

## Staying faithful to Jesus in the face of opposition

Acts 21:1–36

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The Bible is the most exciting collection of books ever put together. More exciting than Harry Potter. Because the Bible contains the story about God saving people from their sins and bringing them into a right relationship with him for eternity. You won't find that in Harry Potter. In fact, I don't expect you'll find that story anywhere else - only in the Bible.

One of the most exciting books in the Bible is the Acts of the Apostles - or rather, the Acts of the Holy Spirit. Because it's in Acts that God's story of salvation begins to come together, and God through the Spirit begins to raise up a new community founded and sustained by the revelation of Jesus.

That in Jesus' crucifixion forgiveness of sins is freely available, and in his resurrection, believers now have new life for eternity. And what is most exciting about the book of Acts in it's the beginning of our story here at Gosford Presbyterian. Just as the church was founded on and sustained by Jesus in the Book of Acts, the church today is founded on and sustained by Jesus.

So, it makes sense that the church should stay faithful in Jesus. That's a no brainer. But the passage today addresses a slightly different question, and an important one: What does it mean to stay faithful to Jesus in the face of opposition? In the face of persecution? Even in the face of death?

In chapter 20, we read how Paul was bound by the Holy Spirit to return to Jerusalem (Acts 20:22). Now, think about what's going on here. Paul has been chased by the Jews around Galatia and Asia, what we know today as modern Turkey. He's been run out of town, beaten, lied about, flogged, and imprisoned. Now, he has a conviction to return to the Jewish capital. Just what does he suppose is going to happen to him in Jerusalem? What do you suppose might happen to him? The elders at Ephesus were pretty clear about what would happen to him. They are facing the prospect of not seeing him again, and it grieved them (vv. 37–38).

It's clear that Paul is going to face his stiffest opposition yet. Which makes Paul's journey to Jerusalem even more interesting. In naming all these places, Luke is showing us that Paul is on a beeline to Jerusalem (21:1-3). He's not meandering his way back thinking, "maybe I get there, maybe I won't – God's will." He knows what God's will is, and he's being intentional about it.

But why would he be so keen to get back to Jerusalem knowing what could happen to him - and probably will? Maybe it has something to do with the concern and affection he still has for his fellow countrymen. Later in his letter to the Romans, Paul would write this:

"For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race." (Ro 9:3).

That is very strong language. Do you hear what Paul is saying? He is more concerned about the salvation of his fellow countrymen than what he is for himself. Mind blowing! Paul is on a beeline to the Jewish capital so that he can tell them about Jesus, and what God has been doing among the Gentiles.

The believers at Tyre knew what was at stake (Acts 21:4–6). And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go to Jerusalem. But we're not to understand the Spirit as saying one thing and then something else now in contradiction. The Holy Spirit has bound Paul to go to Jerusalem. And by the same Spirit, others know that this will not likely end well. There's not necessarily anything mystical going on here. Apart from Paul and his companions being chased around the place and persecuted, perhaps Jesus words were also in their minds:

"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first." ... "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." (John 15:18, 20).

Yet Paul continues toward Jerusalem and arrives at Caesarea - just a few days journey out from Jerusalem. His journey is nearly over. While he is staying with Philip, he is visited by a prophet named Agabus who, like some of the prophets in the Old Testament, enjoys a bit of drama to attract people's attention. He takes Paul's belt, which is probably more accurately described as a cloth sash, and binds his own hands and feet with it prophesying what is going to happen to Paul (Acts 21:11).

Agabus demonstrates that being bound by the Spirit will lead to Paul being bound by men. The disciples respond by pleading with Paul not to go to Jerusalem (v. 12). Paul's

response is to remind them of his resolve (v. 13). Paul is not only prepared to be imprisoned for Jesus. He's prepared to die for him!

This hits the other disciples very hard (v. 14). I think we can take some encouragement from this. Remaining faithful to Jesus in the face of opposition is never easy. If you have ever been tempted to bail out because you face opposition for your faith, then you are in good company. This is exactly the tension that Paul and the disciples were facing. That they knew that remaining faithful meant being obedient to the Spirit.

But notice their response to the opposition. They don't regress from what they believe. They don't pretend that the opposition isn't there or is not that bad. They respond by closing ranks and supporting each other even more. The disciples just don't pat Paul on his back and send him on his way. Some of them go with him. They walk beside him in his moment of struggle.

This is a pattern for us to follow. We ought not let each other struggle alone but consider how we might walk alongside others in their struggle: a phone call, a cup of coffee, or a meal dropped off. Anything that says you're not alone. We're with you. We support others in their faithfulness to Jesus, and this is what the disciples did for Paul.

Why support others in their faithfulness? Because staying faithful to Jesus glorifies God. When Paul arrives in Jerusalem, he tells the believers there what God has been doing among the Gentiles through his ministry - through his faithfulness - and they glorify God (vv. 19–20). Having heard what's been happening among the Gentiles, they look to support Paul even more, and they start thinking constructively about how they might respond to this opposition.

The opposition that Paul is facing is not only coming from non-believing Jews but also believing Jews. Back in Acts 15 we read how the place of the law was vigorously debated with some believers arguing that Gentile also had to obey the law and the Jewish traditions (15:5, 7). Those holding that position were still around, and they began to spread rumors that Paul was teaching people to forsake Moses and the Jewish traditions.

So, they came up with a plan to dispell these rumors. Among them were four men who had taken a vow - Luke doesn't tell us what the vow was, but the vow required them to be purified in the Temple according to the Jewish traditions (21:23). So, they tell Paul to take these men to the temple, provide for their purification, and while he was there, he should purify himself as Jews would do when they come back from Gentile areas (v. 24).

Now, at first glance, this can look like a regression on Paul's part - that he's compromising on the gospel that he has worked so hard to preach. But that's not what's going on here. The decision of the Jerusalem Council is still being upheld - that nothing more of Gentile believers is to be required apart from abstaining from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from sexual immorality (v. 25).

So, if Paul isn't compromising, what's going on? They're making a point. By Paul participating in these purification rites, he is showing that he is not against Moses. Later in his letter to the Romans he would write:

“Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.”  
(Rom 3:31).

You see, if the issue really was Paul's position on the Jewish traditions, then opposition to Paul should have ceased as soon as people saw him purifying himself. The fact that the opposition continues after this—and not from believing Jews but from unbelieving Jews—shows that the issue was never really Moses or the Jewish traditions.

The complaint was made that Paul is bringing Greeks into the temple, something forbidden according to Jewish custom (v. 28). But that was not the real issue either. The accusation was based on assumption rather than observation. No one had actually seen Trophimus in the temple (v. 29). The real issue was that the gospel was redrawing the boundaries of the people of God, and that had implications for Jewish identity. That was why they were trying to kill Paul (v. 31). In fact, the crowd could not even clearly articulate the charge against him—one person shouted one thing; another shouted something else (v. 34). The crowd was angry without knowing why, but they wanted Paul and his Gospel gone (v. 36).

The same sort of thing happens today. It seems to me that when people raise issues against Jesus, or against the church, or against Christianity, the issues they raise are hardly ever the real issue. Have you ever noticed that?

The real issue seems to be that people want to be their own little demigod, deciding what is wrong or right for themselves. The suggestion that there might just be a higher authority that they are accountable to and will judge them is truly terrifying.

So issues like tolerance are raised, and Christians are accused of not being loving. How do we respond? We make sure that we are being loving - but not by their idea of love.

Love that really isn't much more than a feel good emotion. No, we love by God's idea of love. What's God's idea of love? What's his definition?

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

You've probably heard that before. It comes from one Corinthians 13. The issue isn't that Christians aren't loving, although they can be. The issue is that we have a much more comprehensive, richer, deeper idea of love that the world does not understand. That's the issue. That's the point to be made. And we make that point by loving people by God's standards and not to retreat from love when we are accused. By doing so we glorify God.

We are part of the most exciting story that's ever been told. And we owe it all to Jesus. So, what does it mean to remain faithful to Jesus in the face of opposition? It means remaining faithful to Jesus, even when we know that it will cost us - perhaps greatly. It means glorifying God and making him known. It means walking with each other as we struggle with opposition.

Importantly, it doesn't mean two things: it doesn't mean compromising on the gospel so that the peace may be maintained, and neither does it mean being unresponsive to those who accuse us. But it does mean making a point - being clear on what the issues are and seeking to love people by God's standards even as they accuse us.

This is the community that God began to raise in Acts, and this is the community that God continues to raise today, and I pray he does that here in Gosford.