


A Five-Day Devotional Journey
September 21 - 27, 2008
Acts 21:1-36

mad, mad world

1 Heading toward Jerusalem

Read. Acts 21:1-9 NLT

After saying farewell to the Ephesian elders, we sailed straight to the island of Cos. The next day we reached Rhodes and then went to Patara. There we boarded a ship sailing for Phoenicia. We sighted the island of Cyprus, passed it on our left, and landed at the harbor of Tyre, in Syria, where the ship was to unload its cargo. We went ashore, found the local believers, and stayed with them a week. These believers prophesied through the Holy Spirit that Paul should not go on to Jerusalem. When we returned to the ship at the end of the week, the entire congregation, including women and children, left the city and came down to the shore with us. There we knelt, prayed, and said our farewells. Then we went aboard, and they returned home.

The next stop after leaving Tyre was Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and sisters and stayed for one day. The next day we went on to Caesarea and stayed at the home of Philip the Evangelist, one of the seven men who had been chosen to distribute food. He had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy.

Think.

- If possible, trace Paul's journey on a map, noting each place, the distances involved, the time spent.
- What do you find striking about Paul's interactions with believers on his way to Jerusalem? What warning is sounded in Tyre? How does the faith community send Paul off? What impresses you about this scene?
- What "blast from the past" does Paul encounter in Caesarea? Where did we last encounter Philip? What has he evidently been doing over the last decade or two since we last saw him in Acts 8?
- The depth of Paul's relationship with these believers all along the way is striking. To what extent do you feel connected like that in a network of life-giving friendships? How can we grow these kinds of connections?

Pray.

Lord, show me how to pour myself into people and hearts and lives as an authentic Jesus follower. Lead me into a deeper experience of the giving and receiving of true fellowship in you.

Live. Live outside the boundaries — pour yourself into some new friendships this week.

"Step out of the traffic! Take a long, loving look at me, your High God! Above politics, above everything."

Psalm 46:10 *Message*

Like a salmon swimming upriver, Paul makes his way to Jerusalem. He encounters warning signs everywhere:

Stop.

Dead End.

Road Closed.

Repeated warnings of a detour that was anything but a scenic diversion. And yet he pressed right on through each warning.

Jerusalem.

The city of peace was a city in increasing turmoil. Society was unraveling. In less than a decade the spark would ignite, and then for four years the holy land would burn as the full storm finally broke. Jerusalem was the epicenter of what would be a worldwide quake, the foreshocks of which were already clearly rippling out. To step into the city was to step into middle of an unfolding disaster.

And now the apostle, the simple Jesus follower, comes to the city of peace, his companions carrying a huge collection for the poor. And — surprise! — even though keeping a low profile, he steps right into the middle of a riot.

Was Paul courageous? Foolhardy? Stubborn? Or was he walking in simple obedience to his Master? I'm struck by the contrasts. Paul's calm and steadiness. The loving embrace of a holy band of friends over and over and over again. Paul's quiet submission to the counsel of the Jerusalem leadership. All set against the bitterness of enemies filled with suspicion and ready accusation in a city on edge, brimming with fear, poised for riot.

It all begs the question: where does that calm come from? What is it that holds a Jesus follower together when everything and everyone is coming apart? What is it that leads a disciple to step into a mad, mad world and gives him the courage to speak to it, to live in it, and even to gladly die for it? These final chapters of Acts are an open invitation to come and see, to learn the 'secret' of a lifestyle intended for and open to us all.

2) They begged Paul not to go

Read. Acts 21:10-16 NLT

Several days later a man named Agabus, who also had the gift of prophecy, arrived from Judea. He came over, took Paul's belt, and bound his own feet and hands with it. Then he said, "The Holy Spirit declares, 'So shall the owner of this belt be bound by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and turned over to the Gentiles.'" When we heard this, we and the local believers all begged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. But he said, "Why all this weeping? You are breaking my heart! I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but even to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus." When it was clear that we couldn't persuade him, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."

After this we packed our things and left for Jerusalem. Some believers from Caesarea accompanied us, and they took us to the home of Mnason, a man originally from Cyprus and one of the early believers.

Think.

- Where have we met Agabus before in Acts (see Acts 11)? What do you make of his rather interesting form of "prophetic delivery"? What effect did this prophecy have on the local believers?
- Why do you think Paul is refusing to listen to everyone's counsel? Do you think he is making the right decision? Why or why not?
- When have you made decisions against the wishes of people whom you trust and admire? How did things turn out? How do you know when to listen to the voices around you, and when to "stay the course" you feel compelled to pursue?

Pray.

Lord, keep me far from folly and self-asserting presumption. Give me grace to hear the voices of others, but ultimately to be drawn by your voice to the path you have laid out for me.

Live. Quietly pray over any major decisions you may be facing.

4) A mob in the temple

Read. Acts 21:26-29 NLT

So Paul went to the Temple the next day with the other men. They had already started the purification ritual, so he publicly announced the date when their vows would end and sacrifices would be offered for each of them. The seven days were almost ended when some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul in the Temple and roused a mob against him. They grabbed him, yelling, "Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who preaches against our people everywhere and tells everybody to disobey the Jewish laws. He speaks against the Temple—and even defiles this holy place by bringing in Gentiles." (For earlier that day they had seen him in the city with Trophimus, a Gentile from Ephesus, and they assumed Paul had taken him into the Temple.)

Think.

- How had Paul responded to the leadership's counsel? How well does it seem to have worked? What undoes everything?
- What was Paul accused of doing and by whom? On what basis did they make the accusation against him?
- What insight does this incident give us into the nature of assumptions we make about others? When have you found yourself getting angry or feeling hurt over assumptions you have made about someone or their behavior? How can we identify such assumptions before they do damage to our relationships?
- When have you found yourself on the receiving end of assumptions made by others about you? How did you handle this?

Pray. Lord, help me to see others more clearly as you do; to set aside the lenses of my assumptions and perceptions. Teach me to slow down and see before speaking and acting.

Live. Identify and pray over any existing assumptions you may be currently making about others. Stop and seek divine input.

3) A warm welcome in Jerusalem

Read. Acts 21:17-25 NLT

When we arrived, the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem welcomed us warmly. The next day Paul went with us to meet with James, and all the elders of the Jerusalem church were present. After greeting them, Paul gave a detailed account of the things God had accomplished among the Gentiles through his ministry. After hearing this, they praised God. And then they said, "You know, dear brother, how many thousands of Jews have also believed, and they all follow the law of Moses very seriously. But the Jewish believers here in Jerusalem have been told that you are teaching all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn their backs on the laws of Moses. They've heard that you teach them not to circumcise their children or follow other Jewish customs. What should we do? They will certainly hear that you have come. Here's what we want you to do. We have four men here who have completed their vow. Go with them to the Temple and join them in the purification ceremony, paying for them to have their heads ritually shaved. Then everyone will know that the rumors are all false and that you yourself observe the Jewish laws. As for the Gentile believers, they should do what we already told them in a letter: They should abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality."

Think.

- What kind of reception did Paul receive in Jerusalem? Why does there still seem to be a problem with Paul there? What perception was there about Paul? How accurate do you think this perception was? What counsel is Paul given?
- When have others had the totally wrong idea about you? How did you handle their misperceptions?

Pray. Lord, grant me a humble spirit when I am misunderstood; free me from the temptation to petty self-defense and self-assertion; show me how to love when I feel placed on trial.

Live. In word and/or deed, humbly bless an adversary this week.

5) Uproar and confusion

Read. Acts 21:30-36 NLT

The whole city was rocked by these accusations, and a great riot followed. Paul was grabbed and dragged out of the Temple, and immediately the gates were closed behind him. As they were trying to kill him, word reached the commander of the Roman regiment that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. He immediately called out his soldiers and officers and ran down among the crowd. When the mob saw the commander and the troops coming, they stopped beating Paul.

Then the commander arrested him and ordered him bound with two chains. He asked the crowd who he was and what he had done. Some shouted one thing and some another. Since he couldn't find out the truth in all the uproar and confusion, he ordered that Paul be taken to the fortress. As Paul reached the stairs, the mob grew so violent the soldiers had to lift him to their shoulders to protect him. And the crowd followed behind, shouting, "Kill him, kill him!"

Think.

- How did the accusations affect the crowd in the temple? What was done with Paul? Who came to his rescue?
- What really stands out to you in this whole unfolding drama? What do you think is going on in Paul's heart as all of this unfolds? (You can look ahead into the next chapter for more insight into that.)
- What groups in our world do you think feel similar hostility towards the church today? What might we do to defuse it?

Pray.

Father, in the uproar and confusion of this world, give me grace to hear your voice, to see your face, to feel your heart.

Live. Identify any current personal or cultural upheavals that have you on edge — and then quietly meditate on Psalm 46:10.