

# **THE CAUSE OF PAUL'S CAPTIVITY**

## **- STUBBORNESS**

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There is a tendency among Christians to view the conduct of the greatest saints of scripture through rose-tinted spectacles, and forget that they made some very serious mistakes. Scripture reveals the character of all its great heroes as they actually were, and the fact that they did make mistakes is recorded so that we do not make idols of them. The apostle Paul was no exception to this. That Paul was taken captive at Jerusalem in Acts 21 was not inevitable but was the result of his refusing to obey the command of the Holy Spirit through other brethren. This paper considers, in chronological order, the evidence presented in Acts.

#### **The haste to go to Jerusalem**

Acts 20:16 records "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" (RSV). The cause of this haste is not apparent at this point, but we may note for now that "he who believes will not be in haste" (Is 28:16, RSV).

Paul had spent 3 months in Greece (Acts 20:3), so we may reasonably assume that he was not in any great hurry at that time. The desire to hurry seems to have begun at the time "when a plot was made against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria" (Acts 20:3). As a result he determined to "return" through Macedonia, suggesting that he became minded to go to Jerusalem at the end of his time in Greece. Presumably the rerouting of his journey was a cause of some potential delay.

He leaves Philippi, "after the days of unleavened bread" (Acts 20:6), arriving at Troas after a 5 day journey. He stays there seven days, which is not suggestive of great haste, since an overland passage to the next place would presumably have been possible. However, on Paul's last night there, he speaks to them until midnight (Acts 20:7), when Eutychus falls from the window (Acts 20:9-12), and he continues in fellowship with them until daybreak, which does suggest a greater sense of time pressure. In Acts 20:13, they sail for Assos, but Paul walks there where he is picked up (Acts 20:14), and they sail for Mitylene. Over the next two days they come respectively to Chios and Miletus (Acts 20:15).

As already noted, Acts 20:16 finds him in a hurry to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost. Why does he want to get there at this special time in the Jewish calendar? Whilst there might be some explanation of his need to get there by that time for some reason which does not have ritual implications, nothing is

mentioned, and the sequel, as we shall see, makes that very unlikely. It seems an odd contrast with the attitudes revealed in Galatians firstly, towards Jerusalem (Galatians 4:25), and more particularly towards the "times and seasons" (Galatians 4:10 - see also Colossians 2:16-17).

Although, because of the time pressure, Paul sails past Ephesus, he calls the Ephesian elders to meet him at Miletus, where he gives them the well known farewell discourse, which has echoes of the similar discourse by Jesus in John chapters 13-17. During that discourse we find a key statement in Acts 20:22: "I have been bound by/in spirit" (Greek "*dedemenos ego to pneumati*"). This is a very strong statement, possibly even a legal or moral undertaking, comparable with marriage. Care is needed in interpreting the "by/in spirit". This statement is specifically contrasted with the testimony of the Holy Spirit in Acts 20:23, suggesting that a voluntary binding by Paul's of his own spirit which was in view in v22. This interpretation is strengthened by appeal to the general principle that the Holy Spirit is never compulsive (1 Corinthians 14:28), but is a Spirit Who makes us free (Galatians 5:1). How has he become "bound" in this way, so that he is "locked in" to going to Jerusalem in spite of the repeated warnings about what will happen at Jerusalem (Acts 20:23)? At this stage in the narrative no clear answer can be given.

Paul is resigned to the consequences (Acts 20:24), seeing them as the fulfilment of his ministry - the parallel with Jesus' farewell discourse is strong here.

From there they have a speedy journey, to Cos, Rhodes, Patara, and passing to the south of Cyprus, they arrive at Tyre (Acts 21:1-3). They spend seven days at Tyre with disciples there (Acts 21:4). "*Through the Spirit they told Paul not to go on to Jerusalem*". It is impossible to avoid the conclusion that this was the Holy Spirit speaking: if had merely been the disciples speaking for themselves the phrase "*through the spirit*" would not have been used. This definite and unambiguous command is ignored.

From there they travel by ship to Ptolemais (Acts 21:7) and stay one day, before travelling on to Caesarea, where they stay with Philip the evangelist (who was one of the seven "deacons" (Acts 6:5; Acts 8 etc)). Thus he was no ordinary brother. He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied (Acts 21:8) - the text implies that they prophesied on this occasion. We are not told what they said, but Acts 21:12 is suggestive that their message was similar to Acts 21:4. They stayed with Philip for some time, and Agabus came down from Judea. Agabus was a prophet with a proven record of reliable prophecy, having previously warned of a famine (Acts 11:28). Agabus performs an acted prophecy with Paul's girdle, and prophesies Paul's captivity and deliverance to the Gentiles (Acts 21:10-11). Although he does not specifically tell Paul not to go, the message is strong. Given that Paul already knew what was to come, as it had been frequently told him

before (Acts 20:23), Agabus's prophecy seems unnecessary unless it was intended to stop him. This must be the case in the light of the ignored prophecies of Acts 21:4. Everyone else there recognises the purpose of the message (Acts 21:12) and beseeches him not to go to Jerusalem. But Paul is determined to go on (Acts 21:13), and accuses them of weakening his resolve. They are then left with no option but to leave the matter in God's hands (Acts 21:14). This is the last we hear of any message from God to Paul until after he is captured (Acts 23:11).

### **Paul meets the Jerusalem elders and submits to them**

It is quite a large party which accompanies him to Jerusalem (Acts 21:15-16), probably with a view to providing Paul with some protection. Paul is well received there (Acts 21:17), and the next day he meets James and the elders of the Jerusalem church. Paul tells them about the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry (Acts 21:19), for which the elders glorify God (Acts 21:20).

But then there is an immediate change of tone. Paul is now invited to view the situation from a human standpoint. He is asked to consider how many believing Jews there are who are "*zealous for the law*". The letter to the Hebrews shows how fundamentally misplaced such zeal (compare also Romans 9:31- 10:13) is, since the ceremonial law and its sacrifices have been fulfilled in Christ and are now useless. Moreover, those who turn back to such things are turning back to apostasy (Hebrews 10; Galatians 2:16-21). The Jerusalem elders are concerned to keep up appearances (Acts 21:21-24), and to quell the rumours about Paul, given in Acts 21:21. They ask what is to be done about this (Acts 21:22), and their solution (Acts 21:23) is that Paul should do what "*we tell you*". And what they tell Paul is to fulfil a vow (Acts 21:23-24) to prove that Paul is a keeper of the Mosaic law.

We should note firstly the stark contrast of these purely human, politically expedient, "good ideas" of the Jerusalem elders with the previously Holy Spirit given instructions. The elders do not even mention God or the Holy Spirit! Regrettably these men, because of their zeal for the law, were not "walking in the Spirit", and their counsel was therefore bad.

Secondly, they wanted Paul to act for the sake of appearances. This contrasts with Paul's rebuke of Peter over the matter of eating with Gentiles (Galatians 2:11-21).

Thirdly, they wanted Paul to give way to those who were effectively denying the completed work of Christ (Hebrews), and so were essentially apostate (note v21, in the Greek, accuses Paul of "*teaching apostasy against Moses*").

Fourthly, Paul was being asked to take part in a ritual which includes every type of sacrifice which was offered under the Old Covenant (Numbers 6:13-20): sin offering, burnt offering, peace offering (Numbers 6:14), cereal offering, drink offering (Numbers 6:15), shaving of the hair (Numbers 6:18 - a symbol of shame, note the implied conflict with 1 Corinthians 11), and wave offering (Numbers 6:20). Thus this particular proposal would involve Paul in practicing every aspect of the ceremonial law. Yet the epistle to the Hebrews shows that law is futile, and Paul condemns himself in Galatians 2:18-21 if he should take part in it. (The Old Covenant priesthood came to an end when the high priest tore his robes (Matthew 26:65, Leviticus 10:6-7;21:10-12).)

Fifthly, the Jerusalem elders reveal in Acts 21:24-25 their own expectation that a Jew will keep all of the law, in contrast to the (rather second class?) Gentile Christians.

Paul goes along with this plan completely, and it is clear that Paul will be taking part in all the rituals with them (Acts 21:26). He makes no objection, and apparently has no qualms that this is in such serious conflict with all that he has been teaching. Such a situation is likely to overtake even the best saints who stubbornly ignore the word of the Holy Spirit through other brethren. In such circumstances, we are outside the place of safety, and clear guidance, and are given over to the consequences of our actions.

But, at the last minute, when the time is almost fulfilled (Acts 21:27) God arranges for an uproar in which Paul is arrested, and thus God prevents Paul from taking a step which would destroy his ministry. The sacrifices were not made, at least not by Paul.

This mistake was not without serious ongoing consequences. He was never free thereafter to go where he pleased - his mishandling of his freedom led to its loss. Moreover, there were long periods where very little happened in Paul's life, such as the two years mentioned in Acts 24:27. While it is true that Paul wrote many useful letters from his prison cell, this does not mean that this was God's best plan for his life, and we do not know what better works he might have achieved had he been more open to the word of the Spirit.

### **Why was Paul so open to receive the word of the Jerusalem elders?**

Paul clearly had a great desire, expressed frequently in his letters, to see Jew and Gentile reconciled. He had done much to try to heal a breach which the Acts of the apostles shows was becoming ever wider between the Judaising church, composed solely of Jews, which was based in Jerusalem, and the more open church composed of both Jews and Gentiles away from Judea. In fact these two outlooks were irreconcilable because the Judaising church effectively denied the

completed work of Christ. They failed to see that the law of Moses with its commandments and ordinances had been abolished and fulfilled in the death of Christ and his resurrection. As the letters to the Hebrews and to the Galatians clearly state, there is no possibility of holding to both. Jew and Gentile could only be reconciled by consigning the law to its proper place as a historic schoolmaster. The Jerusalem church were unwilling to go that way - rather, they wanted all Jews to live according to the law. Had that view prevailed, Christianity must ultimately have reverted to being a Jewish sect, highly legalistic, and in time the dispensations for Gentiles would probably have been abolished. As it was, the Judaizing churches, which were concentrated in Judea, were destroyed and dispersed when the Jewish nation was scattered among the nations for the second time in AD 70.

But there are also more immediate reasons for Paul's submission to the elders. Their suggestion involved the fulfilment of a vow, and it seems extremely likely that Paul already intended to fulfil a vow when he was travelling to Jerusalem. Indeed that seems likely to have been his main reason for wanting to go there. In Acts 18:18, we read that Paul had shorn his hair "*for he had a vow*". At Cenchrea, where he was at the time, he could not have made any sacrifices - that was possible only at the temple at Jerusalem. There no sacrifice was involved, though such an action may have been unwise. Perhaps he wished to complete "properly" his earlier vow, or perhaps it was a new one.

Paul's wishing to fulfil a vow would make sense of:

- a) Paul's desire to go to Jerusalem,
- b) his haste to go there to arrive at a particular time (Pentecost)
- c) his statement that he was "*bound in spirit*" to go there
- d) his willing cooperation to join with others who were "*under a vow*" in completing the associated sacrifices.
- e) his unwillingness to be deflected from his purpose by other people.

Paul having unwisely bound himself in this way, only God could stop him. This was the purpose of the various prophecies, and when these failed to stop him, at the very last moment God had to arrest him. (Maybe the reason he was never freed was that God knew he would try once again to fulfil the vow?) There is really no other plausible explanation for the course of events, and Paul's willing co-operation with the elders of Jerusalem.

It is, of course, a great mystery as to why Paul was unable to see the problem.

Paul had gone into a situation he had no business dealing with. He was trying to deal with the problems of the Jewish church in Jerusalem. This was beyond Paul's authority – he was called as an “apostle to the Gentiles” (Romans 11:13), not the Jews. That was the underlying reason why God had forbidden him to go

to Jerusalem. He thought himself “bound” to be there, but he did not have God’s anointing to deal with the problems at Jerusalem, except insofar as they impacted Gentiles, as had been the case in Acts 15. Lacking God’s mandate to be there, he was in a place of weakness and danger, outside God’s will, where he became blind to the godlessness of the Jews’ proposals and the implications of his actions.

Very probably in his previous life as a Jew, he had made vows, and although he had seen clearly that there was no other sacrifice than Christ for salvation, he had not seen that such voluntary vows as these involved similar problems concerning the old sacrificial system. Whatever the case, what we must learn from this is that those things of which we see the truth most clearly are likely to prove to be the areas of our greatest failures. This characteristic comes out in the lives of other men that God used - the example which immediately comes to mind in the context of Paul, formerly Saul, is the other Saul - who destroyed Amalekites and witches, yet finally fell victim to that combination.

But unlike Saul, for Paul it was not the end, as God stepped in and stopped Paul’s foolish actions, though it restricted his subsequent activities. He was not the first to do something similar: Peter had denied Jesus because he too went into a situation of temptation beyond his ability in John 18 by entering the court of the high priest. In both cases God was able to restore them, because their failures were consequences of their virtues – their wholehearted desire to establish the kingdom of God – to the point of stubbornness.

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These notes are not comprehensive but should stimulate personal bible study. Every effort has been made to be accurate, but the reader should test everything in accord with the example of Acts 17:11 and the command of 1 Thessalonians 5:21. Errors, or queries which are unresolved after consulting the LORD, should be referred to the author. Further copies from the author (email: rhjbibpap@rhj.org.uk)

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