

Last week Pastor Tim had us take a closer look at Thessalonians 5:16-18 as we prepared for Thanksgiving. Today We are going to hop back into the Acts series one more time before we begin our advent series. So, turn in your bibles to Acts 21:17-26.

Before we look at this passage, I want to provide a brief overview of where we are in the book of Acts so we can fully appreciate what's happening. Paul is on his third and final missionary journey.

If you remember, on the first journey, we saw the gospel spread from Jerusalem to Antioch, marking the beginning of the Gentile Church.

Then on the second journey, we watched the gospel spread further than ever as it crossed the Aegean Sea and churches throughout Macedonia were planted. It's during this missionary journey that Paul takes news from the church in Jerusalem that Gentiles are not required to follow the law. They only need to refrain from eating meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, and from sexual immorality. The letter aims to unify the racial divide forming in the early church, and as we'll see, it plays an important role in the passage we are studying today.

Finally, Paul takes one more missionary journey to strengthen the churches he planted. While on this journey, he spends significant time in Ephesus and travels among the churches collecting an offering to bring back as support to the Jerusalem church to bridge the divide between the Jewish and Gentile believers. On this final journey, Paul is repeatedly warned about going to Jerusalem, but Paul knows his calling and continues to Jerusalem, led by the Holy Spirit.

Today's passage is the final story in which we see Paul as a free man. From here on out, Paul is, in his own words, "*in chains for Christ*" Philippians 1:12-18. What is important for us to note is that although Paul is imprisoned, his ministry is not hindered. In fact, Paul clarifies that his chains only serve to advance the gospel. Paul has always desired to bring the gospel to Rome, which is how he would get there. With pen in hand, Paul would write two-thirds of the New Testament. If it were you or me, we might be tempted to say, "I've done enough," but Paul is unrelenting. With this in clear view, let's look at our passage today and see what we can learn from Paul.

Read Acts 21:17-26

Now there is much to say about this passage and not nearly enough time to unpack all of it. First, it bears repeating, but this is a narrative section of scripture. That means what we are reading is descriptive and not prescriptive. We are not told what to do; instead, we are told what happened. As a result, everything in this passage may not seem to translate to our lives, but if we look at the example of Paul from these verses, some principles carry over and, as we'll see, have a profound impact on our lives.

Before we look at those principles more closely, we need to understand what is happening better. First, we see Paul returning from his long journey. It's important to note that Paul was likely nervous about how he would be received. He's been on the road for a long time, and we get the sense from the letter he wrote to the Romans in 15:30-33 that he hopes his service to the saints in Jerusalem will be acceptable. Much to his relief, we are told that he was received gladly.

Paul arrives back in Jerusalem with several of whom he picked up along the journey, including Luke, and they receive a hero's welcome. They likely stay in the house of a man named Mnason v16, a Hellenistic Jew who would've been more comfortable hosting gentile guests in his home. The next day Paul and his entourage, in a more formal setting, go before James and the elders, who is the half-brother of Jesus.

Interestingly, we can see the progression of the early church as it was established. Initially, the Apostles established the church with Peter at the helm, and then Peter fled Jerusalem, leaving the church in the hands of James in Acts 12. Now in this passage, with no Apostolic oversight, we see the church being elder lead with James as the chief elder. Ephesians 2:20 teaches us that with Jesus as the cornerstone, the apostles and the prophets laid the church's foundation. Now along with James and the other elders, we are building upon that foundation until this very day. It's incredible what you and I get to be a part of.

With the church of Jerusalem firmly established, Paul goes before James and the elders and notices what he says in verse 19, *"after greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry."* Paul is quick to give credit to what God had done, recognizing that all that was accomplished by his hands was God's work. Here, we see one of the key principles we can learn from Paul in this passage as we look to live for God, and that is

Humility

We see this continually modeled by Paul, and we can't neglect its importance. Not only do we see humility exemplified by Paul at this moment, but we'll see it throughout this passage. The fact that Paul, an Apostle, is allowing himself to be accountable to the elders is an incredible display of humility. We'll see his humility on display again when he submits to the costly request of the elders that would ultimately result in his arrest.

After Paul gets done sharing the testimonies of all that God has done through his ministry, they quickly praise God, but they almost forget a minor detail. While Paul was out on the frontier, James and the other elders were working hard at home, spreading the gospel throughout Jerusalem, and just like with Paul; many people came to know Jesus as their Lord. Likely, thousands, maybe even tens of thousands. The church was exploding.

The issue arose because many of the Jews who were saved heard about Paul and deeply misunderstood him. They were under the impression that Paul wasn't just spreading the gospel

among the gentiles but was telling Jews who were dispersed throughout the Roman empire to forsake Moses and the law. The church was still in a bit of a transition. Although God would take care of this issue within a few short years, the Jewish religious system was still very much intact, and even though Paul and James knew that you couldn't merit your salvation by keeping the law, the Jewish customs were still very much a part of their lives. For Paul to be viewed as telling other Jews to forsake Moses and the law could jeopardize the weaker consciences of his brothers, and something had to be done. So, James along with his fellow elders devised a plan.

They asked Paul to perform a purification ritual, which took place over seven days. Since he was away from Jerusalem, he was ceremonially unclean. After completing the ritual, which would require him to go to the temple twice. He was asked to make arrangements and pay for four men to complete a Nazirite Vow, in which they would fast and not cut their hair for some time. By doing this, James and the elders felt it would show that Paul lived in observance of the law. Once again, we see humility being exemplified by Paul.

Here's where things get a bit interesting. Should Paul do this? Are James and the elders right for suggesting this idea to Paul, and is Paul sinning if he does? Either way, this is terrible advice, and Paul would be foolish to take it because Paul would be going into the lion's den. Here is where we learn another valuable lesson from Paul and James. Humble believers are

Decisive

What I mean is that whether this is bad advice or if Paul is wrong to take the advice, his heart of humility enables him to take risks. Were Paul's heart full of pride, he might not be willing to take such a risk. Of course, Paul knew the dangers that awaited him if he were identified in the temple. It's bad enough that the Jewish believers already had issues with Paul, but what would happen if the Jews who persecuted the church found that public enemy no 1 was right within grasp?

This was the most challenging piece in preparing for today's message. Commentary after commentary kept going back and forth about whether Paul made a mistake in this account. Some even accused him of sinning for putting himself back under the law. But, whether or not Paul was wrong, or James and the elders were wrong for suggesting it didn't stop God's plan from being accomplished through Paul. This example should provide great encouragement when we need help figuring out what to do.

Even if we make a mistake, do we trust God is working amid our mess? If we have the kind of humility of Paul, it enables us to take risks and be decisive. Truthfully, our ability to make decisions in difficult moments reflects our faith in God's sovereignty and goodness. Instead of relying on our ability to get it right or living in fear of making the wrong decision and messing up God's plan for our lives. Indecisiveness can be the sign of a heart that doesn't fully trust in God. Of course, this isn't a license to do whatever we want. Instead, it's a call to decide with the confidence of someone filled with the Holy Spirit. As we see here, even if it was the wrong call, God ultimately used this moment to accomplish his will for Paul's life.

Author Kent Hughes says, "Some hearts never risk anything. They strive neither for sin nor for sainthood. They desire a temperate zone free from the storms of sin and from the tempests that accompany a life of service. Never burn for the souls of others, and you will avoid rejection. Never suggest a plan to reach the community or the world, and you will never be criticized for it. Never give counsel to someone undergoing the pain of separation or divorce, and you will never give errant advice. But just think of all the heavenly checks you will never cash for yourself or others."

As Paul freely decided to submit to the request of James and the elders humbly, God was behind the scenes divinely orchestrating his sovereign plan. It's a beautiful reality that you and I as experience as well. The Spirit of God works in our lives, and as we freely make decisions with humility, we have the hope and promise of knowing that he is working. It's a guarantee.

So, maybe Paul, James, and the elders got it wrong. As we'll see shortly, the plan backfires and lands Paul in prison, but did they make a mistake? Wasn't this always the plan? Going back to Paul's conversion in Acts 9, didn't the Lord say to Ananias to go to Paul *"for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."* Then again, more recently in Acts, as Paul says to the Ephesian elders in chapter 20, *"And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of the Lord."* As it turns out, Paul, a humble and decisive leader, is right where God wants him to be, bringing me to the last principle that we will look at today. Spirit-filled believers who are humble, decisive, with the...

Right Motivation

...Will consistently find themselves in the center of God's plan for their lives.

So, what was Paul's motivation? Ironically, we already heard this from the man himself. Although he is being accused of not observing the law and is asked to prove himself to the weaker-minded believers, we can get a peek into the heart of Paul from Romans 14: 13-15, *"Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died."* Lastly, let's see what Paul says of his kinsmen in Romans 9:3, *"or I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh."* Here we see the motivation of Paul displayed before our very eyes.

Paul's motivation is love. Between Paul's humility, his willingness to take risks and be decisive, and his motivation, we find a winning combination of living confidently within God's plan for our lives.

Let me close with Paul's words from 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 "19 For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings."