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Acts 21:1-14 Bound and Determined

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“Father in Heaven, we are about to open Your Word. We recognize it is a sacred work, it is Holy and it is powerful. And Lord, we need Your Spirit to lead us and direct us and to give us the proper interpretation of it. We pray too for Your Spirit to speak to our hearts and only You can. And that everyone here would hear what You want them to hear today, and they will experience what You want them to experience. I ask Heavenly Father that You will be mighty and miraculous in our midst. And we are asking this in Jesus Name, Amen.”

I’d like for you to turn in your Bibles to Acts chapter 21. We are continuing our series in the story from the Book of Acts. Paul is on a journey. The last time we were with Paul, he was at Miletus. While he was there, he had asked for the Elders from Ephesus to come, and while there he preached to them. He told them he’ll never see them again, and they wept much. We pick up the story in chapter 21. We’ll read verses 1-14.

Acts 21, verses 1-14: “Now it came to pass, that when we had departed from them and set sail, running a straight course we came to Cos, the following day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. And finding a ship sailing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. When we had sighted Cyprus, we passed it on the left, sailed to Syria, and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload her cargo. And finding disciples, we stayed there seven days. They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem. “

“When we had come to the end of those days, we departed and went on our way; and they all accompanied us, with wives and children, till we were out of the city. And we knelt down on the shore and prayed. When we had taken our leave of one another, we boarded the ship, and they returned home. And when we had finished our voyage from Tyre, we came to Ptolemais, greeted the brethren, and stayed with them one day. On the next day we who were Paul’s companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied.”

“And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. When he had come to us, he took Paul’s belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, “Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’ And when we had heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, ‘What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.’” So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, “The will of the Lord be done.””

They continued their journey. They got aboard on a larger vessel than they had been on, one of those costal vessels that just went about thirty-forty miles a day. They sailed four hundred miles. They come to the port of Tyre, and while they are there, they go ashore. They are going to be there for a week, so they go ashore, and they are looking for fellow believers. They find fellow believers; they fellowship for a week. And when it is over, they pray together and they depart from there. They have another stop and then they end up in Caesarea. When they get

to Caesarea, they go to the house of Philip. They stay with him; they enjoy wonderful fellowship. And then, Agabus the prophet comes, and warns Paul that he will be bound if he goes to Jerusalem.

Now there are a lot of elements to this story. And one of the things that jumps out immediately is the age old question, "How do you know God's will?" I mean here Paul is determined to go to Jerusalem. We'll read about the people in Tyre who say, according to the Holy Spirit, he is not supposed to go. You have a prophet telling him if he does go, he is going to be bound and he is going to end up in prison. And still, he goes. And so, one can ask the question, "Was Paul right and all the rest of them wrong? Was he doing what God wanted him to do or was his disobedience the cause of him ending up in prison?"

Well, these are issues that scholars wrestle with because it's a story that is fraught with concern. And there is one thorny text in particular that makes it especially difficult. And that is chapter 21 verse 4. I'd like you to look at that. "And finding disciples we stayed there..." there is Tyre, "...we stayed there seven days. They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem." So I mean it's pretty clear, Paul is being told through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem. And this is where we have our concern. Some people land on the side that Paul is stubborn, he didn't listen, and that's why he gets arrested.

And that really kind of falls apart when you realize that Paul was listening to other people and their counsel, and that's how he ended up getting arrested because the next story you'll read, he goes to the church leaders and they say, "Hey, there are some people here that think you don't believe in the law anymore. And we've got some young men that are ready to go up and complete their vows. Why don't you go with them?" They whole thing is saturated in the ceremonial law. Paul is against the ceremonial law for salvation or to teach us about salvation anymore. He is all into Christ and into grace, and saved by grace through faith.

And yet, he listens to them. He wants to get along with everybody, so he does it. That's how he gets arrested. So if his problem is he doesn't listen, well, that doesn't seem to hold water. The thorny issue is verse 4. What does it mean? Well, we kind of have to look at the story in a larger context in order to understand it. Please turn back to chapter 19 verse 21. Paul says, or the story is written about him, it says: "When these things were accomplished, Paul purposed in the Spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, "After I had been there, I must also see Rome.""

Paul purposed in the Spirit. Paul determined this in connection with God. He working with God and the Holy Spirit was convinced he should go to Jerusalem. And he said, "And after that, I am going to Rome." And long behold, that's exactly what happened. Let's go earlier in the stories here in Acts to chapter 16. In Acts chapter 16 verses 6 and 7, it says: "Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas."

"And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'" And that's what Paul did. You see Paul, this is during his second missionary journey, when he is out there, they are trying to figure out what

to do? They decided to go one place, the Holy Spirit forbade them. "You cannot go there." So they tried to go to another place, the Holy Spirit said, "No, you can't go there." So that night, Paul has a dream. And in the dream he sees a man in Macedonia saying, "Come over here." And that's where they went.

I'm trying to demonstrate that Paul did not act independently of the Lord in his life. He was depending upon God for direction and for guidance, and God was more than willing to give him direction and guidance. "No, no, go here," and that's what Paul did. Paul purposed in his Spirit that he was supposed to go to Jerusalem. Look at Acts chapter 20 verses 22 and 23. Paul is speaking. And this is when he is speaking to those Elders from Ephesus while they are gathered in Miletus, he says: "...now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me."

Everywhere Paul goes, the Holy Spirit is telling him, "You get to Jerusalem, chains and tribulations await him." Nowhere does Paul indicate the Spirit as saying, "Don't go." He is just being told, "When you go, chains and tribulations await you." Look what Agabus says in chapter 21. Chapter 21 verses 10 and 11: "And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea..." By the way, if you want to read about him, he is found in Acts chapter 11 verse 28, same guy. "When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"

Agabus says, "You are going to be bound." Agabus in the Spirit of God does not say, "Don't go." What do we do with chapter 21 verse 4? It's a thorny problem. Look what it says: "...They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem." When we put everything together, what can our conclusion be? Our conclusion has to be this – I don't know what chapter 21 verse 4 means. That's the only conclusion because Paul is not disobeying God at this time in his life. He is walking very closely with Christ. And some people have looked at this whole issue and thought "Well, the whole thing is a matter of how to discern God's will." And we can get pretty confused doing that because you have friends and family helping him, and on and on. But this man, he just seems to be so determined. Trust me, he somewhere in his journey has learned from God that that's the direction God wants him to go, and other people aren't seeing it. But he does. He knows, and that's where he is going. He is not just being foolish. He is not just being determined or stubborn; he is being obedient to his call from God.

There is another aspect of this story. We find it in chapter 21 verses 13 and 14, let's read those. "Paul answered, 'What do you mean weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.' So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased saying, 'The will of the Lord be done.'" Suffering! We could talk a lot about suffering. You know, Paul is willing to go and to suffer. And suffering is one of those topics that Christians have a tendency to get out of balance in. I just read this last week. Martin Luther has a quote that says: "When it comes to theology, humans are like drunken peasants." He said, "You put a drunken peasant on a horse, there is one thing you are guaranteed. He'll fall of. What you don't know if it'll be to the left side or to the right."

And that's the way we are theologically. We have a hard time staying balanced. If we go to a church that talks about doctrine and behavior and issues and stuff, we'll have a tendency to be that way. If we go to a church that's just, you know, love, and just kind of, just love. Well we'll have a tendency to be that way. And somehow those have to be wedded gently and logically and in a righteous way together. Balance! The whole discussion of suffering has been out of balance for years in Christian minds. People think that suffering is a way to get to God. In fact, I will tell you, most of you have read about the monastery system down through the Middle Ages. Those people suffered.

They thought poverty and isolation would cause them to become righteous. They would even take whips, and whip their backs and say, "God, look how I am suffering for You" as if suffering is going to take us to God. And we may chuckle at that, and we may laugh, but I will tell you right now; I have been in conversation with many young adults about giving their lives to God especially in the area of a life's companion. And there is a fear! There is a fear that people have of giving that decision up to God because – I've heard that so many times, it goes something like this. "I am afraid if I do that He's going to make me marry someone ugly because we do have to suffer."

Well I'll tell you. You put that whole area of your life into the hands of God, and he will be more handsome than you ever thought possible. And she will be prettier than you ever dreamt could be. Leave that to God. God does not want you to suffer just to come closer to Him. The balanced position of suffering is that we are here to serve God. We seek to do His will every day in our lives. And in the course of doing that, if we suffer then it happens. But we don't suffer in an attempt to find God. You find God but reading the Scriptures and praying, and you serve Him. If that brings about suffering, so be it. Does that help? So the theology of suffering!

There is another element of suffering that is thought in this story. It will be a fine sermon, but I am just giving you some ideas here from the story. And that is, Paul is kind of the only one that suffers in the way. The others go back home afterwards. But yet, they suffer along with him. And it's true in life, when we see a loved one that's suffering because of an illness or financial problems or marriage problems, relationship issues with siblings or children or whatever, all these things. Those of us who love that person, we suffer right along with them. And that's one of the reasons why some people don't like to get close to other people because there is pain when you love. When you love somebody carefully, and dearly, and deeply, and they are being hurt, you hurt right along with them. And I believe that's probably one of the greatest lessons we can learn about God's care for us.

If we, selfish human beings can suffer because of someone else's pain, imagine how God feels about our own pain. What a powerful lesson He can teach us. One of the things that I've learned about suffering is highlighted here. "After it's all over, the people conclude, 'the will of the Lord be done.'" I've seen it happen in families where a loved one is suffering with a painful illness. And over time, the family finally reaches the point where they realize, God has chosen for whatever reason not to work a miracle. They will not be healed in this situation. And the family eventually will come to the conclusion, "Lord, Thy will be done." And there is a peace that comes in the heart. And they are finally willing to give up on Grandma, or Grandpa or whoever it is. And God allows them to come to that point.

I need to share with you a miracle that has taken place in our congregation. A number of you have seen her name in the bulletin, and you've been praying for her in prayer meeting and other places. But Jeanne Bengtsson called my wife and me about a month ago. She's had cancer for some time. And her husband called me and asked if I could come over and have an anointing service for her with some family and friends, just a small thing, because the doctors had said they can do no more for her, nothing. What will happen, will happen. No more chemo, no more radiation, nothing, nothing, it's just all up to God now. So about a month ago we had that anointing service. We committed her situation to God, and we said: "Lord we are asking You to heal her outright." Got a phone call last Sunday, and Peter, her husband, told us that the doctors have announced she is cancer free. So praise God! But that doesn't always happen. It does not always happen. Sometimes we lose loved ones. And eventually, we have to reach a point where we say, "Thy will be done Lord." And they rest until the resurrection.

There is another aspect of the story that is fascinating to me. It's found in Acts 20 verse 4, if you'll turn there please. Some names are mentioned here. "Sopater of Berea accompanied Paul to Asia- also Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia. These men, going ahead, waited for us at Troas." These seven men are mentioned. Luke is also with them, so there are eight men that are traveling with Paul. All through this journey, he has eight men by his side. Men, shoulder to shoulder, men, back to back, covering for one another; men engaged in battle; men, walking and serving, and fighting for a purpose greater than themselves.

It just, to me, it just reminds me of Steven Ambrose writing about the band of brothers in WWII. Company E that goes down on D-Day. They parachute in and fight all the way to the end of the war in Europe. And how he describes these men became closer than brothers. They were beside each other in battle. And what a powerful picture it is of men walking together in the Spirit of God. When one is discouraged another picks him up. When one has doubts another has faith. When one doesn't know what to do, they gather around and pray, and they find strength from each other. And I believe brothers and sisters, that's the picture of what God wants church life to be. That people will be banded together in specific ministries where they have a goal and a purpose, and they help each other in that goal and in that purpose.

I was thrilled to hear that we started the Men's fraternity here at the church. We've had two nights of it, there are sixteen. Plus, there'll be things going on after that. If you want to join it, it's on Tuesday night, seven o'clock here in the Fellowship Hall. You have to be male. That's all. And these fellows, ten of them met the first night. And after one night, one night, they developed the whole brand-new ministry for the church that they are initiating. They all know how to do things with their hands, with, you know, they can repair things and fix things. And they are going to set out and find people in the community and in the church who can't fix things on their own and they are going to do it. Now these guys will sweat together, they will laugh together, they will plan together, they will dream together, and they will work together. And they will help each other from here get all the way to heaven together. That's God's picture of how the church should be.

Ladies, there are ministries for you as well. That's what is like for the quilters and the folks that are making the pillows that send them down town to the hospital. That's God's ideal that we

would find our niche, and there we would find compadres in ministries. (I don't know if I said that right? I know, I'll be corrected if I didn't). What a powerful, powerful picture. I hope that you will find friends to help you on your journey.

There is another aspect of this story. It's simply the detailed account that Luke makes, you know. "We went here, we sailed there, we passed the island on the left, we ended up in Tyre, and the ship unloaded," you know. You look on the map, and there it all is, and I will tell you, it just strikes me that that's the way God is with our lives, the detailed accounts. Now I am not talking about a furred, browed God hanging over the bowed states of heaven, and looking down, saying, "Aha, hum, aha, aha..." I am talking about the type of a relationship that a parent has for a baby, the scrapbooks, and the pictures, and on and on and on. You know how the first kid has a stack of stuff like this, the second like this, and the third, you are looking for family members to see if they have any pictures, you know.

But God, we are the first born all the time. And He's got these huge scrapbooks of us. He is carefully chronicling our lives. He loves us, and He is in a relationship with us. I think that's a fantastic aspect of this story. And I thought, you know, anyone of these things is preach-able. But I was troubled. I was just left a little thirsty yet, a little hungry. And so I asked God this question. "Where is the Gospel in this story?" And I began just to meditate. And I worked through the experience of every person in it, back and forth, and on and on. And all of a sudden, God took my mind down some roads, and I want to share with you those roads this morning. I believe they will be very helpful to you.

Please look at chapter 21 verses 5 and 6. This is talking about the experience there at Tyre. "When we had come to the end of those days, we departed and went on our way; and they all accompanied us, with wives and children, till we were out of the city. And we knelt down on the shore and prayed. When we had taken our leave of one another, we boarded the ship, and they returned home." Did you notice anything in those two verses? Now, before we quiz you too closely, let me redefine again for you the Word of God. Sixty six books, all bound in one book, the Word of God. From creation to after the creation of the New Heaven and the New Earth, all talked about in one major volume, a library of sixty six books.

Certainly, in the history of the world which is here, that's a pretty small book. The apostle John wrote at the end of his gospel, "If we were to write everything that Jesus taught and did, there wouldn't be enough books on earth for that." In fact, some of you may be aware of this, in all of the life work of Jesus, there are only 52 days of His life recorded in the Gospels. So we just have a small picture. This book is written with an economy of words. There are certain things God wanted in there, He impressed the writers and they are there. The question we must ask is why are they there?

Look again at verse 5. Notice what it says: "When we had come to the end of those days, we departed and went on our way; and they all accompanied us." Notice the next phrase, "...with wives and children, till we were out of the city. And we knelt down on the shore and prayed." Now Luke has already said, "...they all accompanied us." Why does he identify wives and children? And then, even more strange, look at verse 6. "When we had taken our leave of one another, we boarded the ship, and they returned home." Well, where do you expect them to go? You know, of all the things on planet earth to record, and all the history that's taken place,

why do you take up that space? You know, the children and the wives came. And you know, when it was over, they went home. Huh!

Remember, Luke has written other stories in the Book of Acts. Let's look at Acts chapter 8 verse 3. The verse begins, "As for Saul..." Now Saul – that's Paul before he changed his name. And by the way, a lot of people think Jesus changed his name, but there is no evidence of it in the scriptures. It's more likely that he changed it himself. Saul was his name from birth, named after King Saul. Saul is a Benjamite. And there he is, King Saul. And you know, just kind of you can see him thumping his chest and being excited about that. But after he met Jesus, he's changed his name to Paul which means "One of diminutive stature." It means a small man. And later when he would write to the Romans, he says, "I am Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ." In essence, he is saying, "I am a small man, serving a Big God."

So he is the one that changes his name, but here he is, big King Saul, verse 3 here, "...and he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison." Now Saul, before he knew Jesus broke up homes, destroyed relationships, tore families apart. Keep that in your mind. Now go to Acts 21 verse 8. It says here, "On the next day we who were Paul's companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him." Philip, one of the seven! Now go back to Acts chapter 6 where those seven are identified. Those of you who have been with us through the series recognize that the seven are those deacons. And let's look at what they are supposed to do, verse 3. Acts 6 verse 3, "Therefore brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

One of the apostles says that. They are talking about the distribution of goods to those in need. Verse 5, "And the saying pleased the whole multitude, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch..." It goes on to say they prayed, laid hands on them, and there they were. And the Word of God spread. Philip is one of those men. Where does Philip live? Where did this story take place in Acts 6? Where did it take place? Jerusalem! Where does Philip live? Jerusalem! That's his home. That's where he is from, probably his family before him, his parents, and their parents and on and on. That is home. But what happened to his home?

Go to Acts chapter 8 verse 1: "Now Saul was consenting to his death." That's referring to Stephen. "At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea, and Samaria, except the apostles." Now verse 4, "...Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word." Verse 5, "Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them." He was run out of town. He was run out of town, went to Samaria and preached. Then, he preached to the Ethiopian eunuch, and then Philip ended up in Caesarea. Twenty three years later, the man who ran them out of town, the man who was wreaking havoc, the man who was seeking to arrest all of Philip's friends and family, the man who was known for his destruction is now an invited guest in his home. That my friends, is a picture of what the Gospel can do.

Paul was a man who was feared. Paul was a man who scattered and destroyed homes and friendships. And now, twenty three years after Stephen dies, Paul is a man who is loved. He is a man who was honored by the very people he was seeking to destroy. Is it no wonder that Paul would record to the Romans in Romans chapter 1 verse 16. Is it any wonder he would say, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes." "The power of God to salvation for everyone who believes!"

Now I want you to know something brothers and sisters. Every one of us seated here today has a Saul in our heart. We are destructive people. We want things our own way even to the point we are willing to destroy ourselves against the counsel of God to do what satisfies us. We are destructive people. We destroy relationships. We hurt. We maim, wound and cripple with our words and with our actions. We are destructive people. We in our vary relationships are tearing homes apart. In our work place, we are creating environments that are difficult for other people. In the neighborhood and in the church, it so much a part of our humanity that we consider it normal and it is normal, but it's sinful. And the power of God in the Gospel is to save that, is to change the Saul in us to the Paul, to a person who no longer is seeking destruction, but somebody who is building up. And the children and the families are safe again.

Even, brothers and sisters, now listen to me carefully. Even when somebody, your ex may have thorn your home up, even to the point like Philip, where you are willing to forgive, especially if they have embraced Christ. And if they are a brother in the Lord, the house is open. I am not saying you have to get back together, I am not saying that at all. But the power of God, through the Gospel is the power to change the destructive characteristics we have in our lives and to change us from Saul to Paul.

And I am wondering today if there is anyone here who would like to really experience and understand that you are a small person serving a Big God. And that that Big God has a powerful Gospel in Jesus Christ. And when Jesus comes into your heart, so will change come. And that which is so destructive about us can be set aside. And we'll be safe to be around other people. So today, I have a question for you. Would you like to know the power of the Gospel in your life, and if so, I am going to ask you to stand.

"Loving Father in Heaven, we are standing because of a great need that we have, and that need is a Savior and we are grateful we have Him in Jesus Christ. We ask Him again to come into our heart or for the first time if we never have before. And we pray that He will work mightily and powerfully in our hearts so much so that one day we will say, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel for it is the power of God unto salvation to anyone who will believe." We are trying to believe Lord. Help us we pray in Jesus name, Amen."