

# **CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE- PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian  
Church, 10 Downing St. Oakleigh, Vic., 3166]

## **DHW BIBLE CLASS LESSON 22 THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES CHAPTER 21**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Paul was in Miletus where he called for a meeting with the elders of the church in Ephesus. In an emotional farewell speech, he told the elders that they would not see him anymore (20:25). He humbly presented his testimony for their scrutiny and examination (20:18-21). He shared with them his plan to go to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost although the Holy Spirit had testified to him that “bonds and afflictions” awaited him. He was not deterred by these persecutions and had set his mind on finishing the task, which the Lord Jesus had assigned to him - to witness “the gospel of the grace of God” (20:22-24). Paul exhorted the elders to be alert and diligent in caring and protecting the church, which God had purchased with His blood. He urged them to take care of their own spiritual lives first before they shepherd the flock and feed the church of God. He foresaw that false preachers and teachers would infiltrate the church to destroy her, and that, even amongst themselves, there would be some who would “speak perverse things” to draw members of the church away (20:28-31).

When it was time for Paul to board the ship, the parting was tearful.

They all knelt down and pray on the beach. This chapter gives us a detailed itinerary of Paul’s travel from Miletus to Jerusalem via Coos, Rhodes, Patara, Tyre, Ptolemais and Caesarea. The last time Paul was in Jerusalem was about four years ago and this would be his last journey to the Holy City. It was not easy for Paul to decide on the trip as he had been duly warned of impending troubles and tribulations. Items of special interest are the two messages conveyed to Paul by the Holy Spirit, one in Tyre (21:4) and the other in Caesarea (21:11). In Tyre, the disciples told Paul “through the Spirit” that he should not go to Jerusalem. In Caesarea, a prophet by the name of Agabus, took Paul’s belt and tied his own hands and feet and then told Paul that the Holy Spirit said: “So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.” Despite these warnings, Paul persisted in obeying God’s will for his life.

Another interesting item to note is the intervention of the Roman authorities that delivered Paul from being killed by the hostile Jews. Luke recorded that the Roman authorities in many instances, came to the assistance of Paul when he was in dire danger. The Romans seemed to be friends, not foes. In Philippi, the magistrates having wrongfully imprisoned Paul and Silas, actually apologised to them and personally escorted them out of the prison (16:35ff). In Corinth, Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, refused even to listen to Paul’s accusers who were the Jews, and promptly dismissed the case (18:12ff). In Ephesus, the town clerk declared the Christian leaders innocent

and instead rebuked the crowd for causing a riot in public (19:35). Now in Caesarea, the chief captain by the name of Claudius Lysias (23:26) protected Paul from being killed.

The account in the chapter can be divided into three main sections: 1) Paul's journey from Miletus to Jerusalem (21:1-16); 2) Paul's meeting with the Jerusalem elders (21:17-26); 3) Paul's peril and the protection of the Roman military captain (21:27-40).

## COMMENTARY

### Paul's Journey from Miletus to Jerusalem

Luke detailed the itinerary of Paul and his travel-companions. From Miletus, the ship sailed in a south-westerly direction towards Coos winding through the islands, passing Rhodes and arriving at Patara where they disembarked. Then they took another ship, probably a larger one, to Tyre. The journey took them past the south of Cyprus, which was on their left, and landed at Tyre where the ship unloaded its cargo. Paul and his travel-companions stayed there for seven days before they set sail on their journey to Jerusalem.

### Paul in Tyre

Tyre was an ancient Phoenician city about twenty miles south of Sidon. It was a busy commercial centre of the world where the commodities brought in by the ships were gathered in its warehouses. The merchants of Tyre were among the first to venture into and sail the Mediterranean waters founding other colonies for trade. Although Alexander the Great conquered the city, it continued to

maintain much of its commercial importance till the Christian era. Both Tyre and Sidon "were crowded with glass-shops, dyeing and weaving establishments; and among the cunning workmen not least of which were those who were celebrated for the engraving of precious stones."<sup>1</sup>

The words "finding disciples" indicates that Paul went about and found some disciples (21:4). Apparently they could not find a synagogue but used a church, which was probably established after the death of Stephen. Paul had some fellowship with the disciples for seven days. They told Paul "through the Spirit that he should not go up to Jerusalem" (21:4). Although Paul's response was not stated, he had probably used the same reasons given to the Ephesian elders, namely that he was "bound in the Spirit" to go to Jerusalem (20:22). This presents us with a problem – judging from these two instances, did the Holy Spirit contradict itself? We shall discuss this later, but suffice to say at this point that we cannot conclude that the Holy Spirit had contradicted Himself.

At the end of the week it was time to set sail again. The disciples in Tyre, together with their wives and children, accompanied Paul and his travel-companions to the beach. There they knelt down to pray for journey mercies and the Lord's protection for Paul. Having exchanged goodbyes

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<sup>1</sup>2 Chronicles 2:3 And Solomon sent to Hiram the king of Tyre, saying, As thou didst deal with David my father, and didst send him cedars to build him an house to dwell therein, *even so deal with me*. . . . 7 Send me now therefore a man cunning to work in gold, and in silver, and in brass, and in iron, and in purple, and crimson, and blue, and that can skill to grave with the cunning men that *are* with me in Judah and in Jerusalem, whom David my father did provide.

and probably embraces and kisses as was their custom, they took their leave. The ship departed from Tyre and reached Ptolemais (pronounce, 'faw-ler-mee-ez'). Paul and his party greeted fellow believers in the city and stayed with them for one day. The next day, they set sail for Caesarea.

### **Paul in Caesarea**

Caesarea was a city on the western coast of Palestine. It was situated on the great Roman road from Tyre to Egypt, about 70 miles northwest of Jerusalem. The city was built by Herod the Great (around 10 B.C.) who named it after Caesar Augustus; hence it was called Caesarea Sebaste (Greek Sebastos = Latin "Augustus"). It was the capital of the Roman province of Judaea, the seat of the governors or procurators, and headquarters of the Roman soldiers. It had a large artificial harbour and the city was adorned with many imposing buildings of great splendour. Cornelius and his family were converted there through Peter (10:1, 24). Philip the evangelist, one of the seven deacons (6:5), lived there with his four unmarried daughters.

Philip played host to them where they stayed for many days (21:10). Recall that Paul was the man, who had consented to the stoning of Stephen, Philip's fellow deacon (6:5) and the stoners had placed their clothes at his feet. Stephen had been brutally martyred. It was because of the persecution of the believers then that Philip had been driven out of Jerusalem. Surely the meeting of these two men would bring back past memories. But now, they were both passionate servants of the Lord Jesus.

One day, while they were still in Philip's home, a prophet by the name of Agabus came to them. He took Paul's girdle (belt) and tied his own hands and feet, and said: "Thus saith the Holy Ghost, so shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle, and shall deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles" (21:11). When they (including Luke) heard this prediction, they urged Paul not to go to Jerusalem. Paul rebuked them for weeping and breaking his heart. He reiterated that he was ready not only to be bound but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus (21:13). When they see that Paul could not be persuaded, they said: "The will of the Lord be done" (21:14).

We now examine the issue of whether the Holy Spirit had contradicted Himself. Did the Holy Spirit say through the disciples of Tyre that they should tell Paul not to go to Jerusalem? Was it the same through Agabus? Did Paul earlier feel compelled by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem (20:22)? Was Paul over-confident and over-zealous? Did he disobey the Spirit?

First, we must emphasise again that the Holy Spirit cannot contradict Himself. Secondly, Paul was not in the habit of knowingly and purposely disobeying the Holy Spirit's directives. Thirdly, we cannot assume that either Paul or the disciples in Tyre or those in Caesarea were mistaken regarding the Spirit's prohibition or injunction to go. It is best to resolve the apparent contradiction in this way. Paul was compelled by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem and at the same time the Holy Spirit did impress upon him through the disciples at Tyre and those in Caesarea including Agabus that he

would face suffering and even imprisonment. It is not necessary to read these instances as a contradiction by the Holy Spirit or a misunderstanding by the others. Is it not possible that God sometimes takes steps to allow our sacrifice and devotion to be voluntary? Therefore, in this case, the Holy Spirit, who compelled Paul to go to Jerusalem, also warned him that he would face sufferings. Ultimately, Paul was given the free choice and he decided to go. He was not frightened by threats or trouble or suffering. The Lord had made it clear to him at the very beginning: "For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake" (9:16).

### **Paul's Meeting with the Jerusalem Elders**

Paul and his party left Philip, who had been a wonderful host. They made their way to Jerusalem, which was about seventy miles away. They took up their "carriages", meaning that they had some animals to ride on. Paul was anxious to reach Jerusalem in a hurry and now they had some form of transport. On the way, they stopped and lodged in the home of Mnason, a Cypriot. He was "an old disciple" -- a long-standing believer who was an early disciple (v.16). He might not have great gifts but he is remembered for his kind hospitality and generosity to all who read the book of Acts. He insisted that they should break journey and take a rest at his house. Finally, Paul and his party arrived at Jerusalem. He was warmly welcomed by the brethren. The next day, Paul and his party met up with all the elders and James, the brother of the Lord Jesus. James was still the leader of the Jerusalem church. After the customary greetings, Paul

shared his ministry with them and told them of the things which God had done among the Gentiles. Paul also came to Jerusalem to give them the love gifts, which the Gentile churches, had contributed. He probably gave the gifts to James at this meeting in the presence of the elders. After they had heard Paul's account of what God had done through his ministry among the Gentiles, they glorified the Lord.

They told Paul that there were many thousands of Jews in Jerusalem indicating that the church had grown from its humble beginnings. They added that these Christian Jews were all zealous of the Law of Moses. They told Paul that it had been rumoured that he had taught all the Jews, who lived among the Gentiles, to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children and not to keep the traditions. In view of this, his presence in the Holy City might cause divisions among the Christian Jews. The elders were concerned about the unity of the Christian Jews. They mentioned that there were four men who had taken a vow and proposed to Paul that he should purify himself together with them, and be "at charges with them" meaning that he should pay for their expenses. The ritual, which the four men took, involved the shaving of their heads indicating that they were undertaking the vow of a Nazarite.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Paul could refute the rumour and show that he was walking in accordance with the Law. They continued that with regards to the Gentiles, they had all concluded that

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<sup>2</sup> Numbers 6:18 And the Nazarite shall shave the head of his separation *at* the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, and shall take the hair of the head of his separation, and put *it* in the fire which *is* under the sacrifice of the peace offerings.

the Gentiles need not observe the Law except keeping themselves from things offered to idols, and from eating of blood, and from animals strangled, and from sexual immorality (21:20-25). Having heard what they said, Paul agreed to go along with their proposal. The next day he presented himself in the temple and purified himself together with the four men. The purification ceremony lasted a week and an offering was offered for every one of them.

Paul's agreement to go along with the proposal may be deemed as a compromise to some. Let us not be too quick to condemn. Paul understood that the ritual was ceremonial rather than doctrinal. The ritual was not about the way of salvation, which was through Christ Jesus alone. It was also not about the Moral Law, which state that God's people, both Jews and Gentiles, must live holy lives according to God's commandments. But it was about Jewish customs, the way in which a Christian Jew ought to conduct himself. It was not inconsistent with what Paul taught the Gentile believers regarding circumcision – that it was not necessary for them. Paul, however, did not teach the Christian Jews to turn their backs on circumcision.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, James and the Jerusalem Council agreed and they stipulated four things, which the Gentiles ought not to do. In summary, these are Jewish

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<sup>3</sup> Paul had Timothy, whose mother was Jewess, to be circumcised: Acts 16:1 Then came he to Derbe and Lystra: and, behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timotheus, the son of a certain woman, which was a Jewess, and believed; but his father *was* a Greek: 2 Which was well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium. 3 Him would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters: for they knew all that his father was a Greek.

customs and practices and they are not about the way of salvation or about the moral law.

Therefore, Paul was conciliatory and went along with the proposal. Paul was passionate about the unity of the Body of Christ. It was not a compromise in the sense of sacrificing a doctrinal or moral principle. Paul was conciliatory because it was in the area of practice. Just as he circumcised Timothy because the Jews in Jerusalem demanded it, he also exercised the same spirit here. Paul shared this tolerant spirit in his first letter to the Corinthians.<sup>4</sup> Paul's purpose was that he would be acceptable to the Christian Jews and thereby be an effective witness of the gospel of salvation. He desires no unnecessary stumbling block to come in the way of his testimony for Christ.

### **Paul's Peril and Protection**

The proposition of James and the elders of Jerusalem did not achieve the desired effect. Certain Jews from Asia saw Paul in the temple during the seven days of purification when he performed it with the four. They incited all the people to frenzy and accused Paul of teaching people everywhere to go against the Jews, the Law and the temple; and of bringing the Greeks into the temple thus desecrating their holy

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:20 And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; 21 To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. 22 To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all *men*, that I might by all means save some. 23 And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with *you*.

place (21:28). Luke recorded that they had seen Paul together with Trophimus, an Ephesian, and had assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple. The combination of these accusations incited the crowd to seize and drag Paul out of the temple. As they were about to kill him, news of the commotion came to the ears of the “chief captain” of the Roman soldiers in the city. Together with his soldiers and centurions, he ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the chief captain and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul (21:32). The Jews were afraid of the Roman soldiers.

The chief captain’s name was Claudius Lysias (23:26). He took Paul and commanded that he be bound with two chains. He demanded to know Paul’s identity and the crime that he had done. The hysterical mob cried out one thing and another. When Claudius Lysias could not ascertain the nature of the problem, he commanded that Paul be brought to the Roman station. The hostile and angry crowd was so incensed that Paul had to be carried up by the soldiers on a flight of steps to the station. The maddening crowd followed and cried out: “Away with him” (v.36). Recall that these same words were used on the Lord Jesus. The crowd wanted Paul to be put to death by crucifixion.

As Paul was led into the station, he requested to speak to the chief captain. The captain asked him whether he could speak Greek and whether he was the Egyptian who had previously led a group of terrorists. Paul proudly revealed that he was a Jew of Tarsus, a citizen of the city of Cilicia. Paul did not divulge that he was a Roman citizen by birth, which he had done previously in Philippi. He

asked the chief captain for permission to speak to the crowd. Claudius Lysias consented to his request. Paul stood at the head of the stairs and calmed the crowd by signalling with his hand. When the crowd kept silent, he spoke to them in the Hebrew tongue.

This episode shows that James and the elders did not manage to solve the problem of the Jewish discontent with Paul and his ministry. In fact, the situation turned rather ghastly. Paul nearly died in the commotion and was almost killed by the hysterical mob. But God was faithful to His servant and saved him in the nick of time. The interesting thing is that God used unbelievers to save His servant. God is sovereign and He can use any power on earth to accomplish His purpose. This truth is awesome!

### **PRACTICAL VALUE**

Christians ought to be hospitable and generous with one another. This was experienced by Paul in his journey from Miletus to Jerusalem. He was warmly welcomed by the disciples in Tyre who took good care of him and his party. The spontaneous expression of love and concern for Paul, whom they did not know very well, was commendable. In Caesarea, he stayed with Philip the evangelist whose four daughters played a great part in making the travellers comfortable. In addition, Mnason insisted that they should rest in his home before continuing their journey to Jerusalem. It is wonderful to know that the early Christians treated their fellow Christians with such cordiality and generosity. They put into practice the saying of the Lord Jesus: “It is more blessed to give than to

receive.” And this giving in the name of Christ will reap great rewards in heaven! Jim Elliot says, “He is no fool to exchange what he cannot keep for what he can have and keep for all eternity.” Let us love and be kind to one another especially to the household of Christ.

The Holy Spirit will use the inspired and preserved Word of God to lead and guide us in discerning the will of God. Sometimes, troubles and tribulations are part of God’s will. So how do we know? Only through much prayer and searching of the Word, could we like Paul make the right choice and commitment. Just like Paul, we can leave the rest to the mercy and providence of God, the God who delivered Paul for it was not time for him to die. AMEN

**DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

**Daily Readings**

**Monday:** Acts 21:1-7; Matthew 16:21-23.

**Tuesday:** Acts 21:8-14; 1 Timothy 3:13; 1 Corinthians 7:37.

**Wednesday:** Acts 21:15-26; 1 Corinthians 9:20-23; 10:32-33.

**Thursday:** Acts 21:27-30; Philippians 1:29-30.

**Friday:** Acts 21:31-40; Luke 23:18; 1 Corinthians 10:13.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What were the warnings to Paul concerning his going to Jerusalem? What was Paul’s response?

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2. Why did the Holy Spirit repeatedly warn Paul of the things that would happen to him in Jerusalem? Did the Spirit really want Paul to go? What do you think?

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3. What is the basis on which Paul compromised with the Christian Jews in Jerusalem? What principle(s) can be drawn for our guidance in doing the work of the church?

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4. In Jerusalem, what difficulty did James and the elders feel must be removed, and what did they request Paul to do? Why do you think Paul willingly submitted to their request?

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5. What were the circumstances under which Paul wanted to speak to the people? What impresses you most in regard to this incident?

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**QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL FURTHER STUDY:**

1. What does 20:1-21:16 reveal about God, especially the Holy Spirit?

2. What are the good examples for churches in this chapter?