



WHY IS COMING HOME SO DIFFICULT?

SERIES: *LIFE UNLEASHED*

Acts 21:1–26
44th Message
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In our text today, Paul makes a historic return to Jerusalem. with representatives from all the churches he planted traveling with him, carrying a significant amount of money collected from every church for the poor in Jerusalem. The gifts are the first fruits of his ministry among the Gentiles and symbolize the unity of all people, Jew and Gentiles, which is the hallmark of the Messianic Age. Craig Keener notes, “the symbolism of an offering from the first-fruits of the Gentile churches arriving on Pentecost would not be lost on the Jerusalem church’s leaders (cf. Deut 16:10, 16)”¹. Like a proud college graduate returning home, not just with a degree, but also with a huge check to pay his parents back for his or her education, one would think Paul’s homecoming would be one of unadulterated joy. This was the day the prophets longed for, a day of rejoicing over Jerusalem when the Lord said, “I will extend peace to her like a river, and the wealth of nations like a flooding stream” (Isa 66:12). As Isaiah’s metaphors continue to flow, it seems as if the prophet has penned Paul’s script as he makes his way toward Jerusalem.

I will send some of those who survive to the nations...and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations. And they will bring all your people, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD...And I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites,” says the LORD.” (Isa 66:19–21 NIV)

Paul surely had Isaiah’s imagery pulsating in his heart. But any expectations of joy Paul may have had are extinguished with ominous warnings that his homecoming will provoke religious tensions to dangerous levels. The text follows a three-fold pattern: Upon arrival in each port, Paul is warmly welcomed by the disciples and enjoys generous hospitality and rich fellowship. But before he leaves, concerns are raised with ever increasing intensity about Paul’s safety in Jerusalem. The first comes from disciples operating “by the Spirit,” the second from a prophet through whom “the Holy Spirit speaks,” and the third from the leaders in Jerusalem, who were united in spirit. Yet, in each case, Paul strengthens his resolve and refuses to be deterred and the scene concludes with an outpouring of affection and love. The text addresses two key questions:

1. How do we discern God’s will when opposing parties believe the Spirit is guiding them?
2. Why is “coming home” often so difficult?

I. Serious Concerns Raised in Tyre (21:1–6)

A. Voyage from Miletus to Tyre (21:1–3)

And when we had parted (Lit. “having torn ourselves away”) from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos, and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. 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. (21:1–3 ESV)

Throughout Paul’s journey home Luke demonstrates how deeply loved Paul was by the disciples in the Diaspora churches. Leaving the elders in Miletus was particularly painful. After being told they would see the apostle’s face no more, there was an outpouring of affection with passionate embrace, kisses and rivers of tears. Not wanting to let him go, they escorted him to the boat and Paul and his colleagues had to literally “tear themselves away” before they could depart. Once they boarded the ship, Luke gives the details of the typical coast hugging voyage, stopping in Cos (about forty miles), Rhodes (about ninety miles) and Patara (sixty miles). After they arrived in Patara, they boarded a larger ship that was able to sail directly to Phoenicia in the open sea.

B. Warnings raised in Tyre (21:4–6)

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. When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home. (21:4–6)

After they landed in Tyre, the ship was able to unload its cargo, which gave Paul time to seek out the disciples and spend a week with them. The church had been founded by Hellenistic Jews, who fled Saul’s persecution after Stephen’s death. Now the former persecutor is welcomed and embraced as an apostle in the faith. Among the disciples were some who had prophetic gifts and were given inspiration to see the danger that lay ahead of Paul in Jerusalem. “Through the Spirit” they urged him not to set foot in Jerusalem, but Paul would not be deterred.

So we must ask the question, was Paul wrong to reject their urging “through the Spirit”? The first sermon I heard on this subject was entitled, “Paul’s Mistake.” If we limit ourselves to verse 4 alone, that conclusion would be a reasonable. But Paul had made a similar claim in more emphatic terms, as earlier he told the elders at Ephesus “I am going to Jerusalem *bound* by the Spirit” (20:22). It was a command he couldn’t avoid and a conviction had been fixed for some time “that he must present the gift from the churches personally for it to be understood as the symbol of unity he intended it to be (cf. 1 Cor 16:4 with Rom 15:31).”²

Most scholars believe that Paul did not reject the substance of the prophecy, but its application. As Longenecker writes, “probably we should understand the preposition *dia* (“through”) as meaning that the Spirit’s message was the occasion for the believers’ concern rather than that their trying to dissuade Paul was directly inspired by the Spirit.”³ Through prophecy they (in this case) foreknow

some events, but Paul has a higher assurance of God's will for him to undertake this journey.

After a week of sweet fellowship Paul's departure evokes a similar depth of love and emotion as shown by the Ephesian elders. Though they only knew each a week, the Spirit had forged the deepest bonds of friendship and love. And, as in the previous scene, the disciples would not let them leave without escorting them to the beach where their ship was docked, and in this case it was a parade of entire families. What a striking and beautiful sight it must have been for passersby to see a group of friends and families with their children unashamedly kneeling in the sand in a circle of prayer around Paul, pleading for Lord's grace and protection with weeping and tears.

II. Disturbing Prophecies in Caesarea (21:7–14)

A. Sweet fellowship in Caesarea (21:7–9)

When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. (21:7–9)

With time to spare before Pentecost, Paul and his companions took the opportunity to spend several days at the home of Philip, whose evangelistic ministry through Samaria and the coastal towns brought him to Caesarea twenty years ago. He has now settled down and married with four daughters (God bless him!), who are also prophets. As Keener notes, "Just as Luke pairs Simeon and Anna as male and female prophetic figures, he here pairs the famous prophet Agabus with Philip's four virgin daughters" to demonstrate that "one sign of the Spirit's coming... is the transcending of traditional gender barriers."⁴

Can you imagine being one of Paul's traveling companions and witnessing the interchange of their conversation? Here is Philip, a former leader in the Jerusalem church, intimately sharing stories with a former terrorist, who was partly responsible for his colleague's death. At the other end of the table is his former nemesis pouring forth details of the thousands of miles he traveled, the sufferings he endured and the power of God's word unleashed among the Gentiles. I doubt if they ever went to bed. As Keener concludes,

We also dare not miss the salvation-historical significance with which Luke invests the meetings in 21:8–18 (with Philip, Agabus, Mnason, James, and unnamed disciples). Representatives from the newer Pauline churches of the Diaspora (20:4–5) are now meeting leaders from the church's earliest days.⁵

In the next scene the prophet Agabus acts out a revelation of Paul's suffering and presents a more complete picture of what occurred here in Tyre.

B. Agabus' prophecy (21:10–11)

While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 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.'" (21:10–11)

During Paul's stay in Caesarea, the prophet Agabus came down from Jerusalem and, like the Hebrew prophets, acted out his prophecy in dramatic fashion. He took Paul's belt and tied his own

hands and feet and announced this is what the Jews at Jerusalem will do to the one who owns this belt. N. T. Wright explains that,

It isn't just a visual aid. It's what happens when, under the Spirit who inspires prophecy, part of God's future comes forward into the present and becomes a visible, physical, albeit symbolic reality. This, actually is how many Christians, drawing on deeply Jewish instincts, have understood the reality of the sacraments.⁶

C. Differing views resolved (21:12–14)

When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. 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." And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done." (21:12–14)

In response to Agabus' dramatic prophetic announcement, everyone, including Paul's colleagues, were united, passionately pleading and begging Paul not to set foot in Jerusalem. Paul gives full weight to the truth of the prophecy, for it coincides exactly with what the Spirit had already been testifying to him in every city (20:22). Despite the accuracy of Agabus' prophecy and the intense emotional pressure from his friends and colleagues, Paul could not set aside the inward constraint the Spirit had given him. Paul counters their tears with his broken heart. Like Jesus, he will set his face like flint to go to Jerusalem, for he does not reckon his life as having ultimate value unto itself, but rather it derives precious value in serving the Lord. As they listen to the strength of Paul's conviction, they fall silent and give their assent "in the words of the Lord's Prayer, and in the words which echo what Jesus himself said in Gethsemane: the Lord's will be done."⁷

Giving their ascent to Paul's higher convictions reveals a humility of spirit that fosters unity in the body of Christ, where believers show respect and restraint in imposing what they believe is God's will upon others. As Keener suggests, "Because of the partial nature of prophecy, however, balancing competing partial revelations in a charismatic setting, even apart from the question of error or deception (1 Kgs 13:18–26; 2 Kgs 8:10), requires discernment."⁸

In summary, in contrast to what happened when Paul and Barnabas parted company in anger, here we see believers with opposing views relate to each other with love and respect. We see blending, not separation, and above all, we see all submitting to the Lord's will. Paul is like Jesus in Gethsemane. We have three separate recorded occasions of prophecy confronting him with the cost of "drinking the cup." Three times his friends beg him not to drink. Three times he remains stalwart, despite what must have been overwhelming temptation to heed his friends' advice and choose another course. Jesus called his friends to pray, but three times they were asleep. Even though Jesus didn't want to drink the cup, he said, "Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:44)—now we have a human being following suit. The Lord's will, not Paul's.

The experience, though painful for everyone, did three things. First, it strengthened Paul's resolve. Much like the temptations of Jesus in the desert, it dealt a deathblow to the devil and gave him the ability to face his upcoming trials. Secondly, for the saints, it taught them to weep and birthed a love for Paul so deep, that he became like Christ to them. And for us, it is a lesson in submission and following the will of God. Choosing which path to take isn't about divining which road is smoother and paved with more happiness. As Bruce Waltke writes, "The will of God, as plainly revealed in Scripture, is

something that you do, something that you live out as you stay close to him, and as you stay close to him, you keep his teachings to love others.”⁹ Paul shows us what living it out looks like.

III. New Wine in Jerusalem (21:15–26)

A. Warmth, welcome and generous hospitality (21:15–17)

After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge. When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. (21:15–17)

As Paul advanced closer to Jerusalem, the love and support for his mission continued to grow. Knowing Paul would face danger when he entered the city, several disciples decided to escort Paul’s party to the home of well-known disciple named Mnason (Heb. Jason), who was one of the original missionaries from Cyrene and Cyprus and had been scattered by Saul’s persecution. To house this large a group, including uncircumcised Gentiles not only demonstrates Mnason’s generosity, but also his understanding of the gospel, namely that the Spirit transcends all racial, ethnic and sexual barriers and makes all Jewish traditions utterly obsolete. As Wright observes, “The welcome he and his companions had had from Mnason, a Cypriot Jewish Christian living in Jerusalem, was no doubt cheering, but Mnason’s was the last friendly roof under which Paul would ever stay.”¹⁰

B. New wine offered (21:18–20a)

On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God. (21:18–20a)

Now we come to the climactic moment that Luke has been building up to, Paul’s presentation of the first-fruits of his ministry among the Gentiles to James and all the elders of the church on the day of Pentecost. Paul hoped this collection along with its representatives would be God’s seal of his Eastern mission before launching out to the West. After their initial greetings, Paul was invited to give his report, recounting of all that God had accomplished through him on both sides of the Aegean. His report was met with praise and glory. But then the shoe dropped and the Jerusalem leaders turned to their primary agenda.

C. The Jerusalem leaders’ agenda (21:20b–25)

I. Troubling concerns (21:20b–22)

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, 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. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come.

It’s important to note that none of the original apostles were there and in their absence the church had grown increasingly nationalistic. Nationalism is a leaven that destroys New Covenant life. With an ever-increasing number of believers who were zealous for the law, it was becoming more and difficult to maintain solidarity with the Gentile mission. And now rumors were floating about that Paul not only refused to impose Jewish law on Gentile believers (which

was bad enough to the thinking of some believers), but he was also encouraging Jewish believers to give up their traditions.

What is shocking to me is that Luke makes no mention of appreciation or even acknowledgement of the generous offering and the massive undertaking it took to collect and transport safely to Jerusalem. Do the leaders think it will take more than a collection to dislodge the rumors, or are they politically compromised so that, if they publicly acknowledge the gift, it would heighten the leaders’ solidarity with the Gentile mission and thereby drive a deeper wedge in their relationship with the zealous Jewish believers? Their final question “What then is to be done?” is a rhetorical question that invites the solution they have already predetermined.

2. New wine in old wineskins? (21:23–25)

Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.” (21:23–25)

Their plan is based on the principle that actions speak louder than words. Paul can show his fidelity to his Jewish heritage by taking a vow and paying the expenses of four of their number who had undertaken a temporary Nazirite vow. The leaders suggest that if Paul joins them in their purification rite and pays their expenses, that will put an end to the rumors and everyone will know he lives in observance of the law. These leaders may be well intentioned, but they are extremely naïve.

3. Paul submits to their plan (21:26)

Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them. (21:26)

The fact that Paul does not push back, but submits to the leaders in order to alleviate their anxiety, demonstrates exemplary humility and is consistent with his passion to win all people to Christ, thus “to the Jews I became a Jew.” Paul complied and performed the symbolic act, not because he was legalistic, but for his devotion and love for God and for the Jews.

However, I agree with Tom Wright when he says, “He must have known it wasn’t going to work.”¹¹ Nothing Paul could have done would have changed the minds of Jews from Asia. Toward the end of the week one of them spotted Paul in the temple and instigated a riot under the pretense that he had brought one of his Gentile representatives into the Temple thereby defiling it. Paul was seized by the Jews and dragged out of the temple and severely beaten. He would have been killed had not the Roman commander intervened to rescue him.

IV. Why is Coming Home So Difficult?

Jesus said: And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, ‘The old is better.’”(Luke 5:37–39)

On the day of Pentecost when the Spirit was poured without measure and the Jews from the diaspora heard the disciples declaring the mighty works of God in their native language, they were amazed and perplexed. But others mocked them and said, “They are filled with new wine” (Acts 2:13). Ironically, they were speaking the truth. The new wine of the Spirit was breaking down all social, national, ethnic and sexual barriers to create one new family without distinction. And wherever two or three are gathered, the Lord is in their midst, making Israel’s temple obsolete.

In their attempts to preserve the Mosaic traditions and nationalistic identity for Jewish believers the leaders in Jerusalem failed to publicly embrace the Spirit’s Gentile mission. Instead they tried to pour the new wine into old wineskins and, as Jesus predicted, the new wine burst the skins, perpetuating the lie that “the old was better.” Sadly, they drank the old wine for another decade until the temple was reduced to rubble.

Why is it so hard to come home? It is because without the new wine of the Spirit, home is no longer home. So for us as a church, it is vital that we examine ourselves. Are we Paul in this story, radical in whom we share the gospel with? Or are we the Jerusalem leaders, stuck to old tradition and unaccepting of believers who don’t conform to our manmade social mores? Throughout the book of Acts, we have seen the Holy Spirit repeatedly tear down social barriers and throw open the doors of the Kingdom to all who believe. Will we pick up the torch and do the same, or will we be like the Jerusalem leaders who could see only defilement, not salvation?

I’m not here to condemn anyone, but to encourage us all to do some wine tasting, as the poet says, “**taste and see that the Lord is good**” (Ps 34:8). Like me, you may find it difficult to venture off and boldly engage different cultures. I would have never gone to teach the Scriptures in Communist Romania if someone hadn’t gone before me and invited me there, nor would I have gotten involved International Justice Mission in their efforts to combat human slavery if it wasn’t for Grace Kvamme. If you look at our website, there are countless opportunities “to taste” new wine. Perhaps, after having a taste, you’ll cultivate your own vineyard, like Leong Tan, who discovered a wide open door for ministry at Salinas Valley State Prison.

Bernard Bell and Miel Horrilleno are currently facilitating “Bridges Class” to help us learn to love our Muslim neighbors. They recently learned that The South Valley Islamic Community in San Martin has 100 families and meets in a converted barn, which is very inadequate. In 2006 they purchased land in San Martin to build a mosque and community building. They proposed to call the center The Cordoba Center after Córdoba in Moorish Spain where Muslims, Jews and Christians lived together in peace. Last week the proposal came before the Santa Clara County Planning Commission. The public was allowed to voice their opinion, but

were limited to one minute, given the large numbers wishing to speak. Bernard represented our church and said,

The Bay Area is a melting pot of people from all over the world, who over many generations have come here in search of freedom and opportunity: to stay alive, to raise their children, to attain a measure of prosperity, and to practice their faith. We flourish as a society when we love and welcome our neighbors, when we extend to them grace, hospitality, and generosity of spirit by facilitating their quest for a spiritual home in this place that they now call home. SVIC seeks to continue the spirit of Cordoba where Muslims, Jews and Christians lived in peaceful cooperation. This is good for us as a society, and part of the rich tapestry that makes the Bay Area such a wonderful place to live. Please approve this project.

May the Lord continue to bless us with the new wine of his love and grace that we may embrace and love all those in our community without distinction. Amen.

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor 5:14–18).

1. Craig S. Keener, 15:1–23:35, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 3103.

2. Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts, EBC* 9; ed. Frank E. Gaebel and J. D. Douglas; Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), paragraph 52290.

3. Longenecker, *Acts*, paragraph 52284.

4. Keener, *Acts*: 3:3091.

5. Keener, *Acts*, 3:3090.

6. N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone: Part Two*, Chapters 13–28 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 141.

7. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 141.

8. Keener, *Acts*, 3:3083.

9. Bruce K. Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 102.

10. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 148.

11. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, 148.