

THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE

AUGUST 22ND–23RD // BOOK OF ACTS

OBEDIENCE DESPITE UNCERTAINTY (ACTS 21:1–6) “...YOU WILL BE MY WITNESSES...” (ACTS 1:8)

When Jesus ascended to Heaven, He commissioned His followers to be His “witnesses”—they were to take what they had seen and heard to the ends of the earth.

- One might say that Acts is organized around taking the gospel to Jerusalem (Chs. 1–7), Samaria and Judea (Chs. 8–12), and to the ends of the earth (Chs. 13–20).

WHAT ABOUT THIS LAST SECTION (ACTS 21–28)?

The most powerful empire on the planet at the time was Rome.

- The ethic of Rome was “might is right.” The empire expanded its influence through power, violence, money, and force.
- So, God was now sending this empire a witness who would embody a new kind of message of a new kind of Kingdom.

THIS MESSENGER WILL LIVE OUT THE MESSAGE.

Because of his journey to Jerusalem, Paul was going to get into some trouble.

- Paul would be beaten, imprisoned, falsely accused, shipwrecked, and eventually brought before governors, kings, and finally Caesar in the city of Rome.
- God would use Paul's suffering as *His witness* of a greater kind of power.

Through his suffering, Paul bore witness to a King whose Kingdom does not advance through violence, coercion, or political power but through the self-giving love of the crucified Messiah.

- The message of Rome was that power is found in domination. The message of Jesus is that power is revealed through sacrificial love.
- So, God would place Paul (this suffering, seemingly powerless apostle) before the empire.

DID PAUL KNOW ALL OF WHAT WAS ABOUT TO HAPPEN?

In some way, Paul knew in his spirit that he had to get to Jerusalem and eventually to Rome.

- Paul also knew that part of his call from Jesus was to suffer with Him (Acts 9:15–16).
- Paul knew the destination and general nature of what was coming, but he certainly didn't know the precise sequence and nature of events.
- Paul didn't know the whole story.

PAUL SIMPLY KNEW THE NEXT FAITHFUL STEP.

There was a grand purpose for Paul's life that was much bigger than just Paul.

- But for now, there was step one: Paul had to get to Jerusalem.
- Sometimes, we get a sense that God has a grand purpose for our lives that is bigger than just us.
- Amazing lives of legacy and purpose start with simple moments of ordinary obedience.

WELL-INTENTIONED WARNINGS

As Paul was traveling from Miletus to Jerusalem, down the Phoenician coast, he was met by Believers who had also heard from the Holy Spirit that he was going to suffer, and they tried to stop him from going (vs. 1–4).

- These Believers loved Paul and didn't want to see him suffer. But Paul knew that obedience to God is worth the suffering it may require.

FAREWELL TO SAFETY, CERTAINTY, AND COMFORT (VS. 5–6)

Paul's emotional farewell to the Believers on the beach in Tyre was more than just a goodbye.

- It was a deliberate step of obedience into an uncertain future, trusting that faithfulness to Christ was more important than predictable, safe outcomes and comfort.
- Sometimes, following Jesus means saying *goodbye* to our certainty and yes to His plan.

OBEDIENCE DESPITE FEAR (ACTS 21:7–14) “...WE REACHED PTOLEMAIS...” (V. 7)

Ptolemais was a coastal port city in northern Israel, about 25 miles south of Tyre, along the Mediterranean coast.

- Paul and his team stayed there for a day until they left for Caesarea and entered the house of Philip the evangelist (v. 8).
- Philip was one of the seven deacons appointed to care for widows in Chapter 6.
- Philip was an evangelist and had brought the gospel to Samaria (8:5–13), explained the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–39), and preached in the region of Azotus, just west of Samaria (8:40).
- The greatest accomplishment of Philip's ministry was that his own children knew God and had the gift of prophecy (v. 9).
- He had four unmarried daughters (young women).

These young women had been supernaturally empowered by the Holy Spirit with the gift of prophecy.

- The promise of the Holy Spirit is not just for men and not just for adults.
- God has a plan, purpose, and gifts available for any who call on His name and make themselves available to be used by Him.
- Often, He speaks through unlikely vessels.

Interestingly, even though these four daughters had the gift of prophecy, none of them told Paul anything about his upcoming time in Jerusalem.

- Instead, it was Agabus the prophet who gave the most dramatic demonstration of what was going to happen to Paul as he bound his own feet and hands with Paul's belt.
- Was the Holy Spirit giving mixed messages to God's people?

If the Holy Spirit was leading Paul to Jerusalem, why would the same Spirit also lead people to try to stop him from going?

- It's not that God was giving “mixed signals.” It was the Believers' various responses to God's revelation that may make it seem so.
- Some Believers heard from the Spirit that Paul was going to suffer, and their response was to plead with him not to go to Jerusalem.

But Paul heard from the Spirit that he was going to suffer and responded with readiness, resolve, and obedience, no matter the outcome.

- Even though the pleading and weeping of the people broke Paul's heart, he was willing to accept what he understood to be God's will for his life (vs. 13–14).
- What kind of fear must Paul have been feeling and facing after hearing these warnings?

OBEDIENCE AND FEAR

There will always be some level of fear connected to things that are worth doing.

- We can hear about the cost of obedience and see that as a reason not to move.
- Or we can “count the cost” (Luke 14:28) and understand what discipleship requires, even as we step out in obedience and trust.
- Courage is action, even in the face of fear.

OBEDIENCE AND SACRIFICE (ACTS 21:15–25)

Having arrived in Jerusalem, Paul and his missionary team received a warm welcome and met with James (the half brother of Jesus) and all the elders (vs. 17–18).

- Paul reported the results of his third missionary journey among the Gentiles, and they glorified God because of it (vs. 19–20).
- But the church in Jerusalem had its own set of unique challenges.

While Paul was off evangelizing Gentiles, many thousands of Jews had come to faith in Christ.

- Some scholars estimate the number being 25,000 to 50,000 in the region of Judea.
- These Jews most likely didn't see Christianity as a new religion but simply as Judaism that recognized Jesus as Messiah.
- As such, they kept many of the same practices and festivals as part of their worship.

But word had been going out all over the city and region that Paul had been converting Gentiles and turning them away from Moses, circumcision, and other Jewish customs (v. 21).

- His return to Jerusalem presented a public relations embarrassment for the elders.
- But Paul had always done his ministry with integrity and been respectful and reverent towards Jewish customs.

In fact, he had circumcised Timothy (16:3), suggested that women wear veils in worship (1 Corinthians 11:2–16), and even referred to himself as a “Hebrew among Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5).

- Paul had honored Jewish worship amongst Jews but taught faith in Christ as primary and never required non-Jews to keep Jewish customs.
- The criticism of Paul's ministry was inaccurate and quite untrue.

For better or for worse, the rumor had spread, and the question was now, “What then is to be done?” (v. 22).

- In other words, “Paul, how do we convince the Jews that you're not anti-Jewish?”
- The leaders asked Paul to join four men who were under a Nazirite vow for their purification ceremony and to pay for their expenses (v. 24).

So, Paul underwent ritual purification to qualify for participation in the completion ceremony of the four Nazirites (v. 26).

- This was a demonstration of his full loyalty to the Torah and his identification with the Jews.
- As Gentile readers ourselves, we often try to convert Paul away from Judaism as we read the New Testament, but Paul was Jewish: a Jewish man who had found the Messiah.

GRACE OR LAW?

Why would Paul participate in a Jewish ceremonial ritual when he didn't have to in order to be justified before God?

- Paul was very clear that you don't flaunt your freedom by simply doing whatever you want—you use it to serve others and God.
- Maturity in our faith requires us to put away the childish mindset of “Do I have to?”

ALL THINGS ARE LAWFUL, BUT NOT ALL THINGS ARE HELPFUL...

What entertainment or music is acceptable? What kind of language should I use? And how about aggressive online commentary/behavior? What kind of clothing can I wear? Can I still drink alcohol?

- Will this hurt my witness or testimony?
- Will this cause anyone to stumble?
- Will this benefit or hurt me spiritually?
- Will this bring me into bondage?

SACRIFICIAL LOVE

- The greatest witness of the power of Jesus to our broken world won't be found in our words. It will be embodied in our lives.
- The “empires” of our world preach power through self-promotion, violence, manipulation, and jockeying for position and our own way.
- The message of the cross says that power is laying down our lives to serve.

SACRIFICIAL LOVE DESPITE UNCERTAINTY (VS. 1–6)

- The Jesus way of self-sacrificial love and service to God and others involves some level of suffering and dying to self—it's not always clear what that will look like.
- Obedience to Jesus and following Him in this path means saying, “yes,” even when we're not always sure where He might be leading us.
- Yes is the answer... **Now, what's the question?**

SACRIFICIAL LOVE DESPITE FEAR (VS. 7–14)

- There will always be some level of fear connected to self-denial and service, but anything worth doing will always seem scary.
- Our fears always seem bigger than they are from far away—we are terrible predictors of what will make us miserable AND of what will make us happy.
- Courage is stepping through the fear.

SACRIFICIAL LOVE AND OUR RIGHTS (VS. 15–25)

- Jesus laid aside His divine glory, power, and status as God by willingly humbling Himself. He chose to serve humanity and die on a cross.
- Jesus could have demanded His rights or summoned legions of angels for protection, but instead He offered up His life voluntarily.
- Why? Because of *love*. No one took His life from Him; He willingly laid it down (John 10:18).

“FOLLOW ME...”

- Following Jesus means imitating His humility and putting the needs of others first in sacrificial love (Philippians 2:5).
- It means letting go of pride and entitlement.
- It means stopping self-promotion and jockeying for attention, position, and our own rights.
- It means surrendering to the will of the Father and choosing a life of service and love.