

DON'T GO!
Acts 21:1-16

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A couple Sundays ago, in a sermon entitled Pathos, I spoke about a number of things that could have easily made the apostle Paul **less than attractive** to most of us. With this text that we have just read from Acts chapter 21 we should add **yet another item** to our list: namely, Paul was clearly bull-headed. For...

- In verse 4 we read that the disciples from Tyre were "through the Spirit telling Paul **not to go**" on to Jerusalem. **But Paul didn't listen.**
- At Caesarea, one Agabus, from Judea, showed up and in typical prophetic fashion, made the same point to Paul, binding Paul's feet and hands with Paul's own belt. But did Paul listen? **No.**
- Finally, in verse 12 Luke makes it clear that he and those with him all urged him **not to go**. By verse 14 we read that they just finally **gave up even trying** any longer to convince Paul to avoid going to Jerusalem. Paul had made up his mind and so, due to Paul's stubbornness, they wrote it off as the Lord's will, and with that traveled on to Jerusalem with Paul.

Now, it wasn't that Paul disagreed with them. When Agabus bound Paul's hands and feet suggesting that that was exactly what was going to happen to the one who owned that belt, Paul didn't disagree. Indeed, if you will recall from chapter 20:23, it was Paul who said to the Ephesian elders that "the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me."

So **it was not that Paul disagreed** with those who were warning him. It was **not** that Paul believed Agabus to be a false prophet. It was **not** that Paul thought those around him too sentimental (though he does get on them a bit in verse 13 when he says, "What are you doing weeping and breaking my heart").

No, Paul knew that all of them were correct.

But Paul was also convinced that what was about to take place was **his fate...his destiny**. And he wasn't afraid to face it.

1. Paul Embraced his destiny.

In many ways, the idea that the Jews should be out to get Paul should have not been a surprise to Paul or to anyone else. Almost from the first day that Paul had been converted to faith in Jesus, the Jews had been out to silence him. By the time of this recorded interaction between Agabus and Paul, Paul had been

- severely beaten (in Philippi),
- stoned and left for dead (in Lystra),
- driven out of several different cities, and so far
- eluded two assassination attempts (the first in Damascus (Acts 9) and the second in Greece (chapter 20)).

The Jews who were in power were **more than a little upset with Paul**. At one time they had numbered him with them, but not any longer. Paul had proven himself to be not only a turncoat but a formidable opponent as well. So they **wanted him dead**.

There is something truly great about a person **coming to grips with their destiny**.

It was 21 years ago now that James Montgomery Boice, the very erudite and skilled pastor at the 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia was informed that he had pancreatic cancer. As most of you know, a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer is pretty much the delivery of a **death notice**. Very, very few people ever survive pancreatic cancer. Most think, when diagnosed with pancreatic cancer that they may prove to be one of those **seven out of a hundred** that survive it by five years. But most die within the first year.

But knowing the odds, and having seen others suffer through all kinds of **vain attempts** to beat the disease, when Pastor Boice was told of his own condition he in effect said, "So be the Lord's will." He **refused any and all suggested treatments** and within about 45 days he was dead.

Some were critical of his decision but most saw it for what it was: a man who had already lived a full life, looking death in the face and saying, "I'm not afraid. Let's get on with this."

That seems to have been Paul's attitude as well.

Acts 20:24

Acts 21:13

There is something **very admirable** and even **attractive** about that kind of attitude. I think we Christians are **all too often quite weak** when it comes to facing death. We may have been a Christian for years, decades even, telling people that we've been made right with God and that there is therefore now "no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus." We say we have passed from death unto life (John 5:24) and that God has now promised us "eternal life" (John 3:16). We speak of the glories of heaven, the wonders of a new body, and the vanity of this life. We may have even given great time in trying to convert a relative or friend, encouraging them to come to Jesus and be saved.

But then when we come down to our own death **we act as though we are cowards of the future**, unsure of what lies ahead, and in some cases showing actual fear at the prospect of death. This should not be!

John Bunyan, that great 17th century Reformed Baptist preacher, had certainly run across this many times. For when it came time for him to describe Christian – the "Pilgrim" in his classic work, "The Pilgrim's Progress," he presents him also as one who was quite afraid of crossing the river of death and into eternity. Hear the words of his allegorical tale...

The Pilgrim's Progress, pp.160-163 (Harvard Classics)

Are you prepared to face death?
Are you prepared to face God?

One of my favorite "last words" is that of the famed (and adulterous, though that is entirely different subject) preacher, Henry Ward Beecher, who on his deathbed on March 8, 1887 said,

"Now comes the mystery."

(By the way, two other great "Last words" are those of George Washington, who said,

"It is well. I die hard. But I am not afraid to go."

And one that I have often quoted and sincerely hope will be my final words – the words of Sir Henry Havelock,

"Come, my son, and see how a Christian can die.")

Well, back to the mystery that Henry Ward Beecher referenced, the apostle Paul had described that **step into eternity** in much the same terminology as "mystery" when he wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:9,

"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived of the great things that God has prepared for those who love him"

Death IS a mystery, but Paul said that he was ready for it.

Well, ready or not, it is coming our way as well.

It may not come as violently as it would come to Paul, but **it will come**.

Please turn to Isaiah 40...

This is, without question, one of my favorite sections of the Bible. For here we have Isaiah: the priest and prophet of God. And the people – someone – is basically asking him to preach to them. But Isaiah is in a quandry. He **doesn't know what to preach about or what to say**. Let's read it...

Isaiah 40:6-8

There's the answer...there is what to preach about: **ALL FLESH IS GRASS!**

That's a universal truth; that is the situation for everyone! These bodies are fading...like the grass and like flowers.

They are **not going to last**.

Death is coming. It is our destiny.

Can you embrace your destiny?

2. **Agabus and his prophecy.**

In verse 10 of Acts 21 we read of Agabus, from Judea. What is a bit surprising is the way that Luke describes Agabus. There we read, "a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea." There is little question but that this Agabus is the **EXACT SAME AGABUS** that we read of back in Acts chapter 11...

Acts 11:27-28.

Assuming that Luke wrote ALL of the book of Acts, and

assuming that these two references to Agabus (hardly a common name) were one and the same man, then it is surprising that when we get to chapter 21 that Luke would reference him in a way that suggests his reader or readers had **never heard** of Agabus before. One would expect Luke to have written Acts 21:10-11 to read, "While we were staying for many days, Agabus, the prophet who had **earlier predicted** a coming famine, came down from Judea and coming to us, took Paul's belt and..."

Well, regardless of **why** Luke seems to have forgotten his earlier mentioning of Agabus, let's talk about Agabus and the four prophetess daughters of Philip...

In Ephesians 4:11, Paul states what are considered the foundation spiritual gifts for the church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors ("shepherds," ESV) and teachers. Some have suggested that the pastor and teacher are meant to go together (pastor-teacher). So depending upon how you look at it one either has a list of four spiritual giftings or five spiritual giftings or empowerings. People who are convinced that there are FIVE giftings will often speak of the "Five-fold ministry" of Ephesians chapter 4.

Now, no one questions the existence of all four or five. The only question is "how many of these giftings are still in existence?" For if the first one – the apostle – was only meant to be for a time, is it possible that the same might be said of the prophet as well? Most everyone wants to hang on to the evangelist and the pastor and teacher, believing that these two or three giftings are still very much needed (indeed most would say we could use MORE Billy Grahams, and MORE solid, dedicated pastors and teachers).

But what about these prophets?

If we conclude (and I think rightly so) that **the age of the apostles ended** with the death of the last first century apostles, did the age of the prophets also end at that time? Neither Biblical teaching nor early church history allows us to legitimately suggest this. And thus, whether or not the age of the apostles has ended, it would seem that **we are still stuck** with the prophets.

Why would I say "stuck"? It is because of what this entails for us – the rest of the church. Let me explain...

1 Corinthians 14:26-32

The presence of prophets, or even the suggestion that there could possibly be modern day prophets – either way, it means that the rest of us need to become judges.

For the text doesn't say, "Let two or three prophets speak and let the others **ACCEPT what is said.**" No, it says that the others are to **weigh...to discriminate, to judge or (get this: a possible translation) "doubt" what is said.**

Today one is most likely to find one of these self-proclaimed prophets in charismatic churches: at a church conference or some special meeting.

If it was clear that those attending these meetings were listening to these prophets with a bit a skepticism, a bit of questioning or doubt, I don't think the non-charismatic churches would be so quick to write off these modern day prophets or even the idea of there could be a legitimate modern day gift of prophecy.

But as is often the case in the church, the **lack of discernment** on the part of the charismatics has led to a pendulum response (and rejection) on the part of the non-charismatics. This is too bad.

So here is where I think we should be on all of this...

1. I believe we **should affirm** our belief in the **ongoing role and gifting of prophets.**
2. I believe we should **ENCOURAGE** God's people towards such a gifting. 1 Corinthians 14:1
3. I believe we should very **critically listen to them.** Can one be a true prophet of God and slip up here or there? I would say that I am open to that. There is no such thing as "prophet infallibility." But if it becomes clear that these prophets are really not true prophets (either because they are not giving any real prophecies, or because what they do prophecy often turns out to be wrong) then in those cases we should **write them off.** Write them off; warn against them; and refuse to listen to them.

Well...back to this morning's text...Agabus had a prophecy for Paul: namely, that Paul was going to be bound hand and foot.

And did that happen? Absolutely. To just peak ahead for a moment...

Acts 21:33 Agabus said Paul's "feet and hands" would be bound. To do that with chains would likely require **two** chains. And two chains is what we read Paul ended up having on him: he was bound not just with chains, but with **two chains**.

3. (Lastly this morning) Paul's Sufferings were for Christ.

It is one thing to suffer...to come to grips with our mortality and even to face death unafraid.

But Paul's sufferings were for Christ's sake.

Back when Paul was first converted, God used a man named Ananias to initially help him. The Lord told Ananias how he was prepared to use Paul (then called Saul)...

Acts 9:13-16

Paul understood that because of his following Christ, great trials had come his way and even more were to follow...

Acts 20:22-24

And then, from this morning's text...

Acts 21:10-13

For any of us who believe in Jesus, the prospect of facing death because of our faith, gives a bit of glory to what would otherwise be a very ignoble death.

Recently, someone gave me a most interesting book. It is a kind of daily devotional book. But instead of it having a Bible passage or Bible verse be the springboard to a daily devotional kind of thought, it has some event in history, tied to the very

date that one would be reading it, to tell of some great event in Christian history that took place on that date. The book is entitled The One Year Christian History.

I will close with a reading of one of these. It is from January 22...

p.44-45 from The One Year Christian History

I love that line: "Be of good comfort, brother. We shall have a merry supper with the Lord this night."

To truly suffer for Christ's sake...

Or like Paul, "to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus"...

Well, if you have to go out (and we all do), what a way to go!