be carried up the stairs to the barracks.

Whether that was because of the pressing crowd or because he was beaten so badly that he couldn't walk, we don't know. But as he's being carried away, the crowd were continuing to shout, away with him!

[12:42] Get rid of him! Kill him! Things look pretty grim. But that last demand of the crowd, get rid of him, makes pretty explicit what some of us have been suspecting and for some time now in the story of Paul.

You see, it echoes the story of Jesus. In Luke 23, we hear something very similar.

The whole crowd shouted, away with this man! release Barabbas for us. This is, of course, at the trial of Jesus. And John 19, recording the same scene.

But they shouted, take him away! Take him away! Crucify him! Shall I crucify your king? Pilate asked. We have no king but Caesar, the chief priest answered.

The parallels of Paul's story in Jerusalem and Jesus' story in Jerusalem are unmistakable.

[14:04] In fact, the parallels have been going on throughout the journey to Jerusalem as well. And Luke deliberately has been drawing them out.

Consider this. In chapter 19 of Acts, Paul was in Ephesus and discerned that God was calling him to go to Jerusalem and nothing would deter him.

Now, Jesus had made a similar decision in Luke chapter 9, verse 51. As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.

Like Jesus, Paul traveled to Jerusalem with a band of disciples. Remember how Luke went out of his way in Acts 20 to list Paul's companions as he set out from Corinth at the start of his journey towards Jerusalem.

Like Jesus, Paul was opposed on his journey by hostile Jews who plotted to take his life.

Remember, he couldn't sail direct from Corinth because there was this plot to kill him.

[15:27] Like Jesus, Paul made or received three repeated predictions of his impending sufferings in Jerusalem, including being handed over to the Gentiles.

Like Jesus, Paul made declared his readiness to lay down his life in order to make this journey as he did so.

Like Jesus, Paul was determined to complete his ministry and not be deflected from it. Like Jesus, Paul expressed his abandonment to the will of God.

And when each of them got to Jerusalem, the similarities continued with what happened there. And as we've just read, both Jesus and then later Paul are rejected by their own people, arrested without cause and imprisoned.

Both are accused on false charges relating to the temple, as was Jeremiah. And the same cry went up against Jeremiah, kill him, get rid of him.

[16:45] them. They're both Paul and Jesus, unjustly accused and willfully misrepresented by false witnesses.

Both are beaten mercilessly. Both, as we have seen, have the frenzied crowd baying for their blood, screaming, get rid of him.

and both are handed over to Gentile authorities and held captive by the Romans. Of course, there are crucial, if you'll pardon the pun, differences between the suffering of Jesus and that of Paul.

Paul's suffering is not for our redemption, of course. Paul didn't, in fact, die in Jerusalem.

And he certainly didn't die for the sins of the world. He is not our saviour. Jesus is the only saviour. So what is Luke doing by highlighting this parallel between Jesus and his apostle Paul?

[18:08] What's the message we're to get from this? We're not called to the ministry that Paul was, and we can't be.

Luke himself doesn't make that leap. He doesn't pretend he was. See, Paul was intent on doing what God had called him to do, no matter what.

It was more important to him than his own life. his calling was much less than that of his Lord and our Lord, but he was determined to carry it out even though it meant that he suffered.

Our calling is much less than that of our Lord, of course, isn't it? it's less than that of Paul to be fair, but our commitment to carrying it out to the end, our determination to be faithful, our steady resolve to keep at it in the face of difficulty, in the face of suffering, in the face of pain or heartache, faith.

That's to be the same. We're to be like Paul who was like Christ. In fact, Paul himself says that in 1 Corinthians chapter 11.

[19 : 39] follow my example as I follow the example of Christ. Now, in many parts of the world, one of the common teachings that's getting around is that if you are a faithful and faith-filled Christian, you won't suffer.

You'll always have health and wealth and prosperity and everything will be lovely for you. That teaching is around here in this country to a certain extent. But of course, it's nonsense. Suffering was what God had for Jesus. We can't even imagine it. It makes nonsense of our whole faith if we take out the suffering of Jesus.

Without it, suffering was what God had for Paul. It was an integral part of his ministry. Without the suffering, his testimony would have been bland. His pastoral care would have been hollow. And his teaching, preaching ministry, including his letters, would have lacked any bearing on reality.

[21 : 12] Without suffering, Paul couldn't have written these words, for example, from 2 Corinthians chapter 1, verses 3 to 5.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.

God. But just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. Without suffering, Paul would have had no ministry of pastoral care, of comforting others, but God gave him comfort that he could minister that to others.

Now, as we've noted already in our reading through the book of Acts, suffering for Christ is to be expected, and if not embraced, certainly seen as one of the ways that God is at work.

When we suffer, God is at work. But the main point of this God is not even suffering and being prepared to suffer for Jesus.

[22 : 53] Yes, that's part of it, but the main thing is the attitude of a disciple. To be a disciple is to be one who is faithful and obedient to Christ, willing to follow him no matter what.

And in the ordinariness of our lives, in our suffering and in our fun times, when we're with loving friends around us, or when we're facing howling mobs, we are to be faithful.

Paul made a decision way back when he was in Ephesus, to follow what God was leading him to no matter what.

And it wasn't the first time he'd made such a decision, of course. But he set his face to Jerusalem, just as Jesus had done in Luke chapter 9.

he was making a decision of discipleship. Similarly, we are called to make a decision of discipleship, to follow Jesus, not to Jerusalem, but forward into the things that God has called us to.

[24 : 27] And note that this isn't just a once only decision. it's continually being tested, just as it was for Paul, and just as it was for Jesus, for that matter.

And having made a decision of discipleship, we need to keep making that decision. And the specifics will look different for each one of us, and will change at different times in our lives, just as it did for Paul.

But there are some general things that discipleship will demand of us regardless. We are called to love God in Christ.

And we are also called to obey Christ and keep obeying him. And this is a huge call, of course.

It's not just something very simple. it means turning away from our own path, our sin, away from us being the king of our own lives.

[25 : 39] That is, it involves repentance. It means that even though sometimes God's way may seem unpleasant or less pleasurable than the alternatives, we have to have faith that God knows best for us.

Obeying requires faith. And obeying is also means learning to praise him in everything.

and to love God and obey Christ in this way, we have two very precious resources to help us, scripture and prayer.

You see, we love him more deeply as we get to know more of him through scripture and communicate with him through prayer. prayer. We obey him more faithfully as we learn more of what he wants of us and rely on the strengthening he provides to us through scripture and prayer. So let us be people whose lives are marked by decisions of discipleship that are enabled through daily ongoing regular reading of scripture and habits of prayer.

[27 : 32] Let's pray. Lord God, our heavenly father, we thank you for your word. we thank you for the example of Paul who was a follower of yours.

We pray that we might be also followers of yours, faithful in all things, that we might be people who learn to love you, to obey you and to praise you in all situations.

We pray that we would make that decision of discipleship for the rest of this day, for this week, and as decisions of discipleship come before us, where we take them in the days and weeks and months and years to come, for the honour and glory of our Lord Jesus.

Amen.