

Acts 21:1-36

Paul Goes to Jerusalem, Whether Jerusalem Likes It or Not

Learning Objectives

- Doing God's will doesn't always mean avoiding pain, even if it seems obvious that pain is coming.
- Doing God's will sometimes means meeting others where they're at, rather than preaching at them.

? How do you feel when someone tells you to do something that you don't want to do?

Pray for your time together as a group.

Read Out Loud: Acts 21:3-14 (NIV)

³ After sighting Cyprus and passing to the south of it, we sailed on to Syria. We landed at Tyre, where our ship was to unload its cargo. ⁴ We sought out the disciples there and stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. ⁵ When it was time to leave, we left and continued on our way. All of them, including wives and children, accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray. ⁶ After saying goodbye to each other, we went aboard the ship, and they returned home.

⁷ We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and sisters and stayed with them for a day. ⁸ Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. ⁹ He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

Why go to Jerusalem at all?
According to the previous chapter of Acts, Paul's goal was to get to Jerusalem for Pentecost, the time of celebration and thanksgiving for God's provision. According to Romans 15:25-26 and 1 Corinthians 16:1, Paul had gifts for the church in Jerusalem. As we'll see, the church there was also going through a difficult time.

¹⁰ After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹ 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 Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'"

¹² When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. ¹³ Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." ¹⁴ When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."

? Did Paul disobey God's will by not listening to counsel of his friends?

Possible Answers: No, because people incorrectly interpreted the trials that Paul would face as a reason that he should not go.

? Why does Paul not take the counsel of the people he visits, the prophet, or his companions?

Possible Answers: Paul was unafraid of trouble and was willing to risk everything to be obedient and to answer God's call.

? Why might others try to persuade us away from obedience to God if it clearly brings some discomfort or trial?

Possible Answers: The people in your life want to avoid pain for you because they don't want you to have to go through trouble. It can be hard to discern God's will in our lives, and so it can be easier to simply rely on others to guide us.

Read Out Loud: Acts 21:17-26 (NIV)

¹⁷ When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters received us warmly.¹⁸ The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. ¹⁹ Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

²⁰ When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. ²¹ They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. ²² What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, ²³ so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. ²⁴ Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. ²⁵ As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality."

Back in Acts 15, the council in Jerusalem, led by James and advised by Peter, had decided that Gentiles didn't need to be circumcised to be believers. Note that in verse 21, people seem to believe that Paul is telling people that not only do they not need to be circumcised, they don't need to follow any laws whatsoever.

²⁶ The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.

? Why did Paul go through this strict observance of the law, even though he'd been preaching that these customs weren't necessary to be righteous?

Possible Answers: Paul preached that Jewish customs weren't required for salvation, he himself kept Jewish customs. "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews," he says in 1 Cor 9:20.

Read Out Loud: 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 (NIV)

¹⁹ Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

? What situations have you experienced in which compromise was necessary?

? How do you tell the difference between things you're willing to compromise on, and things that you are unwilling to change no matter what?

Possible Answers: Many people may feel like there are some things they are willing to compromise on, and some they are not.

Leader's Note: Try not to get caught up in hypothetical ethical discussions (like "Is it okay to kill one person if it guarantees saving a hundred more?") In this case, Paul is trying to follow local custom, not go in as an undercover cop.

? Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 that he became "all things to all people" to reach others for the Gospel. What can we do to reach people where they're at, when we might come from very different backgrounds, lifestyles and perspectives?

Possible Answer: Paul submitted himself to both Jewish law and Gentile customs in order to reach as many people as possible for the Gospel. We are called to try to reach people, not just preach at them or tell them that their lives are wrong.

Read Out Loud: Acts 21:27-36 (NIV)

²⁷ When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, ²⁸ shouting, "Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place." ²⁹ (They had

The crime of bringing non-Jews into the temple was so serious that even the Roman government allowed the Jewish people to sentence people to death for it. There were inscriptions on the gates to that effect, and at least two of these inscriptions survive today. One, found in 1871, is in Istanbul; another, found in 1935, is in the Palestine Museum. Also note that the riot probably saved Paul's life; above all, the Roman soldiers were responsible for keeping order, and they would have been held accountable had they allowed the riot to continue.

previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple.)

³⁰ The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. ³¹ While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. ³² He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul.

³³ The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done. ³⁴ Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. ³⁵ When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. ³⁶ The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Get rid of him!"

? Is there anything that Paul could have done to try to avoid causing a riot?

Possible Answers: People were already willing to believe that Paul was preaching heresy, it wasn't so difficult for them to believe that he would take an Ephesian into the temple.

A preview of the rest of the book of Acts: While Paul's in Jerusalem, he'll cause a riot in a religious council (Acts 23:1-11), and a secret death squad will form to kill him (Acts 23:12-22). Later, half a Roman legion will have to escort him out of town (Acts 23:23-35) and eventually ship him off to the Mediterranean (Acts 27-29).

? Should Paul have tried to avoid the crowds and the temple, knowing what was likely to happen to him?

Possible Answers: The crowds were determined to get Paul, at whatever cost, and only the protection of the Romans eventually saved his life. Avoiding the crowds would only have delayed the inevitable.

For Discussion and Accountability

? Do you find yourself expecting comforts and blessings when you follow God's will?

? Is there someone God is calling you to share the Gospel with, despite differences of culture, lifestyle or perspectives?