

Acts 21 - John Karmelich

One of the great questions asked in Christianity is how exactly do we do "God's will"? If we feel some strong sense to do something is that His will? If people with a spiritual gift to prophesize tell us we will experience horrible pain if we don't change our minds about what we want to do, but still do it anyway, are we doing His will? Do we just pray for His will, make the best decisions we can and go forward in life? Those questions underline this chapter. In it Paul finishes his final missionary journey. He ends it with a visit to Jerusalem where he's arrested. The rest of Acts focuses on his trials due to that arrest and travels to various trials because of it. The predictions made to Paul before this happen came true, so I'm wondering if Paul did God's will here and hopefully all of this shows us a things about doing His will!

If one reads through commentaries on this chapter. They are mixed. Some argue that Paul believed it's his destiny to go to Jerusalem and no matter what anyone told him, he wanted to go there to preach the Gospel there. Others argue that good Christians who had the gift of prophesy warned Paul through the Holy Spirit what he's doing is a horrible idea and it will end with him suffering! Again the predictions came true! Whether we like it not, Paul chose the "go for it" route, and he ended up in prison for a few years, and he suffered terribly as we'll see through the rest of this book.

Gee John, that's great ancient history and we're sorry Paul had to go through all of that, but why should we care when we have our own problems to deal with? Why is this travel journey and trouble passage in the bible? How is it relevant to our lives? To me the issue is about understanding God's will for our lives. It's been a few decades since I first studied and taught this passage. If you read the whole lesson that I wrote back then, I debated it and gave you both sides of the argument. My view now is that Paul wanted to do this and God used the results good and bad for His glory. Who knows what would happen if Paul listened to the advice of those who said "Don't go there"? The point for you and me is we try to make the best decisions we can with the information in front of us and do what we believe is His will.

What I'd argue is the most important thing to get out of this "travel and trouble" chapter is the idea that doing God's will does not involve any fancy or special prayers. It's just a matter of praying for His will to be done and make the best decisions we can, assuming we're not violating any biblical principles. If people tell us "we're in big trouble if we go down that path", but we're still convinced it's God's will for us to do it then we need to go forward despite the cost! It is the underlying principal and I'm convinced it is God's will when we go forward that way. Obviously it doesn't mean if we get the urge to jump off a cliff, it's His will. That violates the murder command! My point is this chapter teaches us what doing God's will is "no matter what" assuming one isn't violating His commands for our lives. OK then time for the details of the chapter.

The last chapter ended with Paul saying goodbye to people in Ephesus (a major city at the time in what is now part of Turkey). He starts his travel journey to Jerusalem to start this chapter. What's implied is Paul traveled by small boats that used visual cues for guidance. That means the ship captain saw where he's going by those cues and sailed by day. That's why the text names the places where Paul, Luke and a few others spent the night as they traveled. In each place they stayed with Christians they met. Back then, hotels and brothels were one in the same, so Paul figured it's better to stay with believers. He may have proud to see the Gospel spread, and found believers in those places. Then they took a bigger ship and landed in Tyre. It was a major port city in what is today Lebanon. The believers there warned Paul "through the Spirit" not to continue on his journey.

Here's where the debate starts about doing God's will. As we'll see later in this chapter, it's obvious the warnings came true. Again my view after decades of studying this, is God knew Paul was going down the path he wanted the warnings were to say in effect, "Suffering is coming, so expect it even as Paul's continuing the path of doing God's will". Even after the Christians in Tyre gave the warning they were "so mad he didn't listen to them", they went to the docks to say goodbye as he continued his journey.

The next stop on the journey is a port town called Caesarea. It's in Israel and a great archeological spot to visit if one gets the opportunity to visit that country. The person Paul meets there was one of the "7" from way back in Chapter 6. (About 25 years earlier!) That's when seven men were picked to distribute food to Christian widows when the Jerusalem church was starting to grow. Anyway one of them was a man named Phillip who had a story told about him in Chapter 8. Decades later he's now in Caesarea. In this chapter the text says he had 4 daughters who prophesized. It means they each had a gift to teach of Jesus and the bible to others. Church history states they were instrumental in the early church. This all took place in the port city of Caesarea. A Christian man from Jerusalem (about 60 miles away) showed up on the scene. He did a demonstration by taking Paul's belt and tying him up (another prophecy), the way he'll be tied in Jerusalem. It's another of the warnings of what's about to happen to Paul. He didn't care, and he desired to go to Jerusalem goal to preach Jesus there on a busy Jewish holiday (Pentecost).

When Paul got there, he told all of the great conversion stories, miracles and problems he dealt with on his journeys. The church leaders said in effect, "That's great Paul, but we got our own problems! Many Jewish-Christians think that you've forsaken your Jewishness on those journeys". Therefore, we'd like you to help four young men perform a Jewish ritual and pay their expenses as a sign that you are still a "good Jew" even though you're a Christian. The Christian church there had over 10,000 believers then according to historians. Anyway Paul agreed to do this ritual to make the church leaders happy.

So much for the good news, time for the bad news! Among the Jerusalem crowd there for the holiday, was a non-Christian Jewish man probably from Ephesus (again in Turkey today). He saw Paul there in the temple. This unnamed man was part of the opposition to Paul in Ephesus. He accused Paul of doing things contrary to Jewish law. Specifically, he accused Paul of bringing non-Jewish men in the area of the temple grounds that only Jewish people can enter. That led to Paul's arrest and the things predicted about him earlier in the chapter came to pass. To prevent him from being killed by an angry mob, then a bunch of Roman soldiers carried Paul out of there. The Romans didn't really care about Paul, but just wanted to keep the peace, on a busy holiday! The chapter ends with Paul asking the Roman leader if he could address the crowd. The speech he gives is given in the next chapter.

Gee John this is interesting ancient history. Why is it part of the bible and why should I care? It comes down to the fact that Paul wanted to preach the Gospel in Jerusalem. Nothing was going to stop him in spite of God given prophecies telling him of the danger that awaits. That leads back to you and me. We are called to use our lives to make a difference for God. There will be negative consequences when we decide to live that way. The "warnings" mean God's aware of what Paul was about to face and He will be there with us as we face the problems we face in doing what we are called to do. In effect all of this is a lesson to us to keep moving forward despite whatever lies ahead that God is with us and it is worth all the pain of using our lives for His glory as the eternal benefits far outweigh all the problems we got to deal with in this lifetime. That's the tough but true lesson of this chapter. Hope it encourages all of us as we use our lives to glorify Him.

With that said, on the same page where you downloaded this summary is a more detailed lesson on this chapter. That one is on a verse-by-verse basis. To read that, click on one of the other two links on this chapter. If you want, you are always welcome to e-mail me and I hope you like this. Thanks, John