

READY TO BE BOUND; READY TO DIE

Acts 21:1-39

Key Verse: 21:13

“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.’”

In the last passage we glimpsed the beautiful shepherd life of St. Paul. He has the image of Jesus Christ, the good shepherd. This was nothing but God’s grace to him. At one time, Paul was a Pharisee driven by selfish ambition. He damaged others. However, the Risen Christ changed him into a wonderful shepherd. This gives us hope. The Risen Christ can change us, too. No matter what our present condition, we can become wonderful shepherds for God’s church. There is no greater blessing for a human being. Let’s accept Paul’s example and trust the Risen Christ day by day to make us shepherds of God’s church.

In today’s passage Paul reaches Jerusalem. Paul went there hoping to unite the Gentile churches with the Jerusalem church. It doesn’t seem to work. Nevertheless, Paul did what was right in the sight of God. Today we learn God’s broken shepherd heart for the people of Israel. We also learn Paul’s life-giving spirit and absolute obedience to God’s mission. May the Spirit guide us to accept the word of God.

First, God’s broken heart and Paul’s obedience (1-14).

Look at verse 1. It was not easy for Paul to leave the Ephesian elders, nor for them to say good-by to him. Their love relationship was deep and genuine. Luke describes their parting as tearing themselves away. With much difficulty, they did so. Then Paul sailed straight to Cos, to Rhodes, and on to Patara. Once underway, there was no hesitation in Paul. There was no delay. Come what may, he took the most direct route to Jerusalem. They found a ship sailing for Phoenicia (2). It seems to have been a cargo ship and most uncomfortable. But with no thought to comfort, only to speed, they went on board and set sail. Soon, they sighted Cyprus and passed to the south of it (3). At last, they landed at Tyre (4), putting their feet on Palestinian soil. While the ship unloaded its cargo, Paul and his companions found the disciples of Jesus. They stayed with them seven days. These Christians were not “Paul’s sheep.” However, they were his spiritual family in Christ. Paul loved Christ and fellow Christians wherever he found them. By the same token, the Christians at Tyre loved Paul dearly. They must have heard how God had used Paul for world mission and participated in prayer for him.

Verse 4b says, “Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.” This can be confusing. The Holy Spirit had been compelling Paul to go to Jerusalem (20:22). Was the Holy Spirit now telling Paul not to go to Jerusalem? No, not at all. Rather, the Christians in Tyre expressed their deep compassion and love for Paul through the Holy Spirit. Perhaps they urged him to continue preaching the gospel to the Gentiles since God had been using him so greatly. They were like a loving mother sending her son off to war. She may know that he has to go, but she expresses undying affection for him and seeks any alternative to spare him. Paul was touched by their love. However, when the time came, Paul went on his way. Paul did not waver in his course. Realizing this, all the disciples in Tyre, together with their wives and children cried and prayed together with Paul on the beach. Then Paul continued his voyage.

Look at verse 8. They came to Caesarea, the home of Philip the evangelist. He was one of the original seven deacons (Ac 6:5). According to Acts 8, Philip had preached the gospel powerfully in Samaria and then, led by the Spirit, evangelized the Ethiopian eunuch by teaching him who Jesus is based on Isaiah

chapter 53. Then Philip went to Caesarea, where he must have lived since (Ac 8:40). Now he had four unmarried daughters who prophesied. While other teenage girls talked about clothes, shopping and “boys,” Philip’s daughters liked to study the Bible and talk about God and pray for world mission.

Philip’s home was spiritual. The word of God was overflowing. There must have been praise, singing and deep fellowship among the believers. It was a good place for Paul to spend time in prayer. He must have confirmed his decision to obey God in prayer. He must have asked God’s wisdom how to enter Jerusalem. He probably helped his Gentile coworkers get accustomed to Jewish life. It was a wonderful time of spiritual preparation. It seems that even the careful historian Luke lost track of time, for he does not say specifically how long they stayed. But this stay could not be permanent. It was the calm before the storm.

Look at verse 10. A prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. This is his second appearance in the book of Acts. At Antioch, Agabus had prophesied that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. The church members believed this and sent a relief offering to the Christians in Jerusalem. And indeed, it happened just as Agabus had prophesied (Ac 11:28). Now Agabus came up to Paul, took his belt and tied his own hands and feet with it. Then he said, “The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles’” (11). Agabus’ prophetic words cut to the heart. Everyone realized that Paul would be arrested and handed over to the Gentiles in Jerusalem.

How did Paul’s company react? Look at verse 12. “When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem.” They pleaded tearfully with Paul not to go. Perhaps it was because Agabus’ prophecy was very convincing. Perhaps it was because they were near Jerusalem and the reality of the danger to Paul was apparent. In any case, their inner hearts were revealed. They did not want Paul to suffer and die. They loved Paul and wanted to spare him. They were so grieved at the thought of his trials in Jerusalem that they wept profusely. It is understandable, but it was not helpful. They made it more difficult for Paul to obey God’s will, from which he could not deviate.

How did Paul respond? Look at verse 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.’” Paul’s heart was breaking. He could not ignore the tears and pleading of his beloved coworkers. Nevertheless, Paul stated clearly, “I am ready to die in Jerusalem for the name of Jesus.” Though Paul’s heart was breaking, he was steadfast in his obedience to the will of God. Paul had prayerfully decided to submit his will to God’s will. Paul’s surrender to God’s will was complete. Paul was no longer living by his will; he was dwelling in God’s will (Gal 2:20). When he heard Agabus’ prophecy, he was not afraid. He accepted it. He was ready to fulfill God’s mission at the cost of his life. Let’s read verse 13 together. “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.’”

Why was it so important for Paul to go to Jerusalem? Of course, it was God’s will, so he had to obey it. However, Paul’s obedience was not slavish. It came from his gratitude for Jesus’ grace. It came from his understanding of God’s heart. God had chosen Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. God wanted to plant world mission vision in Jerusalem. Otherwise, she would be useless and a hindrance to gospel work. Paul hoped and prayed for their restoration. Paul believed that when Israel turned to God, a great blessing would be poured out on the whole world. He said in Romans 11:11-12, “Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world,

and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!” Many Puritan Bible scholars believed that the restoration of the Jews would be the beginning of a worldwide spiritual revival.

Though Paul’s vision was great, the cost to go to Jerusalem was very high. Paul had to decide to give his life. Paul has the image of our Lord Jesus Christ who went to Jerusalem to die on the cross to obey God’s will for world salvation. In order to obey the will of God, Jesus struggled hard. Hebrews 5:8,9 says, “Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” Obedience was not easy, even for Jesus. At the last moment, Jesus had to fight a fierce spiritual battle in prayer. In Luke 22:42 Jesus prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”

Look at verse 13 again. Paul said, “I am ready....” Paul did not suddenly decide to obey Christ at the risk of his life. Rather, by God’s help and through deep and continual spiritual struggle, he was now ready. Tracing his steps, we can see how this came about. He had been compelled by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem (Ac 20:22). It was what God really wanted him to do. However, God did not make it easy for him. The Holy Spirit did not overwhelm him constantly with peace and joy. Rather, the Holy Spirit made him face reality. The Holy Spirit warned him that prison and hardships awaited him (Ac 20:23). Paul had to decide to take the pain that awaited him for the sole purpose of fulfilling the will of God. Paul must have renewed his decision every day. He said in 1 Corinthians 15:31, “I die every day—I mean that brothers....” Jesus taught his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9:23). Paul fought a daily spiritual battle in prayer. Finally, he submitted his will to God and was ready to obey. The weeping of his coworkers was like a final exam. Paul passed. Paul was ready to die in Jerusalem for Jesus.

When someone has made a decision to die for Jesus to fulfill his mission, there will be resistance even from coworkers. Like Paul, in the final analysis, we must obey God, even when our hearts are breaking because of our dear coworkers. Last summer Mother Barry decided to visit UBF missionaries in the Middle East, Europe, Africa and the CIS. She took 30 airplane trips in six weeks. Some people worried about her travel schedule and her age. Some worried about her lengthy absence from the Chicago center. Many told her she should not take the journey. Though mindful of their concern, she made the journey anyway. It was to obey the will of Christ. Now we can see that God used her journey to unify his people and expand our world mission vision.

Tomorrow is the national holiday honoring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. What made him great? It was his decision to obey the will of God at the cost of his life. He realized that challenging the racism and elitism of American society was dangerous. Yet, just before his assassination, he said, “Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will, and He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over and I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight, that we as a people will get to the Promised Land. And I’m happy tonight; I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

We believe that God is making North America like a city on a hill, a light to the Gentiles, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. God is raising spiritual leaders who can spread the gospel and bring healing to wounded young souls. God is raising Ph.D. shepherds who will transform our society into one that reveals his glory in the world. God is raising missionaries who are willing to go to all nations to spread the gospel of salvation in a dying world. It is not really nations who obey God’s will. It is individual

people who obey God's will. One person who decides to obey God's will at the cost of his life is like a holy nation. What kind of decision of obedience have you made? Dr. Joseph Chung had decided to go to North Korea as a missionary if God opens the way. Dr. Joseph Schafer decided to remain in Australia as a permanent missionary as God opens the way. Tiffany Hinton made a decision to serve one person with the heart of Christ in this year. May God help each of us to struggle daily in prayer until we can decide to obey God's will for us. This requires a personal decision that each of us must make; no one can make it for us. May God strengthen you in daily struggle until you can say like Paul, "I am ready to be bound; ready to die for Jesus."

Second, praise God, but... (15-26).

After Paul clearly expressed his obedience to Christ, the company of coworkers gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done." Then they made their final ascent to Jerusalem. They went quietly to the home of Mnason, an early disciple and a native of Cyprus. Paul's Gentile companions would probably have been comfortable there. They met the brothers in Jerusalem who received them warmly. Then Paul and his company greeted James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, and all the elders who were present. Paul reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

The Jerusalem church members praised God for his work among the Gentiles (20). They also reiterated their decision to accept the Gentiles with some conditions (25). But they were most concerned about how to deal with the controversy surrounding Paul. Many Christian Jews were confused by false reports that Paul was anti-Jewish. They did not realize that Paul's motto was, "First for the Jew, then for the Gentile." To clear up this misunderstanding, the Jerusalem church leaders proposed that Paul join in some purification rites to clearly identify himself as a Jew who kept the law. In this way, they hoped to break down barriers between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul humbly agreed to this. However, it did not work as they had hoped.

Third, Paul's courage under trial (27-39).

Look at verse 27. Bad elements among Asian Jews made false accusations against Paul, starting a riot. It became so violent that Paul's life was in danger. The whole city seemed to participate in it. However, through the Roman commander and his soldiers, God spared Paul's life. Look at verse 33. They arrested Paul and bound him with two chains. It was the exact fulfillment of Agabus' prophecy. In that situation, many people would be so frightened that they would panic. But Paul did not. He was well prepared spiritually. He faced the situation with God's peace and wisdom. He spoke to the commander in Greek. This opened the way for him to speak to the crowd. By faith, Paul turned the chaotic situation into the opportunity to deliver his message. Paul was indeed prepared to die in Jerusalem. So he was fearless. We learn here that a person who decides to obey God at the cost of his life becomes courageous and wise. We can see here that when Paul said he was ready to die for Jesus in Jerusalem, he meant it.

Many people only try to save their lives moment by moment. But Jesus said, "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mk 8:35). May God help each of us to follow the example of St. Paul and give our lives for Jesus and the gospel. Then we can please God. We can be courageous and victorious in this life and gain eternal life in the age to come.