

“Spiritual Compromise”

- Acts 21 -

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Acts 21 - 1 Now it came to pass, that when we had departed from them and set sail, running a straight course we came to Cos, the following day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. 2 And finding a ship sailing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. 3 When we had sighted Cyprus, we passed it on the left, sailed to

Syria, and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload her cargo. 4 And finding disciples, we stayed there seven days. They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem. 5 When we had come to the end of those days, we departed and went on our way; and they all accompanied us, with wives and children, till we were out of the city. And we knelt down on the shore and prayed. 6 When we had taken our leave of one another, we boarded the ship, and they returned home. 7 And when we had finished our voyage from Tyre, we came to Ptolemais, greeted the brethren, and stayed with them one day. 8 On the next day we who were Paul's companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. 9 Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied. 10 And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" 12 Now when we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem. 13 Then Paul answered, "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." 14 So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, "The will of the Lord be done." 15 And after those days we packed and went up to Jerusalem. 16 Also some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us and brought with them a certain Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we were to lodge. 17 And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. 18 On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. 19 When he had greeted them, he told in detail those things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. 20 And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many myriads of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law; 21 "but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. 22 "What then? The assembly must certainly meet, for they will hear that you have come. 23 "Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have taken a vow. 24 "Take them and be purified with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads, and that all may know that those things of which they were informed concerning you are nothing, but that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law. 25 "But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that they should observe no such thing, except that they should keep themselves from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality." 26 Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them. 27 Now when the seven days were almost ended, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, 28 crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against the people, the law, and this place; and furthermore he also brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." 29 (For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, whom they supposed that Paul had brought into the temple.) 30 And all the city was disturbed; and the people ran together, seized Paul, and dragged him out of the temple; and immediately the doors were shut. 31 Now as they were seeking to kill him, news came to the commander of the garrison that all Jerusalem was in an uproar. 32 He immediately took soldiers and centurions, and ran down to them. And when they saw the commander and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. 33 Then the commander came near and took him, and commanded him to be bound with two chains; and he asked who he was and what he had done. 34 And some among the multitude cried one thing and some another. So when he could not ascertain the truth because of the tumult, he commanded him to be taken into the barracks. 35 When he reached the stairs, he had to be carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the mob. 36 For the multitude of the people followed after, crying out, "Away with him!" 37 Then as Paul was about to be led into the barracks, he said to the commander, "May I speak to you?" He replied, "Can you speak Greek? 38 "Are you not the Egyptian who some time ago stirred up a rebellion and led the four thousand assassins out into the wilderness?" 39 But Paul said, "I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city; and I implore you, permit me to speak to the people." 40 So when he had given him permission, Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, saying...

Last week...and at times throughout the study of this book, I have noted that Paul, while a great apostle and servant of God, was just human like all of us. By his own measurement, he saw himself as “the chief of sinners.” (1 Tim 1:15) Yet this passage has been “ground zero” for a hotly contested debate throughout the years. Many pastors and commentators have struggled with this passage. Bible scholars, theologians, and even novices have argued whether or not Paul was right in his decisions and behavior in chapter 21 of Acts. I suppose we are all reluctant to attribute any wrongful action to the Apostle Paul. These studies in Acts have endeared him to us. We recognize the strength of his character, the fervor of his spirit, the love and compassion that always was near the surface in this great-hearted man, and we have come to love him. It is hard to believe that Paul would ever deliberately disobey the Holy Spirit. And yet, taken at its face value, this passage indicates a command of the Holy Spirit which the apostle chose to ignore.

Throughout the chapter, we have evidence of the Spirit of God attempting to pull Paul off course on his trajectory. Verses 4, 11-12, and 22:18, all speak to the idea that Paul was *not* to go to Jerusalem! It’s not hard to understand his thinking though. We know that Paul had a deep compassion for his Jewish brethren, many of which would naturally be found on the streets of Jerusalem. But we also know that God indicated again and again that Paul was called unto the *Gentiles*!

We *could* take the stance that Paul was in the right and all these disciples were wrong. But we have seen the results of the rejection of wholesale warnings and the thinking that I alone possess the truth and the righteous position. Furthermore one would have to ignore three crucial words -- it was "***through the Spirit***" that they told Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. We must face the full implications of those words. And remember, they were recorded by Luke, who was Paul's friend. He wrote this account several years after these events, and with the advantage of hindsight, he looked back over the whole circumstance that followed. And yet, led by the Holy Spirit in recording this inspired book, he wrote down at this juncture that it was "***through the Holy Spirit***" that these disciples told Paul he was not to go up to Jerusalem. The Greek is very strong here -- much stronger than our English text. Literally they said, "Stop going up to Jerusalem!" And Verse 5, which in our version begins with "And" should really begin with "But," for Luke is recording a contrast here. He says, ***Through the Spirit they told Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. But when our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey...*** (Acts 21:4b-5a RSV Modified)

We also can gather from the whole of Scripture that it was there, as far as we know from the book of Acts, that Paul was prevented from any further world-wide missionary work for the remainder of his life. We may never know for sure the answer to this issue until we are with Paul to ask him ourselves. But it is notable that the Scriptures never flinch as to shining a public light on the failures and shortcomings of these great men of the Bible. 1 Corinthians 10 speaks of such a presentation and warns ***“These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age.”*** (10:11)

They were again, we need to remember, *just men* like you and I! They were not perfect! And their passions sometimes got the better of them. Some of them, like Peter and Elijah, were able to get up and continue with the show after their stumbles. But others, the likes of Moses and Saul, were removed from the ministry, and others like David were seriously curtailed in both position and influence. Such is the oversight and decision of our heavenly Father. But this story before us needs to sharpen our priority and earnestness of the use of discernment in ministry, as well as a humility and consistent self awareness . Without it, we are apt to follow in Paul’s footsteps.

Luke was obviously along on this journey and was recording where they stopped, and for how long, and how they spent their time. During the voyage they came to the ancient city of Tyre, north of Palestine. There they looked up certain disciples who, through the Spirit, Luke records, told Paul that he should not go up to Jerusalem. Then in verses 6-12 Paul was ***again*** warned against going to Jerusalem! This time by the very flamboyant methods of a prophet by the name of Agabus. Agabus was apparently one to do things “large,” as he threw himself into his message, body and soul!

There is also mentioned here the daughters of Philip, the “deacon-turned-evangelist,” who led the Ethiopian eunuch to Christ. These daughters were all prophetesses. God would speak directly to them through the Holy Spirit, messages to be delivered to others. This issue of prophesying in such a manner is a noble and powerful gift of the Spirit, but not one to be taken lightly. For Scripture is clear that a true prophet will be correct 100% of the time, and instructs in the Old Testament to take all “wanna-be’s” out to the gates of the city and stone them to death.

Despite these facts, it is amazing how many folks are ready and willing today to “give this gift a whirl!” No doubt it is because in our immaturity we fail to grasp the magnitude and seriousness of the practice of “foretelling prophecy.” We need to note that the gift of prophecy is also manifested in the *forth-telling* of God’s words, even those already written in His Holy Bible. This would be the gift manifested from a “called-by-God” pastor/shepherd. Both sides of this gift share elements of the other, as foretelling as well as forth telling should always match the Scripture. These verses seems to be speaking of the foretelling kind of prophecy, as the flares of warning continue to go up in foreboding prediction before Paul and his journey!

Had Paul obeyed the Holy Spirit herein, Luke undoubtedly would simply have recorded what he once wrote about another occasion in Paul's life. He would have said, "*We tried to go up to Jerusalem, but were forbidden of the Holy Spirit, just as once he recorded that the apostle tried to go into Asia and Bithynia; but was forbidden by the Spirit...*" (Acts 16:6-7).

Yet Paul, right or wrong, was not going to be deterred. One way or another he was going to see Jerusalem. As in such situations, the others that were traveling with Paul resigned themselves to the will and power of God, or at least the will and the power of the chosen man of God. Sometimes that's all a guy can do when his counsel is rejected. It's one of those times when you just need to sit back and let things play out. "***Let God's will be done...***"

Notice that even though those who traveled with Paul no doubt had a notion that they were headed in the wrong direction, they gave Paul the benefit of the doubt. Why would they do that? If they felt that it was a bad decision, why wouldn't they just take off and let him go by himself to Jerusalem? Unless you have served in such a capacity, such logic would be hard to comprehend. For they no doubt would have considered the same issues as those who serve in support for any leader. Issues such as: "*What kind of man is this that we support and follow? What is his history? His 'track record'? Does he deserve the 'benefit of the doubt'?*"

What *are* the boundaries of such a position that these men retained? What, if any, loyalty was called for in concern not only for Paul, but for the greater church to which they served and furthered? Such questions are not easy to answer, and certainly no two situations are exactly the same. "*Complicated*" is how I would put it. But what is certain is that there was a sense of commitment to their calling that manifested itself in fierce backing of this man of God.

Paul was going to get the benefit of the doubt this time. Because after *years* of service to the Lord, he had earned it. I do not believe that these men were "flying blind." They were not sucked into some cult-of-personality here. They just loved the Lord, His church, and the man that led them. That is not to say that there is not a time to step away from such a position. But those who stand in such a place are much more cautious and apprehensive about such than those who do not. So what is the balance between loyalty to our leaders and knowing when to "jump ship?" The defining element should always be based on Scripture. Is he unrepentantly standing contrary to the Word? It would have been hard to argue with Paul here via chapter and verse.

The text (16-19) makes a passing reference to one "Mnason of Cyprus," a "long time disciple." Nothing else is told of this man, so why mention him at all? No doubt like now, it was always a blessing to meet a long time servant of Christ. One who had "weathered the storm" and was "still standing." Perhaps because like today, there are so few of them. Apparently, Mnason was one of those enduring souls.

After arriving in Jerusalem, Paul found James, who was the pastor of the church there. What followed is something those in the ministry would understand immediately. As Paul spoke of God and the miracles he had witnessed, those who were "fellow soldiers on the front lines" gathered 'round and listened intently. They rejoiced together in "*what God had done.*"

Now everything was going along splendidly until someone got the great idea to try to fix the "unfixable." We then have further evidence that Paul was "off his mark" at this point in his life. What occurred here too has been hotly debated. For if Paul did wrong, it would be a difficult thing to swallow for many folks today. Some just cannot handle any "tarnish" on a man that is often esteemed higher than any *man* ought to be esteemed.

Here we have the "flip side" of loyalty to those we serve. Though these men were instigators in this plan, Paul should have known better. Any arguments concerning the right or wrong of this issue must be set aside on one critical point. The motive behind this plan was to attempt to calm the concerns of those who were still attempting to "straddle the line" of law and grace. Paul's roll in this undertaking was to act in such a way as to show these folks that he was, according to verse 24, still a follower and supporter of the Law.

But *was* he still a follower of the Law? Not according to his teachings, which overwhelming expressed his commitment to the doctrine of grace. So it certainly seems that Paul fell to the age old trap of attempting to please the religious legalist and therefore a "compromise." If so, I believe I understand why he buckled. It is easy to believe that the "end justifies the means." It's so easy to believe that if a little compromise could "calm the storm," then it would be well worth it.

This passage is especially pertinent in our church age, where churches and whole denominations are essentially attempting the same strategy. Trying to appease people through sanding off the rough edges of the faith...the hard stuff...the socially unacceptable aspects of Christianity and reinventing the faith in a more moderate position culturally. Not only is this totally sin, but it also never works. Neither did it for Paul it seems.

It is no doubt difficult for us to completely understand this emotion in the Apostle Paul. But he was a Jew, and, as a Jew, he loved his nation. He loved their heritage, their background, and their possession of the promises of God. He loved all the ritual and ceremony which had been given to them to teach them about the coming of the One who would fulfill every word of what their observances stood for. He longed to reach them. His heart was broken as he saw their bitterness and frustration, and the hostility and opposition to the cause of Christ which came from his own people, Israel. And he knew that at Pentecost there would be a gathering of Jews in Jerusalem from all over the Roman Empire, and there was born in his heart a great hunger to be there and to reach out in a big way to these lost brethren.

God did not “throw Paul out of the club,” but the cost of his mistake was quickly made evident. This plan to appease the Jewish masses not only failed, but was essentially catastrophic. This is generally the end result of any such attempts at compromise what God has written and what the Holy Spirit laid out as his plan! As this mob gathered, there was “confusion.” Some believed Paul to be one guy and some understood he was another. Word had it that he had taken a Gentile into the inner court of the temple and that was something that was never to be done.

Because of Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles, and his public persona concerning the Law, the people extrapolated as to what he might have done and then “ran with it.” Paul was nearly killed in what played out. The Commander of the Barracks came to the rescue in the “nick of time” and pulled him out of the mob. But Paul, believing even yet that he could reason with his Jewish brethren, requested the opportunity to speak to the mob.

Now in this chapter lies a deep lesson for all of us. It is that even through an individual’s long continued Christian experience and understanding of Scripture, there are still no guarantees against failure, against missing the mind of God. That is why we often see promising men and women who have been greatly used of God for years and years, decades even, suddenly fail in some way and cast a blot upon their ministry, sometimes terribly so. Some *terminally* so. This is the deadliness of the enemy we are up against. Satan as well as our flesh can bide their time. Both can wait out long periods of service and community participation, even our victories in Christ, and then can catch us off guard -- especially by awakening a desire which seems to be right, one that elicits a great personal passion within us. We can therein come to believe our actions to be exactly what God would want done. It then may be a “good idea” but with no guarantee it is a “God idea.”

It can so often be our tendency to see the enemy as clear and overt apostasy. But rarely is that the case. Most of us want our cake and eat it too. Most of us want some level of faith...some amount of Christian atmosphere, but we place limits on our commitment. Christianity of our own design. A “custom” faith that fits us personally and culturally. Satan of course is well aware of this caveat, and therefore he tends to operate subtly and stealthily. He watches us, listens to our discussions, and knows exactly which buttons to push. We don’t see these issues as sin and we don’t really see them as even dangerous. After all, “compromise”...it’s such a benign and innocuous word! And if such promises to illicit some level of peace and ease, then what can be the harm? After all, we’re still on board! We still *believe*. Because we live in such a compromising church age, nothing is more subject to criticism than a church that is unwilling to follow suit.

Often, these issues are allowances toward sin. But sometimes...like with Paul, they can even seem righteous. We can believe we are taking the “high road” when scripture and the facts actually do not support our position, and neither do all those around us who we embraced as our accountability and council, right up until this issue arose for which we have great passion, emotion and desire concerning. Our stance may not even be some blatant sin, but the execution of action concerning such suddenly makes it a sin and brings the house down on our heads. Someone going to Jerusalem to share the gospel is anything but sin! But Paul doing it...and the manifest of him doing it, seems to have *become* sin because it seems he was quite simply told not to do it. How often we adopt a “messiah” syndrome and feel we must save the situation personally. Where do we get the idea that God needs us or is in anyway powerless to rectify a particular situation? Paul didn’t compromise the specifics of the *Word*, he compromised on the leading of the *Holy Spirit*. And it cost him dearly, just as it so often does us.

Tony Evans said:

"Compromise is the cancer of the church, and we must rid Christ's body of it. While Christians can compromise on preferences, they cannot compromise on principles. We can't be one way on Sunday and another on Monday. This is a major problem among Christians in America today. We don't take a stand. We don't keep our standards. We merely shift to satisfy society."

D.L. Moody said: *"Christians should live in the world, but not be filled with it. A ship lives in the water; but if the water gets into the ship, she goes to the bottom. So Christians may live in the world; but if the world gets into them, they sink."*