

**Acts 21:1-16, No. 43**  
**“The Christian’s Calling”**  
**September 4, 2016**  
**The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

Remember, Paul is *en route* to Jerusalem in the company of a number of representatives of his Gentile congregations who are bringing with them a substantial sum of money for the relief of the poorer members of the church. He planned his itinerary so as to reach Jerusalem before Pentecost, the second of the three annual feasts, it fell in late spring.

**Text Comment**

- v.1 Commentators suggest that the ESV’s “parted from them” might better be translated “torn ourselves away from them.” Again an eyewitness touch, the recollection of how hard it had been to say goodbye by someone who was there. Remember these are the Ephesian elders. Paul had lived three years of his life in the company of these men. They were close friends who had shared some remarkable history. And now, so far as they knew, they were saying goodbye for the last time.
- v.3 Obviously an eyewitness touch. The journey across the open sea, passing south of the island of Cyprus, rather than hugging the coast of Asia Minor – a distance of some four hundred miles – was much faster, of course, which was why they took that ship. Chrysostom tells us that the sea passage took five days.
- v.4 They waited a week, perhaps to worship with the brethren, perhaps because it took that long for their ship to unload and load, or for them to find another ship. The fact that there was a church in Tyre, of which we have learned nothing in Acts, reminds us that churches were springing up in all the cities and towns of the eastern Mediterranean world. By this time, almost any place they stopped would have believers there.
- v.5 The reference to their having knelt on the beach, another eyewitness touch – Luke is recollecting the scene in his mind’s eye – together with a reference to kneeling in 20:36, indicates how commonplace kneeling was as a posture for Christian prayer. In the Bible and in early Christian history the people of God prayed together either standing or kneeling. No doubt there were exceptions, but these were the standard postures.
- v.7 The coastal port of Ptolemais was later named Acre, the sight of famous battles during the crusades and during the Napoleonic wars.
- v.9 “One of the seven,” that is, one of the seven deacons elected and ordained in Acts 6. If you remember, we left Philip in Caesarea in Acts 8:40 and now, these years later, he was still there. For a time he was itinerating, but, apparently, had become the pastor of the church – no doubt a sizeable church – in Caesarea, the political capital of the Roman province. Caesarea had been Paul’s destination all along. Herod the Great, as you may remember, had built Caesarea, magnificent as it was, to be the port of Jerusalem, which lay in the hills sixty-five miles from Caesarea. Philip “the evangelist” distinguishes him

from Philip the apostle. It didn't necessarily then evoke the same job description we attach to "evangelist" today.

One wonders if it were during this stay with Philip that Luke learned the history that he later incorporated in Acts chapters 6 through 8. [Stott, 331]

- v.10 We have met this Agabus before in 11:27. On that occasion he had come from Antioch to tell the brothers in Jerusalem that there was to be a great famine during the reign of Emperor Claudius. If you remember, OT prophets also acted out their messages. In this way they were made memorable and more powerful, all the more since people would not have – as we do today – a written copy of their prophecies.
- v.16 The entourage was primarily Gentile. Not every Jewish Christian family would have been eager to welcome Gentiles into their home. Mnason is proof that there were believers who fully understood the radical implications of Pentecost and rejoiced to see the gospel embrace Gentiles *as Gentiles*. Mnason was obviously a man of means to have a home large enough to entertain a sizeable group of men.

The late I. Howard Marshall, a New Testament scholar who specialized in research in the two volumes written by Luke, the Gospel and the book of Acts, and my dissertation advisor in the mid-1970s, made his international reputation as a scholar of note with a book entitled: *Luke: Historian and Theologian*. The title advertised the thesis of the book, viz. that Luke was both a reliable reporter of events, a historian, *and* a Christian theologian, a man who was communicating the Christian message by means of his historical record. We have noticed many times to this point that woven in, under, around, and through Luke's narrative is a masterful explanation of the Christian faith, its unique message about God, about salvation, and about the response the gospel requires from men and women, viz. faith in Jesus Christ.

But Luke is not only a *theologian*. In the broader sense in which the term is commonly used, "theology" refers to what Christians *believe*, the message they proclaim to the world. In that sense theology does not include either an account of Christian experience – how a Christian's life plays out from the time one becomes a Christian to his or her death – or an account of ethics, how a Christian is to live, what he or she is called to be and to do. You don't go to a *systematic theology*, for example, to Charles Hodge or Louis Berkhof, to learn how to pray, or to learn what true Christian worship consists of, or to learn how to navigate the shocks of life, and so on. In the same way, you don't go to a systematic theology to learn what true holiness consists of in the push and pull of ordinary life. A systematic theology may contain a section on the law of God, the Ten Commandments, but you will find there only a broad account of Christian duty, not the sort of instruction in daily life that you find throughout the Bible. You don't turn up Louis Berkhof to decide whether you can eat out on Sunday or under what circumstances it is permitted to make a statement you know to be untrue – which many biblical heroes did with divine approval – or whether a stained glass window or a child's Sunday School book can contain drawings of Jesus.

But, as we have already seen and often seen, in Luke you get all of this: theology, ethics, and instruction in the Christian life. We've heard the gospel summarized a number of times in

Luke's narrative so far, we have heard things being said by the apostles about God and his nature, about salvation and the way of salvation, but we have also seen two important Christian men deal with a dispute between them, we've heard the apostles declare that they would not obey the state if such obedience required them to disobey God, we've witnessed the disciples at Sunday worship and mid-week prayer, several times we've listened to believers counseling Paul against exposing himself to danger unnecessarily and seen Paul take their advice, and on and on, all subjects that do not strictly belong to "theology," so called. In all of this history of early Christian living we are being given instruction in the Christian life as specific, as relevant, as illuminating, and as inspiring as Luke gives us in his Gospel, where he reports to us the teaching of the Lord Jesus about what is required of the one who would be his disciple.

And very definitely we are given another piece of instruction in what it means to live a Christian life in Luke's report of this travel episode in the life of the apostle Paul. Besides the details of the voyage, the various stops, the change of ships, and the meeting with Christians along the way, this paragraph focuses our attention on one thing: Paul's determination to get to Jerusalem no matter the danger that will greet him there.

Twice Luke lets us listen in as fellow Christians tell the group of travelers *by the Spirit* that Paul would face trouble, if not death, were he to show himself in the capital. You will notice that the ESV rightly capitalizes "Spirit," indicating that the Holy Spirit is meant. That makes it clear that they had received divine prophecy to the effect that Paul would suffer in Jerusalem. In the first case, in Tyre, the warning Luke reports is more general, but the verb used in v. 4 to describe the entreaties of the Tyrian believers suggests that they pled with Paul repeatedly not to go to Jerusalem. And the reason Luke hardly needed to state. Paul had enemies. The Christian church had enemies in Jerusalem and Paul, as a former highly regarded and influential Rabbi and now a prominent and influential prominent Christian, and as someone now famous for spreading the reach of the Christian faith outward from the Jewish world into the Gentile world, was an obvious target.

All of this is then made the more explicit in the prophecy of Agabus. If Paul were to go on to Jerusalem, the Jews would be successful in getting the Roman authorities to do their dirty work for them. All of this, of course, convinced Paul's friends and associates - Luke includes himself among them - to implore Paul to change his plans. "Why stick your head in the lion's mouth? You are simply too important to the larger work to lose now!" But Paul was unmoved and refused to change his plans.

We have learned through the years that if a biblical author repeats himself, he is emphasizing a point. And there is an obvious repetition here. Indeed, there is more repetition than just these two accounts of Christian brethren pleading with Paul to alter his plans here in chapter 21. Already in chapter 20 Paul had confided to the Ephesian elders, with whom he met at Miletus, that

"...the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me." [20:23]

In other words, in this travel narrative Luke makes a great point of the fact that *Paul knew very well* that he was heading directly into a storm and refused to be dissuaded from traveling straight ahead.

You will, perhaps have wondered, as commentators do, whether Luke was intentionally drawing our attention to the similarity between Paul and Jesus himself at this point. Jesus, you remember, also made a long journey to Jerusalem - not nearly so far as the crow flies, from Galilee to Jerusalem, but in the time taken considerably longer than Paul's from Greece to Jerusalem. Jesus too "set his face like flint" toward Jerusalem and refused to be deterred by those who warned him that he was asking for trouble going to Jerusalem, that he was as much as throwing down the gauntlet to his enemies. And Jesus himself knew full well that when he arrived in Jerusalem he would be arrested and that the Jews would somehow contrive to get the Romans to execute him. Indeed, he told his disciples on many occasions that this is precisely what would happen to him when he arrived in the capital. *And still he went. Why?*

Well, for the same reason Paul gives first in 20:24 and then again in 21:13.

"...I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."

"For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."

Indeed, Paul's "Thy will be done," in 20:24 and 21:13 is very like the Lord's "Thy will be done" in Gethsemane, the night before his crucifixion. Both men knew what awaited them; both men went anyway because they had a calling to fulfill.

Now, it has sometimes been thought a problem that these communications to Paul by his Christian friends in Tyre and Caesarea were *by the Spirit*. Shouldn't Paul have obeyed their urgings since they were the result of prophecies that the Holy Spirit had given to them. These texts have even recently been used by advocates of a continuing gift of prophecy in the church to surmount the problem that modern prophets are not always right in their predictions. The argument goes this way. True enough, in the Old Testament, if a prophet said something was going to happen and it didn't, he was to be executed as a false prophet. But we don't have to do that any longer because in the New Testament no one is obliged to obey a prophet; his or her word doesn't carry the same authority it did in the ancient epoch. Even Paul ignored prophecies that were made by Christian prophets.

It's a bad argument and for these reasons. What the Spirit had prophesied, first to Paul and then to the believers in Tyre and Caesarea, *proved perfectly true*. Paul went to Jerusalem and there he was arrested by the Romans. Indeed, he would spend two years in Caesarea awaiting his trial. What is more, Paul did not ignore these prophecies. He accepted them as absolutely true. No one was less surprised by what happened to him in Jerusalem than was the Apostle Paul! *But, and this is the material point, the Lord by his Spirit never told Paul not to go to Jerusalem*. In the same way the Lord Jesus knew what would happen to him Paul was given to know ahead of time

what would happen to him. But in neither case was that information given for the purpose of dissuading either man from the course on which he was set. The Lord told Paul what was going to happen to him. But it was not the Lord who told him to break off his journey but his caring friends who did not realize that Paul *had* to go to Jerusalem in the same way Jesus *had* to go to Jerusalem! Agabus never told Paul that the Spirit had forbidden him to go to Jerusalem! There was no command in his prophecy, only a forecast.

And why did Paul have to go? Paul's firmness resulted from his sense that he was *supposed to go* to Jerusalem, that the Gospel needed him to go to Jerusalem. He had been working toward this end for some years now. The number of people involved in the various churches that had contributed to the collection, the importance of that gift both to the Jerusalem church and to the churches who had sent it, the benefit it would provide for Jewish-Gentile Christian relations all meant that Paul *needed to be there in person* to see that all went well and accomplished the purpose for which it had been so long planned and brought about with such great sacrifice by the Gentile brothers. It was essential to the long-term fortunes of the gospel that the relationship between the Gentile believers and the Jewish believers be established in love and mutual confidence. It was essential for the Jewish mother church to know firsthand how dramatically the gospel was advancing through the Gentile world. It was essential that Paul put to rest some of the rumors that were circulating among Jewish Christians that Paul was undermining Jewish identity by his ministry among the Gentiles. All of this will become obvious as the chapter proceeds.

Those considerations were more than enough to convince Paul that he couldn't abandon his plan at this late date. But, I'm sure Paul himself didn't realize how much else would happen that would advance the welfare of the Christian church forever because he went to Jerusalem and was arrested there. It was because Luke found himself in the Holy Land for two years while waiting for his mentor to stand trial that he had the opportunity to write two of the most important and most influential books ever written, the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, the two books that form the heart of the New Testament. Think about it, if Paul hadn't gone to Jerusalem, at least humanly speaking, we would never have known how it happened that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. I'm not entirely sure we would celebrate Christmas in anything like the way we celebrate it today. We would never have known of Zechariah's *Benedictus* or Mary's *Magnificat*. We would never have known that Jesus taught the parables of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son, the rich man and Lazarus or the tax collector and the Pharisee, and we would have never learned of the Lord's ascension to heaven, of the Spirit's descent at Pentecost, of the early progress of the gospel in Jerusalem, the martyrdom of Stephen, the office of deacon, and so much more.

Don't tell Paul not to go to Jerusalem. He absolutely *had* to go to Jerusalem, no matter what was to happen to him there. This is history, absolutely. Luke is the most reliable historian of all the historians of the ancient world. Down to the very details he told the story *as it happened*. But this is also *theology* – the sovereignty of God over human history, God's omniscience and his providential plan – and *ethics* – Paul's duty to his calling – and *instruction in the Christian life* – how Christians are born again to obey and to serve the Lord come wind, come weather, therefore they must be willing to embrace sacrifices of whatever kind in order to fulfill their Christian calling.

Over my vacation I read Andrew Roberts' magisterial new biography of Napoleon Bonaparte. The book is a triumph both of historical scholarship and English prose. If you are up to 800 large pages of late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century European history, you can't do better than this! I confess to having my impressions of Napoleon profoundly transformed by reading Roberts' account, all the more interesting a fact since Andrew Roberts is himself an Englishman. By nature and upbringing disposed to think more highly of the British than the French, associating as we will the British with Protestant Christianity and the French with Roman Catholic superstition, knowing enough of Napoleon's skeptical view of Christianity, I had always seen Bonaparte as a villain.

He was years ahead of the British in recognizing the evils of the social class system; he was the first European leader genuinely to advance commoners, even able peasants into positions of power and influence simply because of their ability. Indeed, he convinced many of his people that they were part of something great and that they too, lowly as their beginnings might have been, could make history. And many of them did; something that was years away in Great Britain. He was no more a war-monger than the British were and perhaps less, the British as determined if not more so to be Europe's great imperial power. Many of Napoleon's social, political, and military reforms were years ahead of their time and nowadays, in retrospect, we would all commend. French society and government were in utter disarray when Napoleon arrived on the scene and it was he who singlehandedly rescued them from the mess in which the French revolution had landed them. He was loved by his troops – at least until his misadventure in Russia – because he so obviously loved and cared for them, constantly talking with his soldiers, making jokes, bantering back and forth, asking them if they were being properly cared for. He was a brilliant military tactician, fought sixty major battles and lost only seven of them. There was a flowering of high culture, art, and architecture during the Napoleonic period, even though it was a period of almost constant war, for which the British were certainly as much if not more to blame than the French, determined as they were to defend European royal prerogatives. The British wanted the Bourbons back on the French throne, no matter the fact that that royal house had ground its people into the dust.

All of that to say that I finished the book with a far higher view of Napoleon, as a thinker, as a political leader, and as a military genius than I had entertained before. His contemporaries, including the British, found him to be a remarkable man in many different ways. To be sure, there remains much to dislike. He was vain, was sexually unfaithful to his two wives (though loved them both and was devastated by their own sexual infidelities), could be cruel – though he was often generous to a fault, often to the poor and needy; he had a natural affinity for the underdog – and, over time, exhibited the truth of the adage that “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Still he was a remarkable man!

Napoleon was a human dynamo. He wrote letters every day at an astonishing pace. Even when campaigning far from home letters flooded from his pen. He would write 20 or 40 or 60 letters a day. He would write to the politicians back in Paris, to the military commanders in other theaters, to his wives, brothers, and children, and so on. Nothing was too small for him to take an interest in. He was a micro-manager of the first order. He would write from a tent camped with the *Grande Armée*, about the curriculum to be followed in a school he had founded for the

children of military widows, about disputes among the leadership of the Paris opera, about whether dancing should be allowed near churches, or to a commander about one of his decorated corporals who drank more than was good for him, and a thousand more subjects great and small, but none too small to be of interest to him.

But what strikes the reader on every page of Roberts' biography was Bonaparte's *drive*! He came to France – he wasn't French you know – a penniless refugee from Corsica. Six years later, he was the most powerful man in France and, indeed, in Europe. The man, we would say, *was on a mission*. Why did he change the face of Europe? *Because he was determined to!* And so it is in human life; so it has always been and so it will always be.

And again and again in the Bible you find it so with the saints of God, both the small and the great. True enough, the Bible is candid about their faults and failings and, true enough, we are everywhere given to know that it is God's grace in them and God's plan for them and through them by which great things are accomplished by them, but the Bible never skimps on describing the commitment, the consecration, the spiritual *drive* with which they lived their lives. From Abraham to Moses, from Hannah to Mary, from Jeremiah to the Apostle Paul, these were all people who embraced their calling to serve the Lord in this world, no matter the sacrifices required, no matter the personal loss that would have to be endured, no matter the uncertainty with which they were forced to live.

The Christian, Jesus said, was someone ready to give up a great deal in this world. He would be, she must be a risk-taker, a person acquainted with hardship, but a person who had a crystal clear view of the meaning of his or her life, its purpose, and kept an open eye on the prize. In Luke's narrative, Paul is not simply the great apostle to the Gentiles, the founder of European Christianity and the prototype of the Christian evangelist and church-planter, *he is the representative Christian*. And in nothing is he so much the representative Christian as in his determination to serve the Lord, consequences notwithstanding.

Believe me, brothers and sisters, there will be times, more than enough times in any Christian's life, when you will be tempted to take the foot off the accelerator; indeed there will be times aplenty when others will encourage you, if not implore you, to take it easier, not to take such risks in serving the Lord, not to be *so* determined. And Luke is teaching you in all such times and circumstances to say as Isaiah teaches us to say:

“Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore I have set my face like flint and I know I will not be put to shame.” [50:7]

That is the drive that changed the world and that will change it again today! You younger Christians, whether or not you understood this at the time, you signed on for high adventure and hardship, and you must not let hell, high water, or the example of Christians who have grown too comfortable with an easy, risk-free Christian life, deter you. Jesus Christ is worth everything you have and he asks for nothing less!

And you parents, be teaching your children the words “must” and “cannot.” They are the words a Christian soldier lives by. There are things we *must* do and tempting things we *cannot* do,

things that amount to a betrayal of our calling as the servants of the Lord Christ. People who fully understand that will be people God uses!