

Acts 21

Here we have a passage that includes v4 "Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem" which seems, on the face, to contradict with other verses in Acts. But I think part of the answer lies in the human response to a challenging word from the Holy Spirit.

In Acts 19v21 we read that "Paul decided in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem." Then in 20v22, whilst at Ephesus, he says, "Compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me."

Paul was clear in his thinking and his understanding of being led by the Holy Spirit. This is confirmed in Caesarea, where he stayed with Philip who had four unmarried daughters who prophesied. v10 continues, "After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 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.'"

So, we see the Holy Spirit confirming Paul's earlier sense of leading. But when the other Christians heard Agabus' word their response was to plead with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Could that have been the same response in Tyre? The Christians there were so concerned for Paul that as he was leaving the Christians, "through the Spirit urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem." (V4).

I think this is a salutary lesson for all of us - when the Holy Spirit speaks to us we need to heed his words and neither add nor detract from them.

Yes, in the Spirit the Holy Spirit wanted Paul to go to Jerusalem but, in the natural, his friends wanted him to stay to avoid harm.

And so it was with Jesus - he told the disciples that he was headed for Jerusalem where he would be handed over to the authorities and killed. But Peter, ever the impetuous, said, "No, this won't happen to you" (Matt 16v23).

You see, there are times when we naturally want the best for ourselves and for others. But that is not necessarily God's will nor way. He's not a God to inflict pain, but he will bring greater glory to through what is sometimes a tough road. And there may be times when he gives us a glimpse of the future so we can be prepared, knowing that each day God's grace is sufficient.

Jesus dying on the cross was horrid, but it is the means for salvation for millions.

Paul being arrested in Jerusalem led to him being transferred to Rome and witnessing there. That was God's way of spreading the gospel far and wide.

Paul was resolute - v13-14 "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." When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."

Sometimes, when we have a word for someone, we have to be careful not to add our own gloss on it. I would also, normally, counsel that when sharing a word from God it is to be positive, encouraging and non-directional. We cannot take the responsibility for telling someone to move house, job or marry.

Let me share the story of a good friend. He went to see his respected church leader regarding an important decision. On arriving, the leader said, "Before you ask your question, let me tell you what I sense the Lord is saying: You need to have more joy in your life." Now, my friend is a serious sort of chap so this word would fit well. But as he started laughing he revealed that he had come to ask if it was right to think about marrying his new girlfriend. A good pastoral question, but already answered when he said her name is Joy! They are now delightfully married with 2 children and working as missionaries in East London!

To finish the chapter - Paul tells the church of his missional exploits and how Gentiles came to faith. Shortly, other Jews come and stir up the crowd and Paul is arrested. So fulfilling the words of prophecy spoken earlier, a miles away.

Paul was there, knowledgeably obedient. This gave him the confidence that he was not in the wrong place at the wrong time but right in the heart of God's will for him.

Let us listen out for the Spirit to speak to us, and through us to others, so we will be reminded that we're right at the heart of God's will for us.

