

ACTS—WEEK 19

PAUL'S FINAL ARREST



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is “Paul in Ephesus” by Eustace Le Sueur (1616–1655),
on display at The National Gallery, London.*

Paul is on a relentless path to his final arrest. The Spirit has told him, and others, what’s coming, but Paul interprets the message differently. He stays on task while everyone else opposes the plan.

Their opposition ends up being the key to the plan’s success. Paul ends up in prison, where he will write his wonderous prison epistles.

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We are a spiritual fellowship patterned after the Celtic Revival. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.

Acts 20:13–21:36 — Paul’s Final Arrest
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1 Acts 20:13–24 (ESV)

But going ahead to the ship, we set sail for Assos, intending to take Paul aboard there, for so he had arranged, intending himself to go by land. And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and went to Mitylene. And sailing from there we came the following day opposite Chios; the next day we touched at Samos; and the day after that we went to Miletus. For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.

Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. And when they came to him, he said to them: “You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But 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.

Paul’s drive to get to Jerusalem is a thing of wonder. He knows *that imprisonment and afflictions await him there*, yet that doesn’t dissuade him in the slightest. His desire to get there in time for Pentecost is so great that he decides *to sail past Ephesus*, missing a golden opportunity to encourage the brothers there. Why?

This seems to be the Nazirite vow Paul is completing. We saw that Paul was under some kind of vow in Acts 18:18b, “*At Cenchreae he had cut his hair, for he was under a vow.*” The Nazirite vow is a good fit.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Num+6&version=ESV>

Still, this doesn’t tell us why Paul wants *to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost*. There’s no evidence that *the day of Pentecost* was related to any vows; it’s presumably just a reference date.

Whatever it is, Paul’s plan here is the converse of a previous lesson. This time, he’s walking into a trap.

This time it’s the Holy Spirit, not secular wisdom, calling the shots. “*And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there.*”

Paul’s life is anything but dull. It’s not painless, but it’s full of action and significance. His vow is part of that pattern. Part of living in the Spirit is making vows—total commitments to one thing.

You can elevate anything into a vow. Just set up a reasonable commitment and a goal, and, in private, consecrate it to the Lord and vow to keep that commitment.

Then keep track.

2 Acts 20:25–38 (ESV)

And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.

This is the kind of brutally frank discussion that dying parents have with their heirs. “*I know that none of you ... will see my face again.*” Furthermore, attacks are coming.

“I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.”

These words sound totally discouraging, but in a perverse way, they’re just the opposite. No matter how bad things get, if they happen exactly as Paul said they would, then everything’s going according to plan. Knowing that is a great comfort.

The Bible is full of dire predictions. They’re actually there to encourage us by preparing us.

Forewarned is forearmed.

Trials have a purpose. If Christianity was easy, it would be all fluff. Instead, it glorifies God. We should always pray about these trials—be they personal, or corporate, or even national or international.

But do something different. Typically, people pray for a trial to be removed or for it to end. But it’s also good to be shown the point of the trial. Consider asking God to help us learn whatever it is that our trials are supposed to teach us.

Instead of focusing on minimizing the pain, focus on maximizing the benefit.

3 Acts 21:1–14 (ESV)

And when we had parted from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos, and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. When we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload its cargo. And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.

When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

Is the Holy Spirit being inconsistent? Today's passage has Paul being warned about going to Jerusalem.

And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. ... And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"

But earlier the Spirit specifically told Paul to go to Jerusalem. How can that be?

The answer is that in today's passage the Spirit warns Paul of trials in Jerusalem, but doesn't say, "Don't go." The disciples *telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem* are simply reacting to the warning. The warning serves an important purpose, but that purpose is to prepare Paul, not to dissuade him.

The disciples jumped to the wrong conclusion.

The Holy Spirit gave almost the same message to the disciples that He gave to Paul, yet they reached almost the opposite conclusion. Why?

They assumed that Paul's wellbeing was the top priority. They felt that Paul's preaching must be essential to God's plans. After all, just look at the impact he's having for the gospel. But 2,000 years later, looking back through the retrospect-o-scope, what's the most important thing Paul did?

Write.

4 Acts 21:15–26 (ESV)

After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge.

When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality." Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.

The *brothers* have devised a clever plan to keep the Holy Spirit's prediction from coming true. Really. What were they thinking?

Their brilliant plan is for Paul to pay the expenses for four non-Jewish converts to shave their heads and join Paul in offering a sacrifice at the temple in accordance with the rules of a Nazirite vow. This will show that Paul is not teaching *all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses*. Since he is promoting the observation of a Mosaic custom even for non-Jews, they *all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law*.

Wait 'til you see what happens next.

This seems almost unimaginably stupid. Notice that the passage doesn't mention them praying to seek God's will. What were they thinking? Not about God.

This looks like overconfidence. The apostles assume that they're the good guys and it's interfering with their humility. They're not staying mindful of their fallen human nature. That's going to hurt.

But we're just as dumb as they are. Yes, we're making progress throwing off the *old self* and putting on the *new self*, but we don't see our progress relative to the goal. We're far from a finished work.

Memorizing doctrine isn't enough; we need to take a close look in the mirror.

5 Acts 21:27–36 (ESV)

When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian with him in the city, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. Then all the city was stirred up, and the people ran together. They seized Paul and dragged him out of the temple, and at once the gates were shut. And as they were seeking to kill him, word came to the tribune of the cohort that all Jerusalem was in confusion. He at once took soldiers and centurions and ran down to them. And when they saw the tribune and the soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. Then the tribune came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. He inquired who he was and what he had done. Some in the crowd were shouting one thing, some another. And as he could not learn the facts because of the uproar, he ordered him to be brought into the barracks. And when he came to the steps, he was actually carried by the soldiers because of the violence of the crowd, for the mob of the people followed, crying out, "Away with him!"

The brothers' plan backfires so perfectly it reminds me of the classic sci-fi plot where someone goes back in time to try to prevent a major tragedy but ends up causing that very tragedy. My favorite is the one where a time traveler goes back to 1871 to try to prevent the Great Chicago Fire. Sure enough, Mrs. O'Leary's cow is doing just fine until the time traveler spooks her and she knocks over the lamp.

The sci-fi theme is don't try to change history. Here, it's don't try to play God. That seems like a no-brainer to us reading about it now, but these giants of the faith somehow missed it. How can that be?

They assumed that Paul's arrest was a bad thing. This was so obvious that no one even considered the alternative. Paul's missionary work is advancing the kingdom, so God must not want Paul arrested.

Their reasoning makes perfect sense from a secular point of view, but it's wrong. This is one of the most difficult and advanced concepts in Christianity. Our minds are full of logical assumptions and processes. They define us. They're how we think. They're how we survive.

Yet, in the light of God's perspective, His priorities, and His revealed word, many "obviously right" things can be dead wrong.

All study of scripture is humbling, but this is more humbling than most.

It's all good; we can use a little humbling. Worship and praise God for His amazing ways. He grows His servants using processes we would never think of.

Yes, pain is sometimes part of the deal.

Make a point of pledging your willingness to pay a cost to belong to Him.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you ever made a vow (other than your marriage vows)?
2. Have you ever had to prepare for something bad that you knew was coming?
3. Do you ever see new truths through the retrospect-o-scope?
4. Have you ever had a plan go horribly wrong only to later find it was all for the good?
5. Are you comfortable with suffering for the gospel?