

Place: Lurgan Baptist 7:2:2011

THE CHURCH ABLAZE

Reading: Acts 21:1-26

32. UP TO JERUSALEM

The Civil War battle of Sharpsburg was one of the bloodiest days in American military history. On that September day in 1862 nearly 6,000 Union and Confederate soldiers were killed and 17,000 others were wounded. To put that in perspective

The casualties at Sharpsburg numbered four times the total suffered by American soldiers at the Normandy beaches on 6th June 1944. More than twice as many Americans lost their lives one day at Sharpsburg as fell in combat in the War of 1812, the Mexican War and the Spanish-American War combined.

(McArthur p, 242)

Some of the fiercest fighting on that awful day took part in a place of the battlefield known as the Cornfield. Some Union soldiers, their ranks decimated by heavy Confederate fire, fled toward the rear in wild panic, only to be stopped by the contagious courage of one man. Historian Bruce Catton describes the scene.

The Pennsylvanians broke and ran again, to be stopped incomprehensibly, a few yards in the rear by a boyish

private who stood on a little hillock singing his hat shouting, “ *Rally, boys, rally. Die like men, don’t run like dogs.*” This lone private stopped the retreat. Like that nameless soldier, Paul had the courage not only to face the enemy himself but also to inspire others to do likewise. Has there been a time in history when Christians needed more courage than today ? The persecution of believers by the Roman emperors stands out in history as a perilous for certain. But in the modern era Christians are being attacked more than ever, and certainly more than any other religion. The Israeli political leader David Ben Gurion defined courage like this, “ *Courage is a special kind of knowledge the knowledge of how to fear what ought to be feared and how not to fear what ought not to be feared.*” The American William Penn once wrote, “ *Right is right even if everyone is against it and wrong is wrong even if everyone is for it.*”

The Bible is filled with the record of men and women who were courageous enough to do the will of God. Against all odds and often against the advice of their own friends, they stood for the Lord even if it meant standing against all others. Noah withstood the criticism of those in his day who didn’t believe that God was going to judge the world. I mean he built an ark on dry land when it had never rained, no-one even knew what rain was at that time. But *Noah* persevered in spite of the criticism. *Do you recall Joshua and Caleb ?* Two of twelve spies who went into Canaan to check out the Promised Land and they were the only two who had enough courage to believe God would give them victory. Do you remember *David* ? A teenage lad, the only Israelite who had the courage to stand against

the Philistine giant, Goliath, in the Valley of Elah. His courage resulted in a great victory for the nation over his pagan attackers. What about *Daniel* ? When a captive in Babylon he continued praying even though he knew it might result in his death. What about his three friends. Do you recall their remarkable courage ? *Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego* refused to bow down to the image of the Babylonian king. Daniel ended up in a lions den, and his friends were thrown into a fiery furnace. But they were all delivered by God. Many believers have suffered terribly down through the centuries but did you know that more people are suffering for their faith today than at any time in history ? We here in the West don't hear as much about this as we should but martyrdom is not a thing of the past. And there is a need for spiritual courage today, and it's likely to increase in the future as we near the second advent of the Lord Jesus. Paul was certainly a man who needed courage daily and that need continued as he made his way to Jerusalem.

We have entitled our study “ *Up to Jerusalem,*” which is a phrase that is found in (21:4) You see, Paul is on the last leg of his third missionary journey. (18:23-21:17) He is carrying a large financial gift from the churches that he had established and he is bringing this financial provision to the beleaguered church in Jerusalem. But his friends tried to dissuade him from going, believing that danger awaited him there. Indeed this is the very first thing that I want you to notice flowing out of this passage.

(1) THE PRESSURE FROM THE CHURCH

You see, Paul was warned several times of what awaited him in Jerusalem. As Paul visited the brethren in Tyre they warned him not to go to Jerusalem. (20:4) As Paul fellowshiped with the brethren in Caesarea a prophet named Agabus provided a visual of the danger that lay ahead for Paul. Again, his Christian friends begged Paul not to go to Jerusalem. (21:12) Paul's response is one of the most outstanding demonstrations of courage and commitment in the New Testament. Do you see what he says ? (21:13) During the Civil War in the U.S.A one dedicated Southerner said, “ *I would rather die on my feet than live on my seat.*” This was Paul's conviction. He had tremendous courage and sheer determination to go on. He was willing to defend the faith regardless of the cost. Now can you imagine the pressure that Paul felt ? You see, the church did not want to lose this champion of the faith and so pressure was brought to bear upon him not to go up to Jerusalem. For one thing there was,

(a) THE PRESSURE OF FRIENDSHIP:

The first three verses of this chapter recount Paul's voyage from Miletus to Tyre in Syria on the coast of Palestine. But do you recall the last time we saw Paul ? He was bidding a tearful farewell to the elders of the church at Ephesus. In fact look at (21:1) Or “ *parted from them.*” The word means “ *tear away.*” (20:30 Lk 22:41) That shows us something of the trauma of that parting. So great was the Ephesian elders love for Paul that Paul literally had to tear himself away from his sorrowing friends. Wouldn't it be great if there was kind of love that existed between a pastor and his elders ?

Between a missionary and his committee ? Between a Sunday School teacher and her pupils ? You see, Paul literally had to resist their efforts to prevent him from leaving. Now will you notice that Luke includes himself in (21:1) ? He says “ *And it came to pass that after we*,” he was an eyewitness to the bond that was being broken as Paul left the Ephesian elders in Miletus. And yet Paul probably never considered changing his plans. He knew exactly where the Lord wanted him to be, in spite of the dangers that lie ahead. Now there has been much debate as to whether Paul was right or wrong in making this trip to Jerusalem. *So many Bible scholars are divided over the issue.* Some going so far as to say that Paul was completely out of the Lord’s will in taking this journey. What we can be sure about is that he certainly knew the pressure of friendship telling him not to go. Luke’s travelogue of their journey may seem uneventful but can you not imagine as they moved slowly over the water it give ample time for Paul to reflect what lay ahead in Jerusalem ? **The pressure of friendship.** Don’t go. I wonder could you be facing this pressure ?

Is the Lord calling you to do something or to go somewhere but you cannot bear tearing yourself away from family, friendships or even relationships in which you are involved ? You see, it takes courage to serve the Lord. Courage that overcomes the pressures that sometimes come from family and friends. Paul did not give in to those pressures but what about you ? Do you recall what the Lord Jesus said ? (Lk 14:26) Do you see that word “ *hate,*” ? It means “ *to love less.*” You see, the Lord Jesus insists that He occupy first place in the

affections of His people. He says, “ *He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*” (Matt 10:37) The woman known popularly as “ *the little woman,*” Gladys Aylward, just before leaving home for China left a note under her pillow which read, “ *He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.*” That was her explanation to her mother for leaving home on missionary service. In the life of Mrs. Jonathan Goforth there came a time when her love for the Saviour was tested. Goforth had asked her to marry him. Her answer was “ *yes.*” Then a few days later, Goforth said. “ *Will you give me your promise that always you will allow me to put my Lord and His work first, even before you ?*” Rosalind, his wife to be puts it on record that she gave an inward gasp before replying, “ *Yes, I will always.*” Could it be that the pressure of family and friendship is seeking to deter you from doing God’s will ?

(b) THE PRESSURE OF FAILURE:

For there are always those who are quick to point out that the course we are on will end in failure. There is always someone who will tell you why you what you want to do for God won’t work. My if you are going to serve the Lord today you will have to do the same thing that Paul did and that’s listen to God and not to men. I mean do you see what happened when Paul arrived in Tyre ? Look at (20:4) if you will. Incidentally, Paul did not found the work at Tyre. It had probably been founded by believers fleeing the persecution that broke out in Jerusalem after Stephen’s martyrdom (11:19) a persecution that was led

by Paul himself. Though Paul was only among these believers seven days they quickly grew attached to him and the scene at Miletus was repeated at Tyre. Indeed they told Paul “ *through the Spirit,*” not to go to Jerusalem. Now do see that phrase “ *through the Spirit,*”? It does not mean that Paul disobeyed the instruction from the Holy Spirit though some read it that way. Rather, it means Paul took these words as being a warning through the Spirit of what was going to happen him in Jerusalem, but not a prohibition to go, You see, Paul did not yield to the counsel of the Christians in Tyre because he knew what God was calling him to do. I mean here was a man who lived a life sensitive to the Holy Spirit’s leading. Do you recall his second missionary journey ? The Bible says, “ *And were forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia,*” (16:6) that is Paul knew the restraining ministry of the Spirit. Then after the vision of the man of Macedonia the Word says, “ *Assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for the preach the gospel unto them.*” (16:10) Paul knew the constraining ministry of the Spirit.

This long term pattern of obedience clearly indicates that Paul was not of the will of God in going up to Jerusalem. Indeed he says, “ *Behold I go bound in the spirit,*” (20:22) Compelled by the Spirit to go. Have you ever faced the pressure of failure ? I recall that when I was exercised about going into the Lord’s work I felt the need for further training. I applied to the Irish Baptist College and was accepted. No sooner had that happened when I was met with a prediction of failure. A dear saint of God who belonged to our own fellowship accosted me one

day. “ *So you are going to the Baptist College. What are you going in there for ? Do you not know that any fire you have for the things of God they’ll soon get rid of it.*” Thank God, I proved him wrong. But tell me, is the same thing happening to you ? Are you trying to do a work for God and all you are hearing is, “ *it will never work.*” Listen, there was (a) (b)

(c) THE PRESSURE OF FEAR:

For now in Caesarea Paul is confronted with Agabus and this prophet has a foreboding message for Paul, bad things awaited him in Jerusalem. Agabus (11:28) was much like one of the Old Testament prophets who used dramatic means for delivering their messages. (Ezek 4:1) Do you see what it says in (21:11) ? I mean, what would you have thought if that had been your belt and the message of this prophet had been directed at you ? Now Agabus did not interpret the prophecy or say whether Paul should or should not go up to the Holy City but Paul’s friends did. Look at (21:12) Even Dr. Luke was pleading with Paul not to go to Jerusalem.

My the pressure upon Paul must have been unbearable. Months, perhaps years of prophecies about future persecutions, the tearful farewell with the Ephesian elders, the heart tugging love in Tyre, Agabus’ dramatic prophecy, and now everyone even trusted Luke begging Paul to turn back. Paul acknowledged that they were tearing him apart. He says, “ *What mean ye to weep and to break my heart*,” (20:13) What a man. Could it be that the pressure is preventing you from doing the will of

the Lord ? On 14th April 1521, Martin Luther was on his way to the Diet of an ecclesiastical conference of Worms in Germany. The emperor had forbidden the sale of all Luther's books and ordered them to be seized. Luther's life was in great danger. His devoted friend, George Spalatin, had sent word to Luther through a special messenger not to come to Worms or he would be killed. Like Paul, Luther did not listen to his friends. Instead he sent Spalatin the famous message. *" I shall go to Worms, though there were as many devils as tiles on the roofs,"* Later when Martin Luther was asked to renounce all that he had written in his books and to repudiate them so that he could live, he said, *" Since then Your Majesty and lordships desire a simply reply, I will answer. Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason, I do not accept the authority of popes and councils for they have contradicted each other. My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me Amen."* My are you struggling with a decision to follow God's will ? Or to take a stand for Christ ? Will you be as unwavering in your courage as you seek to obey God regardless of the cost ? (1)

(2) THE PERSUASION OF THE CHURCH

And we get this in (21:14) when the believers say, *" The will of the Lord be done,"* this was not fatalistic resignation but confident trust in God's sovereign and perfect will. (1 Sam 3:18 Matt 6:10 Lk 22:42) They committed Paul into the care of the Lord. Now as I have said already there's a difference of opinion about whether

Paul was right or wrong to go to Jerusalem. Certainly his friends saw the danger and urged him not to go. But Paul was conscious of his duty to deliver the offering to the needy saints at Jerusalem and he was willing to be put into prison and even to die if that's what it took to do the will of God. There was certainly one thing that Paul and the church agreed on and that was this, *" the will of the Lord be done."* (2:14) At a meeting of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes in the U.S.A. Bobby Richardson prayed a prayer which is a classic, *" Dear Lord, your will, nothing more, nothing less, nothing else."* Now the Bible has a great deal to say about the will of God. I mean we are to **Seek the Will of God.** Do you recall what the Saviour taught in His Pattern Prayer ? He said we are to pray, *" Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done as in heaven so in earth."* (Lk 11:2) But the Bible also teaches we are to **Surrender to the Will of God.** As Paul puts it *" doing the will of God from the heart."* (Eph 6:6) Is this not what the Lord Jesus did ? Do you see Him in the garden of Gethsemane ? The Bible says, *" And being in agony he prayed more earnestly and sweat as it were great drops of blood falling to the ground."* (Lk 22:44)

In that garden He prayed, *" Father if thou be willing remove this cup from me, nevertheless not my will but thine be done."* (Lk 22:42) The Saviour surrendered Himself completely and totally to the will of the Father knowing that will was to go to a cross as a substitute for sinners and a sacrifice for sin. But we are not only **to Seek the Will of God, and to Surrender to the Will of God, the Bible tells us we are to Stand in the Will of God.** Do you recall what Paul says about Epaphras ? *" Epaphras who is*

one of you a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in praying, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.” (Col 4:12)
Now should this not be our desire ? Not only to Seek God’s will and Surrender to God’s will but to Stand in God’s will ? The persuasion of the believers in Caesarea concerning Paul was this, “ *the will of the Lord be done.*”
Now think of,

(a) *THE WILL OF THE LORD RESISTED:*

You see, its hard to pray “ *Thy will be done,*” (Lk 11:2) or “ *the will of the Lord be done,*” Why ? Because the major sin of the human heart is pride. Was it not pride that brought about the downfall of the devil ? I mean Lucifer pitted his will against God’s will. Five times he said, “ *I will, I will, I will, I will, I will.*” Satan began to be Satan when he said to the Father “ ***Not thy will but mine be done.***” That’s why there is so much heartache on the earth, because Satan deceived Eve, and Eve said to God, “ *Not Thy will but mine be done.*” Adam said to God, “ *Not Thy will but mine be done.*” They didn’t use those exact words, but that’s what their actions said, when they took their will and put their will against the will of God. And all sin is just simply saying “ *I will.*” One of the most tragic songs I know is Frank Sinatra’s “ ***I did it my way.***” Can you imagine standing before the Judgment Seat of Christ and saying to the Lord, “ *I did it my way.*” Only for Him to say to you, “ *Yes and here was My will for your life. Look how I would have used you and blessed you, if only you had allowed My will to conquer you.*” Now were Paul’s friends not resisting God’s will for his life ?

I mean, why did Paul encounter such pressure from his friends to go against what he knew to be the will of God ? Let me give you a couple of reasons.

1. Other Believers are Often Quick in Knowing God’s Will for Us:

Have you ever discovered that ? I have. When I have had to make a major decision that affects my family, my church, another church, others know what I should do right away. My we need to avoid making snap judgments or offering spiritual formulas. What matters is God’s will for us, not what others think we should do.

2. Their Spiritual Focus Here was more Horizontal than Vertical:

I mean their love and loyalty were commendable they wanted to preserve Paul. But their motives though pure, were shortsighted. These believers were not seeing God’s ultimate purposes. They were looking for Paul’s good but not God’s glory. And to his credit Paul survived all of this. How ? Think not only of (a) but think of,

(b) *THE WILL OF THE LORD RECOGNISED:*

In going up to Jerusalem Paul recognized that this was God’s purpose for his life. Now for several reasons I do not believe that Paul stepped out of the will of God when he went up to Jerusalem.

1. He had a Sentimental reason for Going There:

But it was a good reason. He was carrying the offering from the Gentile Christians to the suffering saints in Jerusalem. He wanted to present this to the church in Jerusalem with his own hands, because it was his hands that at one time had wasted the church in Jerusalem. He had been partly responsible for the state of penury in which the saints in Jerusalem found themselves. Paul did not want to send some representative to Jerusalem, he wanted to go to Jerusalem himself.

2. There were His Writings:

When Paul was in prison in Rome, the church at Philippi sent to a love gift. Paul wrote to them, “ *But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel.*” (Phil. 1:12) Because what happened to Paul did not hinder the spread of the gospel, I do not believe that Paul was out of the will of God.

3. There was what God said about Paul at his Conversion:

He said to Ananias, “ *Go thy way, for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel: for I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake.*” (9:15-16) Up to this point in our study of Acts, Paul has not appeared before kings and rulers, but we know it is in the will of God that he should do so. In the next chapter’s we will find that he does go before kings. He will testify before King Agrippa. It is probable that he

appeared before Nero in Rome. We know for certain that he reached those who were in Caesar’s household because he sent greetings from them in his letter to the Philippians (4:22) which was written while he was a prisoner in Rome.

4. There was His Finish:

Do you recall what he says to Timothy ? “ *I have finished my course,*” (2 Tim 4:7) This was written at the end of his life. It seems to me that he would not say that if for a time he had stepped out of the will of God. No, Paul did not step out of the will of God, rather he refused to be deterred from God’s will. Paul would have loved Eric Liddell, the runner who placed spiritual conviction and loyalty to Christ above Olympic or national glory. You see, Paul played to an audience of One. My like Paul have you come to recognize God’s will for your life ? Do you see clearly what the Lord wants you to do ? (a) (b)

(c) THE WILL OF THE LORD REALISED:

Listen again to their persuasion, “ *the will of the Lord be done.*” (21:14) You see, God’s will is something that you do. Do you recall when Paul was saved on the Damascus Road ? Do you recall what He said ? “ *Who art thou, Lord ? Lord what wilt thou have me to do ?*” (9:6) In seeking God’s will and doing it, a few practical reminders are in order.

1. Spend time with the Lord Regularly:

A certain young woman trying to decide God's will regarding a marriage proposal took a week off work and went on holiday with her Bible and her Lord. She was a wise woman.

2. Be Careful About Your Advisers:

Be discerning as to who you seek advice from.

3. Realise that God's Will May be Not what you Want:

Many of us are like the little girl who wrote an honest thank you note, "*Thank you for your present. I have always wanted a pin cushion but not very much.*"

4. If you know what God wants you to do, do it:

Do it in His strength and for His glory. The words of Richard Baxter says it all, "*Lord, what thou wilt, where thou wilt, and when thou wilt.*" Is that your prayer?

(1) (2)

(3) THE PROBLEM IN THE CHURCH

The problem was this. There was a growing division between the "*far right*," legalistic Jews and the believing Gentiles. Anything challenging the exclusiveness of the Jewish way and anything threatening the Jewish traditions was vehemently opposed. Paul's leadership in the ever expanding Gentile mission put him in direct conflict with the prevailing mood among Jerusalem Christians.

However, it all began so well, for when he arrived in Jerusalem,

(a) COMMUNION WAS EXTENDED:

There was the unofficial reception possibly at Mnasons house and then there was the official reception by the leaders of the church. No doubt they were pleased at the much needed gift that Paul and the others brought.

(2 Cor 8:20) But more significantly they were overjoyed at the Gentile converts who accompanied Paul. This was a historic meeting. The elders of the Jerusalem church probably seventy of them, were brought face to face with Gentile believers, the fruit of Paul's labour's in distant lands. Can you imagine it? Can you picture it? And God got all the glory. Do you see what it says in (21:19)?

"*What things God had wrought.*" Paul never talked about what he had done for the Lord, he talked about what the Lord had done through him. It was not Paul who ministered, it was Christ ministering in and through him. My are you slipping into a mindset that you are the one accomplishing great things for God?

Can you imagine if any modern preacher or evangelist had accomplished what Paul saw in his ministry, you can be bet there would have been a public relations person shouting it from the housetops. But not Paul. He was content for God to get all the credit. Are you? When the Lord does something in and though your life is your attitude that of the psalmist? "*Not unto us O Lord, not unto us but unto thy name give glory.*" (Ps 115:1) That's

what they did here. “ *They glorified the Lord,*” but praise soon turned to problems as,

(b) CONCERN WAS EXPRESSED:

Look if you will at (21:20-22) Here’s the background. Estimates that as many as 50,000 Jews in Judea had converted to Christ while maintaining their zeal for all things Jewish. *They were in the process of transitioning from Judaism to Christianity.* Many of them continued to observe the Law, not as a means of salvation but out of respect for God and their heritage as Jews. Some false teachers had crept in and spread lies among the churches saying that Paul was teaching that Jewish believers had to forsake Moses and the Law completely “ *that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk after the customs.*” This was not true of course, but it is what the Jerusalem elders had been told. (16:1-3 18:18) Now why were so many believing Jews still clinging to the Law of Moses ? Had they not read Romans and Galatians ? Probably not and even if they had old customs are difficult to change. In fact, one day God would have to send a special letter to the Jews, the book of Hebrews to explain the relationship between the Old and New Covenants.

As Dr. Barnhouse used to say, “ *The Book of Hebrews was written to the Hebrews to tell them to stop being Hebrews.*” It was until the city and the temple were destroyed in AD 70 that traditional Jewish worship ceased. My do you know something ? Lies are one way Satan attacks the church of God. (1 Tim 5:19) But

even though these accusations were false they posed a serious threat to the Jerusalem church so,

(c) COMPROMISE WAS EXHIBITED:

The leaders suggested that Paul demonstrate publicly his reverence for the Jewish law. All they asked was that he identify himself with four men under a Nazarite vow (Num 6:2) pay for their sacrifices and be with them in the temple for their time of purification. So Paul agreed, humbled himself before these men who were trying to keep peace in Jerusalem, even though he was innocent of their charges. My Paul could have refused on principle to participate in rituals which he knew were unnecessary from a sanctification perspective. But he didn’t. He submitted because he had a desire for unity in the church and that no-one could accuse him. You see, humility sacrifices for God’s church. And the reason Paul was willing to humble himself was that he wanted to be a “ *servant unto all,* ” that he might win more to Christ. (1 Cor 9:19) He was willing to become a Jew to win Jews to be as one under the Law to win those under the Law. He concluded by saying, “ *I am made all things to all men that I might by all means save some.*” (1 Cor 9:22) He capitulated to the Jerusalem church because he loved souls.

He longed for saved souls to be united and for lost souls to be saved. In fact he was willing to be damned if it meant that his brethren would be saved. (Rom 9:1) **Have you a heart like Paul’s ?** A heart that seeks to unify saints, justify sinners and glorify God ?

