

Journey to Jerusalem

Notes for 28 Oct

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Read: [Acts 21:1-36](#)

We're getting towards the end of Luke's account of Paul's journeys. The group of travellers is now off to Jerusalem, something Paul feels compelled to do. "And now I am bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. I don't know what awaits me, except that the Holy Spirit tells me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead" (Acts 20:23-23).

After a spot of geography and travel reporting Luke tells us, almost in passing, some remarkable accounts of prophesying.

- v21:4
Upon arrival in Tyre, on their way to Jerusalem, they looked up the local disciples in that area and "these believers prophesied through the Holy Spirit that Paul should not go on to Jerusalem".
- v21:9
The four daughters of Philip, in Caesarea, who were 'unmarried, and had the gift of prophecy'.
- 21:10-11
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.'"

Discussion

This week's section of the Book of Acts appears to me to be in two parts. Firstly, we have the prophetic stories, outlined above, which act as a sort of warning preamble to what's coming up for Paul - numerous arrests and trials, much legal wrangling (where Paul has some surprising supporters) and eventually on to Rome.

Then we have the arrival in Jerusalem and the meeting with James - which I imagine was a profound experience for both men. A discussion, by now familiar, follows on the rights and wrongs of Jewish practices for Gentile believers. Then a rite of Purification. Then yet another riot.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves...

I'd like us to think on the texts listed above. How do you think Luke intends us to understand what is going on?

1. Taking the second reference first - the comment about Philip who had "four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy". Parse that sentence! What is being said here?
 - Does Luke define the 'gift of prophecy'?
 - Is it defined anywhere else?

- Have a go at defining it yourself... What 'baggage' are you bringing to your definition from your historical understanding of that phrase?
 - Can you separate a definition from your own personal 'baggage'?
2. In the context of this chapter, *prophecy* is used to, essentially, warn Paul about what will happen to him. In v4 Luke tells us that "through the Spirit they told Paul *not to go on to Jerusalem*"
- In 20:23 Paul says the Spirit is telling him to go to Jerusalem. Here the Spirit is telling people to tell Paul *not to go to Jerusalem*. Have a go at reconciling those two statements!
 - Is it possible that the Spirit said different things to different people?
 - Many years ago I was a regular attendee of (and occasional organiser of) a Wednesday night quasi-Bible study at the New Gallery church, right in the middle of London. We were a ragtag collection of students, itinerant world travellers and young-ish folks who liked arguing about things and particularly liked getting together to argue about things.

It was good fun. (I would consider our very own Virtual Vestry to fulfil much the same purpose, though it has to be said that we're all somewhat, ahem, older...).

One evening a new person came along - a young Australian lady. At the end of our rambling discussion about something or other in the book of Romans she stood up and declared that "the Spirit was not here tonight". And then turned around and left.

We were dumbfounded and had no idea what to say or, indeed, what to think. *Was* the Spirit with us that night? We were definitely two or three (probably closer to twenty) "gathered together", and so we reckoned that Matt 18:20 applied to us.

Who was right?

3. Agabus adds to the confusion with a piece of theatrics in which he borrows Paul's belt and ties up his own feet with it and declares that this is the sort of thing that's going to happen to Paul - but it won't be a belt, it will be chains.

Agabus clearly had to travel to see Paul. Luke casually declares him to be a prophet. And Agabus starts his performance by invoking "Thus says the Holy Spirit...".

What are we to make of this...?

- It can be argued that Agabus' prophecy is not an instruction from the Spirit to Paul to *stay away* from Jerusalem, but, rather, a prediction of what will happen *when he does go*. I think that's a possible and fair interpretation. But in the wider context of the verses around the Agabus story is it not easier to interpret it as a request for Paul *not to go to Jerusalem* (eg v14 "Since he would not be persuaded...")?

I want us to think about how we interpret the instructions from the Spirit. Try and be both deeply personal and intensely practical. *How* do you distinguish God talking to you from the ramblings of

your own internal monologue? *What* does it sound like to hear the Spirit talking to you? Is such a thing something that you should *expect* to happen to you? Why/why not?!

I suspect the discussion of the above will take most of our time. But, should a miracle happen, and we get past the first couple of questions(!), please take a look at the remaining verses up to v36. What is Paul doing, going through the rite of Purification? What does this say about Paul's careful management of the Jewish/Gentile situation?

Paul ends up, yet again, relying on the Roman occupiers for his safety. Is this ironic?! To be continued next week....