

Compelled by God's Call

Acts 21:1-40

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton ... To be great is to be misunderstood." Warren Wiersbe said, "Emerson might have added that the Apostle Paul was misunderstood by friends and foes alike."¹

Everyone thought they knew what was best for Paul, but Paul had heard from God, and nothing was going to stop him. Paul had just finished his tearful farewell with the Ephesian elders. He knew trouble was waiting for him in Jerusalem - the Holy Spirit had made that crystal clear. But Paul was compelled by something deeper than human wisdom or self-preservation. He was compelled by God's call on his life. When you're truly compelled by God's calling, even your best friends can become obstacles to God's will. Here are three aspects of Paul's journey that teach us about following God's call even when it doesn't make sense to anyone else:

I. THE **WARNINGS RECEIVED** (21:1-14)

Was Paul right or wrong to go to Jerusalem? He was warned countless times that problems would meet him at Jerusalem, yet he still went.

- In Acts 22:18, Paul recounts his conversion, where God told Paul to leave Jerusalem because they would not receive his message.
- Paul told the Ephesian elders that he was going to Jerusalem "not knowing the things that will happen to me there" (Acts 20:22-24).
- In Acts 21:4, Paul is warned by disciples, "Because of impressions made by the Spirit, they kept on warning Paul not to set foot in Jerusalem." (Williams Translation)
- In Acts 21:10-11, Agabus acts out how Paul will be bound if he goes to Jerusalem.
- In Acts 21:12, even Luke adds his voice (saying "we") to the chorus pleading with Paul to not go.

Was Paul stubborn? Paul could have made a mistake – he was human. However, I agree with Wiersbe, who states, "the prophetic utterances can be taken as warnings ('Get ready!') rather than as prohibitions ('You must not go!'). The statement in Acts 21:4 does not use the Greek negative *ou*, which means absolute prohibition, but *me*, used 'where one *thinks* a thing is not' (*Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, by G. Abbott-Smith, p. 289). Agabus did not forbid Paul to go to Jerusalem; he only told him what to expect if he did go."²

Oswald Chambers once said, "To choose to suffer means that there is something wrong; to choose God's will even if it means suffering is a very different thing. No healthy saint ever chooses suffering; he chooses God's will, as Jesus did, whether it means suffering or not."³

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 488.

² Wiersbe, 489.

³ Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House, 1992), p. 223, as quoted in R. Kent Hughes, *Acts: The Church Afire*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996), 288.

II. THE **WARFARE** ENCOUNTERED (21:15-36)

- Acts 21:20-21 - The rumor was not entirely true. Paul did tell the Gentile Christians they didn't have to become Jewish, but he never told the Jewish Christians to abandon their customs altogether. In fact, Paul had had Timothy circumcised just to appease the Jewish Christians. But some rumors have just enough truth in them to be believable.
- The Bible makes it clear what we are supposed to do with a rumor when it surfaces. "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you" (Matthew 18:15). Don't get on the telephone and tell someone else about the problem. You go to that person and say, "Let's talk this over." Until you can do that, just keep quiet.
- Acts 21:23-24 - That probably went against Paul's nature, but he did it to keep the peace. He once wrote, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22). A mature Christian knows how to compromise in matters of opinion. Sometimes compromise is not a sign of weakness; it's a sign of strength.
- Acts 21:27-30 - Nobody was allowed to bring Gentiles into the court of the Jews. The Jews had seen Paul circulating in the city with Gentiles and they just assumed he had brought the Gentiles into the court of the Jews.

III. THE **WITNESS** MAINTAINED (21:37-40)

- Most of us, if we had just been nearly beaten to death, would be thinking about getting to the hospital. Paul was thinking about getting to preach! His passion for souls was greater than his concern for his own safety.

APPLICATIONS FOR TODAY

1. **Learn to distinguish between God's preparation and human protection.** Just because someone warns you about difficulties ahead doesn't mean God is telling you not to go forward. The Holy Spirit often prepares us for battle rather than calling us to retreat. (See Joshua 1:9)
2. **Expect opposition when you're following God's clear direction.** God's will might involve controversy - be courageous. There might be times, because of your faith, that you create controversy. Jesus said He didn't always bring peace; sometimes He brings a sword. (See Matthew 10:34-36)
3. **Your theology needs to include women who may prophesy.** This is seen in Phillip's four daughters, as well as other passages (like Acts 2:28-29). "The Bible presents a number of examples where daughters of God had the gift of prophecy which [was the] most valuable of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 14:1). Miriam, Moses' sister, was a prophetess (Exodus 15:20), as was Deborah, with whose timely assistance Barak overcame the Canaanites (Judges 4:4). Isaiah's wife was a prophetess (Isaiah 8:3). Also, Huldah was a prophetess who helped Hilkiah the priest in the transformations of Josiah, king of Judah (2 Kings 22:14; 2 Chronicles 34:22). And we read that Anna the prophetess welcomed baby Jesus to the world (Luke 2:36-38)."⁴
4. **Be willing to accommodate others in non-essential matters without compromising the gospel.** Paul's participation in the Jewish purification rites wasn't a compromise - it was wisdom. A mature Christian knows how to compromise in matters of opinion. Remove unnecessary barriers while maintaining gospel clarity.

⁴ Taken from <https://bibleask.org/who-were-the-four-daughters-that-prophesied/>