

When we last met, we studied Paul's message to the Ephesian Elders. Paul sent for the elders during his layover at Miletus, so that he could instruct them further about their ministry, and to give them a final farewell. He had his mind set on going to Jerusalem, in time for the feast of Pentecost, and to take an offering collected from the primarily gentile churches, to give relief to the people in the church at Jerusalem. His hope was that if the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem saw the love and generosity of the gentile Christians towards them that they would receive them as brothers and sisters in faith, and tear down the barrier that Judaism posed once and for all.

We also considered the wording of Acts 20:22-23. Was Paul compelled by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem, or constrained by the Spirit from going to Jerusalem. Was it God's perfect will that Paul go to Jerusalem at this time, or was God warning Paul not to go? In our passage of scripture this evening we read of two more instances where people warned Paul by the Spirit of God not to go, but Paul remains determined. This passage begins with the parting words of Paul to the Ephesian elders, and ends with the events that take us right up to Paul's arrival in Jerusalem. Let's see what insights we might gain as we read Acts 20:33-21:16.

The opening verses of tonight's passage give us insight into Paul's ministry in Ephesus, which in turn sets an example for us to follow in our own ministries. The first principle we see is that ministry is not about the money. In fact, a covetous attitude toward money can cripple a person's ministry. I have known people in vocational ministry that reasoned that God calls them to whatever appears to be the bigger better deal. Whatever ministry they are in now is merely a stepping stone towards what the next church has to offer.

I do not mean to imply that God does not sometimes call a pastor to another church wherein God pours out financial blessings. I base my statement on observation, and the personal testimonies of men who have told me that the biggest mistake they made in ministry was falling to the allurements of the bigger better deal. They got ahead of God, and lost much of the joy and the power of the Spirit in their ministries.

Apparently, the church at Ephesus did not compensate Paul on a regular basis for his ministry. So some might ask, why do you let the church give you a regular salary Brother Greg? Let me say that ministry, for me, is not about the money, but I am so appreciative to this church, that you compensate me with a generous salary, so that I can take care of my family, and focus full time on ministry. While I was in seminary, I was a weekend pastor, because I was in New Orleans most of the week. After I graduated, I worked full time, bi-vocationally, up until the Lord called me back to Hickory Hammock Baptist Church.

Paul did not accept a salary, because he feared it might give the perception that he used the gospel to advance himself financially. He did not want to give the Ephesians any tightness in their chests, or to give them any reason to believe he had ulterior motives. We should note, however, that the Philippians and perhaps some of the other churches sent him financial support on a regular basis, which he received graciously, with thanksgiving.

While in Ephesus, in order to support himself, to aid his companions, and to advance the ministry, Paul worked hard with his own two hands. He did whatever it took to reach people with the gospel, and to encourage the church.

There is an attitude among some, that ministry is an easy ticket in life. They think that you don't have to work hard; you get all the accolades from people in the church, it's an easy life, and they day dream about getting into ministry for all the wrong reasons. For me, ministry is my dream job, because God called me to His purpose. There is no place I want to be outside of

God's revealed will for my life. That does not mean the ministry is easy, or that it is without great challenges. Some days, I work hard with my hands at the church, if that is what I need to do. Ministry is extremely mentally and spiritually challenging. There is no shortage of the devil's attacks, or criticism from others, for anyone who stands upon God's word, and always tries to do what is right, but someone in ministry is in the spotlight, and becomes the target of those kinds of attacks. Effective teaching and preaching ministries require hours of weekly study and preparation, with frequent and sometimes constant interruption.

So why would anyone want to subject themselves to all of that? It all comes back to God's call upon a person's life. With God's calling comes His grace to accomplish His will. Just as God is faithful to me, when I am in the center of His will, He is faithful to all who follow Him in obedience and faith. Whatever God's will might be for your life, work hard at being the best you can be at fulfilling His purpose.

The reason we work hard at ministry is to help the weak, and because we realize that it is more blessed to give than to receive. Through evangelism we offer life to the spiritually dead. Through discipleship we help people to grow in their relationship with the Lord, and their knowledge of God's word. Ministry is about helping others, and every person who is faithful in ministry knows the affirmation of the Holy Spirit, and the blessings from God that come from just following His will because we love Him, and we love one another.

We see love expressed as Paul left the Ephesian elders. They expressed love in their prayers for one another. We see the love in the sorrow they felt when they knew that they would not see each other again. Love can be seen in their tears. Ministry is not about the money; it's about hard work and giving to others. It's about praying, encouraging, and loving one another.

After leaving the Ephesian elders, Paul and his companions made their way towards Jerusalem. When they reached the mainland at Tyre, in Syria, they stayed a week, while they met with the believers in that city. It is interesting to note that the church in that city had its beginning during the dispersion of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, when Paul was the primary persecutor of the church. Now, he comes to them as an Apostle, and a primary leader in the church.

Luke focuses on the disciples warning Paul not to go to Jerusalem, but notice that their warning came through the Spirit. If their warnings to Paul came out of their love and concern for him, that is one thing, but if the warning came through the Holy Spirit, if the Holy Spirit was telling Paul not to go, that is another thing all together.

This is nothing new, because in chapter twenty we read that Paul acknowledged that, in every city, the Holy Spirit warned Him that nothing but hardship and danger awaited him in Jerusalem, yet he was determined to go. Here we have the whole church at Tyre affirming through the Spirit that what Paul already knew was a certainty. Again we must ask whether or not God wanted Paul to return to Jerusalem at this time. Did God send him, or did God try to dissuade him from going?

Regardless of what position we might take, we see a basic repeat of the events of Paul's departure from the Ephesian elders. This time however, the whole church turned out to see Paul off on his journey, even the women and children. We see again the love they had for one another, as well as their emphasis on praying for one another.

The next major port of call, as far as Luke's account is concerned, was their arrival at Caesarea. There they entered the house of Phillip. Phillip was one of the seven chosen to take care of the widows in Jerusalem, back in chapter 6. We say that he was one of the first deacons

in the church. He is here called an evangelist, and the text indicated that he now lived in, and ministered in, Caesarea. The bible says that he had four daughters who prophesied.

This is a distinction that the bible reserves for those who are prophets or preachers, those who speak on behalf of God. Here we read of this title being bestowed on four unmarried women. We study closely what Paul and others have to say about the roles of men and women. Generally speaking, the men are to take the spiritual leadership roles in their homes, and in the church, while women take an equally important supporting role. We would be remiss, however, if we did not recognize that there are many instances in the Old Testament and the New, where women prophesied. Paul himself writes about this in 1 Corinthians 11:5. I am not suggesting that you change your beliefs about individual roles, but I am saying that we must always be honest with the scriptures. At least at this time in church history, it appears that there were some women who had the gift of prophesy.

It is surprising to me that Luke does not record that these women, being prophetesses, had something to say about Paul going to Jerusalem, but he does record what a prophet named Agabus had to say. "Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, 'The Holy Spirit says in this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the gentiles.'" In every city, the Holy Spirit warned Paul about what lie ahead for him in Jerusalem. In Tyre, through the Spirit, the people warned him not to go to Jerusalem. Now, in Caesarea, another prophet warns Paul that the Holy Spirit says that if he continues to Jerusalem he is going to face great hardship.

Notice in verse 12 the use of the plural pronoun we. Not only did the prophet, and the people in the church urge Paul not to go to Jerusalem, so did Luke, and the other companions with them. Everybody loved Paul, and everyone who had the Holy Spirit warned Paul not to continue on his quest to take the offering to the church in Jerusalem.

Obviously Paul would not be dissuaded. His mind and his heart were set on Jerusalem. He did not care about the warnings. He was prepared to be arrested or even to die in order to carry out his mission. Paul asks them to not weep and break his heart. He believes he must go, and he will go, not matter what.

Let's say for the sake of argument, that it was the Lord's will that Paul suffer in this way. After all, Paul says, I'm going, and the others said to let the Lord's will be done. If this was God's perfect will, we commend Paul's willingness to suffer for the sake of Christ, even as we should model that same willingness. On the other hand, each of these instances recorded have the warnings attributed to the Holy Spirit. What if Paul was so hardheaded and determined that he brushed off what the Holy Spirit tried to tell him?

From my own personal experience, I have learned that I need to heed any warning that comes from the Holy Spirit. Sometimes that warning comes directly to me from the Holy Spirit, just as Paul said in chapter 20 that in every city the Spirit warns me. Sometimes when I am not in tune as I need to be, the Spirit speaks to me through the wise council of others, as is the case of both instances recorded in chapter 21. Often the Spirit speaks to me through the inspired word of God, as I look at examples of how the Spirit works and how people responded to the Spirit.

My take on all of this is that the Holy Spirit will never lead you astray. I find it unlikely that all of these Christians would come to the same conclusion, but only Paul got it right. Yes, the collection taken to the Christians in Jerusalem was a great idea, but Paul could have sent it by someone else, and gone directly to Rome, as God had earlier given him the vision to do.

No matter what conclusion we might make on this matter, Paul does go to Jerusalem, and he suffers for years as a direct result of his decision. Still, God worked out his will in Paul's life,

and Paul becomes an even stronger Christian as a result of his trials. He winds up going to Rome, as God intended, and there writes inspired letters that are a source of instruction and encouragement for the church of all ages. We all struggle with decisions from time to time, but if our faith and our hope in Jesus Christ is real, and we trust Him completely through our changing circumstances, God will see us through.

It must begin, however, with a personal relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. If there is anyone here who would like to know how to begin that relationship, I would be honored to speak privately with you.