

Acts 21:1-36 // Accepting the Lord's Will

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Preacher: Andrew MacKenzie

[0 : 00] We join Paul and his companions just after they've said goodbye to the Ephesian elders. This is Acts 21, beginning at verse 1.

! We sailed on to Syria.

We landed at Tyre, where our ship was to unload its cargo. We sought out the disciples there and stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit, they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. When it was time to leave, we left and continued on our way. All of them, including wives and children, accompanied us out of the city.

And there on the beach, we knelt to pray. After saying goodbye to each other, we went aboard the ship and they returned home. We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and sisters and stayed with them for a day.

[1 : 20] Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the Evangelist, one of the seven. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it, and said, The Holy Spirit says, In this way, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.

When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, After this, we started on our way up to Jerusalem.

Some of the disciples from Caesarea accompanied us and brought us to the home of Nassim, where we were to stay. He was a man from Cyprus and one of the early disciples.

When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters received us warmly. The next day, Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present.

[2 : 52] Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. When they heard this, they praised God.

Then they said to Paul, You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to their customs.

What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow.

Take these men, join in their purification rites, and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law.

As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality.

[4 : 06] The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them. Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end, and the offering would be made for each of them.

When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, shouting, Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul, and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple.

The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut.

While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar.

[5 : 20] He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowds. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. The commander came up and arrested him, and ordered him to be bound with two chains.

Then he asked who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another. And since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks.

When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great, he had to be carried by the soldiers. The crowd that followed kept shouting, Get rid of him.

Thanks be to God for his word. Well, good evening, everybody. Let me add my welcome to Tim's. My name's Andrew. I'm one of the ministry trainees here at the church.

Thank you to Jack for reading our passage this evening. It's great to be continuing our series in Acts. Together tonight, we'll see that Paul returns to Jerusalem, where 20 chapters ago, the book started.

[6 : 31] So let's pray as we begin this evening. Thank you, Father, for your word in Acts that tells us of what Jesus continued to do in the world after he went up to sit on his throne, that we might be encouraged and equipped to live for you.

So we pray tonight that as we look at your life-giving word together, that you would be working in us to shape and fashion us all into more and more useful instruments in your kingdom-building mission.

In Jesus' name, amen. Well, I wonder, do you feel victorious? Does your life feel victorious?

Do you, Christians, sitting here in Glasgow, with, say, maybe 80 other people, feel as if you're winning at life, that your life is all that it's meant to be?

Maybe you're here tonight, and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian. And my guess is you've not come along here tonight because you feel like you've won at life, and life is perfect. Maybe it's because you feel the exact opposite.

[7 : 39] Well, if that is you, I'm so glad that you're here, because tonight, we're going to see a really realistic account of what the life of a Christian is, what the call for a Christian's life is together.

As we've been going through the book of Acts together, in many ways, we've been watching the victory parade of the gospel, as the gospel has gone out from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth.

Only if you're familiar with the book of Acts, if you've been with us, if we've been going through, you'll know that it's looked absolutely nothing like a victory parade. There's been no open-top buses.

There's not been hundreds of thousands of people on the streets welcoming them in. We've had riots. We've had arrests. We've had violent mobs, attempted assassinations, murders, none of which looks or feels victorious.

Christ's co-victors, his people, often appear to have lost to the world. Rather than to have victory over it. Because despite what we often think, the true victory doesn't come from a comfortable life.

[8 : 56] Which, amongst other things, is exactly why Luke wrote this book to his friend Theophilus. To give him certainty that actually, the Christian life is meant to Luke. Like this, the Christian life is victorious, but it's not meant to be comfortable.

That Christians really have won, and things are meant to be this way, so that he should accept God's will. And as we look at our passage this evening, we'll see that's true, not just for the life of the church, but for individual Christians as well.

You want to be victorious in life? Then accept God's will for you to live a Christ-shaped life of selflessness and suffering, not comfort.

Let's dive in together. We've got three points this evening that will help us. They should be on your service sheets. Firstly, Christ-shaped lives submit to God's will, verses 1 to 16.

If your Bible's fallen shut, now's a great time to get it back open again. We're still at page 1118. We saw last week in chapter 20, verse 16, that Paul's been trying to get to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost.

[10 : 12] And so he met the elders of the Ephesian church in Miletus. That's where we picked up. And so we continue on his journey, accompanied by Luke, who wrote this book and others.

And it's a painful departure. Verse 1, they had to tear themselves away from these Christians that they loved lots, that they would rather probably have spent lots more time with, and set sail. There's a map that's going to come up on the screen so we can chart their journey together. So they go from Miletus last week to Kos and to Tyre, and then down from there to Jerusalem. They've got a couple of stop-offs in between. In verse 3, we see they land at Tyre, which is a town in Phoenicia, which itself is a region in Syria. So that's why we're told they're going to three different places.

It's really all one. They're going to Tyre, which is encompassed in that. And then verse 4 says, we sought out the disciples there and stayed with them for seven days.

[11 : 14] Through the Spirit, they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. Presumably, having made good time on the bulk of their journey, they're now on the right coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

They've got a bit of time, and so they choose to spend some time with the disciples in Tyre. And the disciples there, having had the fate of Paul given to them, revealed to them, of what would happen to Paul as he continues into Jerusalem, they urge him not to go ahead with his plan.

Because them, like us, don't find it easy to accept people taking risks when there's actually a much safer option. Why would a North Korean convert who's escaped the country choose to go back to North Korea when actually they could go somewhere like Japan?

Both countries in dire need of the gospel. But if you go back to North Korea, well, you face death and imprisonment. Or you could go to Japan where there's still gospel need.

But they're less hostile to it. That's how we're tempted to think, but it's a very human approach to it. It's one that elevates comfort to a much higher value than maybe we ought.

[12 : 31] It is an understandable reaction to the Spirit's revelation. But undeterred, Paul carries on on his journey. Back in chapter 19, verse 21, Paul had decided that he was going to go to Jerusalem.

He decided in the Spirit that that's where he was going. And so verse 7, they continue their voyage to Ptolemaeus before verse 8 heading to Philip in Caesarea.

And Philip is one of the seven who we saw set apart back in Acts 6 to help the apostles in their ministry. His daughters prophesied.

Luke doesn't tell us what they prophesied about. But having had the disciples in Tyre before and Agabus, who's up next, both speaking about the fate that awaits Paul, it seems fair to assume that they also are cementing the fact that suffering is what lies ahead for Paul in Jerusalem.

And then we get to Agabus, the prophet. He appears on this scene. We've had him earlier in the book as well. And look at verse 11 with me.

[13 : 41] Coming over to us, he, that is Agabus, took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it, and said, the Holy Spirit says, in this way, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.

Agabus is back. And he's back with a vivid message in the style of Old Testament prophets like Ezekiel. He takes Paul's belt, he ties his hands and his feet, and says, this is how the Jewish leaders will bind Paul and hand him over to the Gentiles.

It's revelation with speech directly attributed to the Holy Spirit. But notice that it's not saying that Paul shouldn't go. Just saying what will happen when he does.

Abinding by the Jews and a handing over to the Gentiles. I wonder if that rings any bells. It is strikingly like Jesus, isn't it?

Let me read you a bit from Luke's gospel, his first book. In chapter 19, it says, keeping a close watch on him, they, that is the Jews, sent spies who pretended to be sincere.

[15 : 02] They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said, so they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor. In other words, a Gentile.

And throughout our passage, there are many more than we have time to look at this evening. Luke describes Paul and the events that take place surrounding him in strikingly similar ways to that which he described of Jesus.

Emphasizing Paul's Christ-shaped life. And despite people's appeals and pleads for him not to keep on going, Paul has real steadfastness and trust in the Lord's plan.

Despite the suffering he knows is coming. Isn't verse 13 an incredible statement of trust in God's will? Then Paul answered, why are you weeping and breaking my heart?

I am ready not only to be bound, but to also die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. Paul's accepted God's will for his people to be victorious now and suffer.

[16:13] He submitted to it. And with his Christ-like steadfastness, those around him accept God's will too. And they finished their journey to Jerusalem in verse 16.

One of, if not the turning points in Luke's gospel account is when Jesus turns and he sets his face, he turns resolutely towards Jerusalem.

He accepts and submits to God's will for the rest of his life to be orientated around the suffering, rejection, and ultimately death that's awaiting him in Jerusalem.

All for the sake of bringing in or inaugurating God's kingdom. And we've seen already that Paul decided in the spirit to head to Jerusalem, warned all the time of the suffering there is to come for the sake of furthering God's kingdom work.

And so I think the question for us, or one question for us tonight, is do we have space in our understanding of God's will for his people now?

[17:20] For it to be for us to suffer now for the sake of the kingdom? When suffering for being a Christian comes, do you automatically assume that something's gone wrong, that you've done wrong, that somehow God's done wrong, thinking that this isn't how life is meant to be?

Or have you accepted that actually it is God's will for his people to suffer now for the sake of his kingdom? And part of that includes surrendering for Christ's church, our second point.

Christ-shaped life's surrender for Christ's church. Having arrived in Jerusalem, they get a warm welcome from some of the Christians there, verse 17, before their church summit with James and the elders of the church in Jerusalem.

That summit starts off well. In verse 19, Paul gives a mission partner update to their central prayer meeting where he shares everything that's been going on since he was last at home assignment on Jerusalem, in Jerusalem.

And the church rejoices in his work. The church rejoices in what's happening with people very different from them. They share, as we all ought to, in the joy of God's kingdom growing work.

[18:41] They also have another thing on their agenda, this tension in the room. And it's about church unity. The unity of the global church is at risk.

Read from verse 20 with me. Then they said to Paul, you see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law.

They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs.

What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come. And from that, we gather, they will not be happy that he's come. And this issue has reared its head again and again and again throughout Acts.

How does a Gentile person, a non-Jewish person, become a Christian? Do they have to be a Jew first and then a Christian? Enemies of the church, false teachers, had clearly been spreading rumors about Paul that he was teaching Jewish people abroad just to abandon their Jewishness and to live as Gentiles.

[19:53] These Jews who were zealous for the law and had believed are hearing that Paul is urging Jews to become Gentiles first and then Christians. And now we know that those rumors are false.

Back in chapter 16, Paul had Timothy circumcised for the sake of the growing kingdom. He's not against the Jewish Christians continuing in their culture.

but he's been promoting gospel unity between the two groups. He's been calling for, he's not been calling for Jews to become Gentiles or Gentiles to become Jews but for them to be one in Christ. And all that hard work that we've read about up to this point is at risk. The fracturing of the church would be a serious setback for the gospel's expansion.

And so good old Peter has devised a plan. Verse 23 he says, so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. Take these men, join in their purification rights and pay their expenses so they can have their heads shaved.

[21:00] Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. It all boils down to a public display that Paul's not against the law himself.

completing purification rights having been outside of the Jewish land he's doing that for himself and paying the expenses of four men in association with their vows.

With the decision of the Jerusalem council is restated in verse 25 that's there to reassure Paul that they're not trying to change how Gentiles become Christians but they're asking Paul to submit and to surrender his rights for the sake of church unity.

And I wonder if you were Paul having strived tirelessly again and again to get the church past this issue to get them agreed and to move on how likely would you be to surrender your rights and help them through it again at great cost to yourself.

This week as I've prepared this I've been really struck by Paul's patience and his selflessness when you think how many times we've found ourselves back here in the book of Acts.

[22 : 19] Paul is after all a free man free from the law and the temple system and yet read verse 26 this is what he does. The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them then he went to the temple to give notice of the dates when the days of purification would end and the offering would be made for each of them.

In Paul's Christ-shaped life he chooses to surrender his freedom for the sake of the unity of Christ's church. Like Christ he lays down what is rightfully his and pays the cost for the sake of God's people.

Elsewhere in the Bible Paul writes that he is becoming all things to all people so that by all possible means some might be saved. The Christ-shaped life is one of surrender for the sake of the church. The victorious life is one of surrender not one of comfort. It's worth noting the offering that Paul gives isn't a sin offering.

the offerings that he pays for wouldn't have added to Christ's one time for all offering and payment of the debt of sin. There's no gospel compromise here but Christ-shaped surrender the giving of himself for the unity of the church.

[23 : 46] And so what about for us as a church family? What does it look like for us here at St. Silas to live a Christ-shaped life together that surrenders for Christ's church?

Globally I think that involves recognizing that we are connected across the globe that what happens here does get passed out to other Christians who hear and pray for us.

And while there are many freedoms that we feel that we have they aren't all shared by other churches around the world in different contexts. Take robes for example once in a blue moon do you ever see anyone at St. Silas Sunday morning or evening in robes we don't consider it necessary or the right contextualization of the gospel.

But when they do get dusted off they get dusted off for very good reason. If you were here for Jonathan's ordination last year you would have seen lots of robes and that's because churches from across the globe will have seen photos of what was going on here and for some Anglican churches in the world people not being in robes would make them worried that we're not faithful Christians united with them in gospel unity and so we as a church can go well this all looks very odd and very out of place in the west end perhaps but at the same time we can gladly surrender what feels comfortable and right for us for the sake of global church unity for the sake of Christ church or individually increasingly as a church we're a church family of people from different cultural and church backgrounds with lots of different preferences about how things at church might look or feel or run but the Christ shaped life surrenders those preferences and opinions when they're not gospel compromise surrenders our feeling of our needs to be seen to be right or to have our way for the sake of the unity of Christ church and so we've had one riot avoided in our passage within the church but another one's coming outside of it in both cases riots that are based off rumors that are completely untrue our third point

Christ shaped life's sacrifice for God's mission verses 27 to 36 at the end of Paul's seven days of purification he's spotted at the temple by some visiting Jews who really haven't taken kindly to his ministry and look at how they respond verse 27 they stirred up the whole crowd and seized him that is Paul shouting fellow Israelites help us this is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place and besides he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place like all good riots this riot started off a complete falsehood that if anybody bothered to stop and check could easily have been disproved they shout that Paul's against you as a Jewish person that Paul's against the code you live your life by and that Paul's against how you worship oh and we think he's done the unthinkable and brought a dirty Gentile into the holy temple and this somewhat understandably stirs up the crowd so verse 30 we read the whole city was

aroused and people come running from all directions

[27 : 28] Paul's dragged out of the temple and verse 31 this massive crowd tries to kill him Paul's only saved by the timely arrival of the Roman commander to quell this riotous uproar taking place they arrest Paul and verse 34 some in the crowd shouted one thing and some other another and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks having been tried in the court of Jewish public opinion he's been beaten been tried to kill and now he's being handed over to the Romans just as Agabus the prophet predicted the Romans arrest him to find out what he's done to cause such an uproar obviously he's done nothing but still the crowd are there shouting one lie after another constantly contradicting themselves and verse 35 so violent and so severe was the violence that Paul suffered at the hand of the

Jews he had to be carried up the steps by the Romans and even that sight wasn't enough to stop the crowd constantly baying for more of his blood all this for an innocent man and the eagle-eyed among you might be thinking this sounds very familiar to something that we saw in Acts not that long ago and you'd be right in chapter 19 we had another riot this time in a Gentile city Ephesus that also brought the whole city into uproar Luke describes it as some in the crowd shouting one thing and some another and the riot again was only broken up for fear of the Romans when comparing the two which I think Luke invites us to do both Jews and Gentiles rejected Christ and Christ's messenger scripture when people are presented with a gospel that invites them who compels them to change they don't like it and so if it's God's will for his people to share the message it means that we need to accept that that involves sacrifice as we lived

Christ-shaped lives including sacrifice of our own comfort the Jew-Gentile distinction was one of the defining issues of the day and on both sides Luke shows us violent rejection it's the same but that's not the only similarity again Paul mirrors much of Christ's own experience in Jerusalem Christ too was seized by the Jews falsely accused of defiling the temple taken out of the temple and handed over to Gentiles where conflicting false testimony is made and the crowd endlessly shouts away with him just like the crowd here Paul sacrificed for God's mission time and time again knowing what it would entail he accepted God's will and lived the Christ-shaped life he knew there wasn't a conflict between deciding in the Holy Spirit to go to

Jerusalem and being told by the Holy Spirit when he went to Jerusalem there would be violence and suffering and so what encouragement for Theophilus whose lived experience is of wholesale rejection and exclusion surveying the experience of the church around him as feeling weak not victorious seeing it look as if the church is suffering and the world is prospering but he can take real confidence that this is how it's meant to be God wills his people to surrender for his church and to sacrifice for his mission and none of that looks glamorous but it's the Christ-shaped life and it is victorious and so too for us we're prone to thinking that the victorious life is the comfortable life but comfort is not a priority for God for his people and it shouldn't be for us when we struggle with God's will for the Christian life being one of surrender and sacrifice we can redirect our eyes towards the Lord Jesus whose crucifixion was his coronation and remember this really is how it was meant to be to sacrifice for God's mission is to grow his kingdom to boot our comfort on the line maybe you have someone in your family who you know just doesn't want to hear about Jesus who are hostile to the name of Jesus ever being brought up maybe you even just have an unspoken de facto pact that you just won't talk about that area of your life so to speak God's will is for his people to risk our comfort in life risk our relationships are standing to be willing to sacrifice it all for his kingdom growing mission is there someone you'll see soon who you haven't spoken to about

[32 : 59] Jesus in a while for fear of a response or something else it would be a great thing to take one step forward in our evangelism together to prayerfully uphold one another and seek to do it to take risks and to sacrifice for God's mission and if things go wrong and that sacrifice is needed along the way we need not be surprised when we've accepted God's will for us we can trust that we are still victorious and while we might remember the church as more powerful and impressive in years gone by we know that the norm the reality is weak and unimpressive looking so we can get stuck in we can freely give of ourselves to serve the Lord's will and surrender for Christ's church and in sacrifice for God's mission trusting in his provision let's pray together the Lord Jesus said I am coming soon hold on to what you have so that no one will take your crown the one who is victorious

I will make a pillar in the temple of my God never again will they leave it I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God the new Jerusalem which is coming down out

