

Words and Deeds: Hard Journeys
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 91; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23; Acts 21:1-14

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Acts 21:1-14. May God add His richest blessing to the reading of His infallible, perfect, holy Word. “After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea and sailed straight to Cos. The next day we went to Rhodes and from there to Patara. We found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, went on board and set sail. After sighting Cyprus and passing to the south of it, we sailed on to Syria. We landed at Tyre, where our ship was to unload its cargo. Finding the disciples there, we stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray. After saying good-bye to each other, we went aboard the ship, and they returned home. We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for a day. Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied. After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'" When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."”

“You have died of dysentery.” Ask anyone who was in elementary or middle school in the ‘80s or ‘90s, and they can tell you exactly where that famous line comes from: a simple computer game called *Oregon Trail*. It was one of the first interactive educational computer games that really took off, finding its way into school computer labs across the country.

With primitive graphics on the old Apple IIe, students were responsible for a band of five travelers heading from Independence, Missouri to somewhere along the northwest coast. You had to buy supplies, ford rivers, keep the group fed when the wagon got stuck in the mud, and avoid threats of all kinds. With smart choices and some luck, your crew might make it all the way to Oregon. But for most of us, the story ended badly with our family succumbing to a dreaded disease.

The game related to us the very real trials and tragedies of pioneers in the mid-1800s traveling the 2100-mile route. As it turns out, among the very first to make that trek was missionary Marcus Whitman in 1835. He made the journey as far as Wyoming. He eventually came back home, married, and made the journey again, this time reaching Fort Vancouver, Washington. His wife’s records of the trip were published, encouraging more settlers and missionaries to come. By 1890, when railroads made the harsh trip unnecessary, hundreds of thousands of people had made the journey, some intending to make money off the gold rush, others intending to bring Christ to the Native Americans and to those who settled out west.

The journey was grueling. The American Bureau of Land Development believes that about 300,000 people made the journey along the Oregon Trail...and roughly 30,000 of them died along the way. The Oregon Trail became known as a traveling junkyard and graveyard as people left broken and used gear all along the way and buried their loved ones in unmarked graves. Yet the people who blazed the Oregon Trail were responsible for settling the American West, making America the coast-to-coast nation that it is today.

Some journeys are going to be difficult, and Paul's journey to Jerusalem and beyond would be no different. Today's passage relates to us the bumpy journey Paul and his companions had on their way to Jerusalem. It wasn't the physical trip that was hard – it was knowing that Paul was going to face incredible hardship sometime after he arrived in the holy city. But how Paul faces the trip teaches us a lot about the Christian life, and even about our relationship with others as we go through difficult times.

Last week, we saw Paul saying goodbye to the elders of the church in Ephesus, dear friends he knew he would not see again. Luke says they had to tear themselves away from them because their love for each other was so great. But eventually they're back at sea, and there's a number of stops along the way. Long story short, they were probably on a coasting vessel for a while – a ship that was fine for going distances relatively close to the shore, but not out on the open sea. That changes when they catch the boat in Patara, which is about a 400-mile, 5-day journey to Tyre. They spot the island of Cyprus on their journey because that's the only thing to see along the route!

Tyre was a major trading center, so it makes sense that the boat is stopping there, and why Paul, Luke, and their crew have a week in the city – they get to “see the sights” while wares are unloaded and reloaded, which would take a while. So they do the natural thing – they find the church in town. This is not one that Paul started, but one that we think was formed way back when the church was scattered after the persecution Paul started in his former life after the death of Stephen.

And the Spirit is working there. They are welcomed among them for the week. I imagine there is a great amount of fanfare, seeing that Paul has been spreading the gospel all over this part of the world. But the Spirit is also speaking to the members of the church about what is going to happen to Paul. They may not know him well, but the Spirit reveals to them what is about to occur, that great tribulations are in store for Paul once he reaches Jerusalem.

This is where things get tricky. Luke writes, “Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.” Does this mean that the Holy Spirit is saying contradictory things, one to them and one to Paul? That would be very unlike God to be inconsistent, right? So what's going on? It has less to do with the Holy Spirit and more to do with our humanness.

The Spirit's message is consistent to both Paul and to the church at Tyre – Paul is going to face overwhelming hardship when he goes to Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit is consistent in revealing that to everyone. It's what they do with the message that matters. The people of Tyre would love for Paul to stay and teach them, to fellowship with them long...he is their brother in Christ! And now they're going to lose him, maybe permanently, and it's really really sad.

Their natural response is to say, “Don’t go – please stay. We love you. We’ll take care of you here. You don’t have to do this.” The Holy Spirit hasn’t revealed to them the why of Paul’s journey or what his final fate will be. They are responding to what they know. But as hard as it is to hear this message, it confirms to Paul what he’s been told – trouble awaits him at Jerusalem, but that’s where he’s supposed to go.

So after a week, they set out. But before they do, there’s a beautiful picture of Christian community there at the beach. Everyone in the church – the disciples, wives, children – they’re all there. They’ve all come to pray over Paul and his friends. Danger may lie ahead, but they don’t face it alone. The prayers of the church go with them, the prayers of the little ones, the heartfelt cries of God’s people calling out for mercy and protection on this man of God.

In a little over a month, we’re going to be sending our youth off to Cincinnati, OH. It’s going to be our biggest group ever, with seven of us going. And I invite you to come out that morning to see us off, to cover our trip with prayer, to join in the joy of knowing that our group will be making a difference in peoples’ lives. We need your prayers; we covet them. Plan for that on July 14.

The boat leaves and just makes a couple of short hops down to Caesarea, where Paul and company get off to head by land the rest of the way to Jerusalem. There they meet Philip. Now this is one of those payoff moments for sticking with me this whole time as we’ve looked through the book of Acts, because you might remember Philip as the guy who ministered to the Ethiopian official in his chariot and then suddenly disappeared after baptizing him. He found that the Spirit had dropped him a long ways away, and he journeyed until he reached Caesarea.

He’s settled there, had a family there, and he now has four daughters that prophesy. Luke doesn’t mention the daughters because they’re major to the story, but as an important side note. They fulfill the words of the prophet Joel, quoted by Peter in his first sermon, that in the day of the Lord, “your sons and daughters will prophesy.” They are yet another sign that God’s Spirit is poured out on all people, and we should be listening carefully to what the Spirit has to say to us.

When they’ve been there a while, the prophet Agabus comes to them, and he physically demonstrates what is going to happen to Paul – he’s going to be arrested, and the Jews are going to hand him over to the Romans. Everyone who hears knows what this sounds like – it’s exactly what happened to Jesus when he was crucified. Their worst fears come to mind. And so the whole group, even Luke and Paul’s other companions, beg him not to go. They don’t want to lose him. That’s what they think is going to happen – that Paul is heading to his execution.

And Paul admits as much. He says, “Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” It’s his expectation that he will be martyred in Jerusalem. And he’s ready for it. If it’s for Jesus, Paul’s OK with it. What’s hard for him is not going to face God’s will for him. What’s hard is just how hard everybody else is making it! He’s torn because everyone else is so upset. On the one hand, it’s touching that everyone loves Paul so much. On the other hand, it makes the whole situation that much harder. And finally, when Paul will not change his mind, the group comes to the same conclusion that Paul had made a long time ago: “The Lord’s will be done.”

Let's run with some of the ideas of this passage as they apply to our Christian lives now. I think there's a lot here for us if we think about it closely. And the first thought is this: *hard journeys are not a given for Christians, but an expectation.* Not every Christian has a road full of difficulty and hardship and persecution. Even Paul, who experienced more than his fair share of mishaps and trials, had long periods of peace and quiet – think of his years in Ephesus, for example. God laid out for Paul just how much he would suffer for His name, and yet Paul is joyous throughout most of his life. While he was often under attack, dealing with constant pressures, he has times of rest and refreshment too.

Hard journeys are not a given for Christians. We shouldn't be seeking them out. Suffering is not good in and of itself. If God allows suffering in our lives to mold us, to grow us closer to Him, to discipline us for our long-term good, that's all right. But when things are less difficult, when the road ahead seems clear, when we know we've got Jesus front and center and we're following Him and we're just enjoying His love and presence with us, all good.

But hard journeys are the expectation of the Christian. Jesus told His disciples in John 15:20, "No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you as well. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also." If Jesus was persecuted, we can expect the same kind of treatment. Now a lot of us have difficulties – work, finances, health, you name it. Those are hard journeys in their own right. But we can expect to have troubles that come from our walk with Christ.

I doubt that any of us will have to choose between our home and our faith or our job and our faith, at least not any time soon. But Christians throughout the world today face those issues. Persecution of Christians is a given in many places. We may never face that sort of thing. And yet we face a hard journey ahead of us in our culture if we stick to our guns and live as faithful believers. Because we see more and more intolerance of those who hold to our morality as we see it displayed in Scripture. Sometimes it's just ridicule in the press; sometimes it's laws that bump up against our freedoms to live in a Christian manner. Who knows where it will lead?

But many times, the hard journey isn't because of others; it's because God is telling us to do difficult things that will glorify His name but ask a lot of us. Maybe that hard journey is God asking you to risk friendships as you invite people to church, or to drop a friendship that leads you into sin. Maybe that hard journey is giving up something that's a regular part of your life so you have time available for what God wants to do through you. It could be that He's asking you to take a leap of faith to do a mission trip or host a Bible study. Who knows? Everyone's journey is different. But if we're following Jesus, we know that we can stand in the midst of the journey. God holds us. Even through life's storms, especially those hard journeys that happen because we stand on the promises of the Lord, God holds us tight and will not let us go.

A second thought: *The Holy Spirit is consistent, but humans aren't. Trust the guidance of mature Christians, but trust the Spirit's clear direction.* The churches in Tyre and Caesarea weren't trying to throw Paul off the path of following Jesus. They weren't trying to get him to disobey the Spirit's voice. They were just trying to reconcile the truth that the Holy Spirit had revealed them about Paul's future with the truth that the Holy Spirit had made it clear that Paul was supposed to go to Jerusalem.

Look, we would all prefer the easy road, right? None of us going on a trip to the West Coast is going to get together a wagon and follow the Oregon Trail now, right? Our first priority is usually health, safety, and security. After that, we prioritize our passions, our pleasures, our conveniences. But as we've learned, those priorities are often not God's priorities for us, and we sometimes have to leave those behind in order to be faithful followers of Jesus. It's not that those priorities are sinful, but they aren't God's priorities for us right now.

When we come up against difficult journeys, we often ask the help of others to see what they think. And sometimes, the people who care about us most, who have the Spirit, who truly want to see God glorified in our lives, who love us, still give us the wrong answers. Not because they want to mislead us, but because our human nature gets in the way. Sometimes, it's as simple as thinking, "What if that were me?", to throw us off. We worry that God might call us to do something difficult, so we don't encourage others to do them either. We also really hate it when those we care about suffer, especially when that suffering spills over onto us. There's a lot of pain in quitting a job, moving to a new place, giving old habits up. Change is hard for almost everybody, even good changes. And that can throw us off.

But at the same time, getting the guidance of mature Christians is also really good, especially if we aren't clear as to where the Spirit is leading us or if there's any hint that what we're doing might be going against God's plan revealed in the Bible. God's Spirit will never tell you to engage in sin. Sin is anti-God; He simply can't and won't do it. It's against His nature. Sometimes we need an outside ear to make sure we aren't just following a bad road. Other times, we really need the guidance of others because God's Spirit has made it clear that something needs to change, but we don't know what, or we need assistance in figuring out what God is doing. When any mature Christian who has been on our side and praying for us and shows the Spirit's work in their lives speaks truth to us, we should be listening.

But if the Spirit is clearly leading down a difficult path, don't take the difficulty as a sign that you shouldn't do it. As most of you know, coming to Detroit for us was the difficult path. We really thought God was leading us here, but it was not where we thought we'd wind up. But now, we're celebrating nearly 11 years in Detroit, and we've now officially marked 5 years as CrossWay Church! Isn't that amazing? Some wise voices were disappointed we weren't moving back to Indianapolis. And yet God knew what He was doing bringing us here.

That brings me to our last thought: *When confronted with a hard journey, the safest place to be is in the center of God's will.* Hard journeys will come, but they are better than seeking safety somewhere else. Most of us know the story of Jonah; at least we've heard he wound up in the belly of a great big fish. But Jonah is a cautionary tale to us.

God tells Jonah to go on a hard journey – to preach to the Ninevites, the sworn enemies of Israel. Jonah didn't want to tell his peoples' enemies how to avoid God's wrath, so he left town in the opposite direction from where he was supposed to go. And look how that turned out! When the Ninevites did repent and change and avoid God's destruction, Jonah was made about that too. The caution we get from the story of Jonah is that even though he turns back to God after his sin, he's learned little about God from going on this hard journey of his.

Paul knew there was a hard journey ahead, but he was willing to face it. Why? Because he knew God would be with him. This was God's desire for Paul. Anything else would have been disobedience. Paul knew that whether he faced death or hardship or whatever his enemies could bring on, his soul was safe putting it squarely in God's hands.

That's my prayer for us today...that we would boldly walk into the center of God's will for us. It might not be very clear; that's OK. Step into the will of God you know – you know He wants you to be holy. He wants you to be righteous. He wants you to glorify Him. All of these things you can do simply by paying attention to what God has already said to us in His Word. And as God reveals any particular will He has for you, it will be an easier path because you have already practiced walking in His will as you've discovered it in Scripture.

The path God has for you might feel like the Oregon Trail. It might feel like a marathon. It might feel like an uphill climb on a rocky and twisting path. It may be a hard journey. But may we embrace that path...because on that path, no matter what happens, we will know the peace and love that comes from knowing that we are in the center of God's will.