

Acts 21

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[0 : 00] Please turn in your balls to Acts chapter 21. We're in Acts 21 this morning and then Acts 22 tonight.!

And I think two younger relatives of his. He was a sailor. And so for the hour and a half journey, he taught the two young people opposite and me reluctantly about sailing.

And what he kept talking about was fair winds and ill winds. Fair winds and ill winds. I know nothing about sailing, but if it's a fair wind, the wind's with you, isn't it?

And you can go as quickly as you can. Ill winds are against you. And as I was kind of trying to study Acts 21, actually Acts chapter 21 is all about fair winds and ill winds.

And there's times when things are going great. It's really encouraging. The wind is behind you. And there's the joy of the Christian life. And then there's also in Acts 21, ill winds, where everything seems against you and everything seems to be going wrong.

[1 : 26] And what we'll see in Acts 21 is fair winds and ill winds in the Christian life go together. Passage divides into three. Verses 1 to 14, you see Paul's journey.

He's in Turkey. He's passed by Ephesus. He's met the elders there, remember. He's got eight companions with him. And they are carrying tens of thousands of pounds of money, possibly even more.

The nine of them are on their way to Jerusalem with this gift, with this offering. The money has been given by non-Jews, Gentiles, non-Jewish Christians, to feed and clothe the Jewish Christians who live in Jerusalem area.

And the gospel had come to the Gentiles from Jerusalem. And so now those who'd received the gospel are giving back to the mother church, so to speak.

They're expressing their oneness with the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. It's an expression of fellowship. And in verses 1 to 14, the fair winds are blowing. In every sense of the word, Paul's journey and his companions' journey is given to us in some detail.

[2 : 40] The first day they set out to sail at sea, they sail 45 miles. The next day, they do 70 more. The third day, they do 70 more.

That's some going, isn't it, when you're on a small boat. You don't get out of sight of the land, of the shore. And you bob along 45 miles, 70 miles, 70 miles.

There's a fair wind. They end up in this place, Putara, on the south coast of Turkey. Then they sail for Phoenicia, or Syria as we might call it.

They sail past Cyprus. And at last, they come to the land at Tyre. Verse 4, what would you do if you were in a great hurry to get to Jerusalem?

If you were carrying thousands of pounds of cash for the poor, but you find yourself on a ship that's got to unload its cargo, and it's got to stay in Tyre for seven days, what would you do?

[3 : 42] What would you do? Verse 4, having sought out the disciples, we stayed there seven days. Paul has their companions. They arrive in Tyre.

They can't move on. What do they look for? What would you look for in a strange town? They look for the Christians. There's no church buildings.

They won't be for another 350 years. But they look for the Christians, and eventually they find them. And I want you to immediately notice that their hearts are knit together right away with these believers.

Only a week later, they say goodbye to them. And the whole group of Christians entire come with Paul and his companions to the very boat itself.

And they kneel down on the shore together, and they pray together. And the church I grew up in, grew up in Swansea, it's a university city. But at that point, there were very few internationals that

came, and not lots at all.

[4 : 47] And there was one student who came to our church, who had been about kind of 1981, who was from Kenya. His name was Ben. Ben, he was like a celebrity, you know? An absolute celebrity.

And he was there three years. He made a massive impact on the church family. And when he left to go back to Kenya, and Andrew will remember this, the whole church went to Swansea train station. There's photos of us all there, waving goodbye to Ben from Kenya. Why do we do that? Well, because he'd won our hearts. Because we were affectionate towards him.

We loved him. And so it was in the early church. In less than seven days, these Christians have become family. They've never met before. But it's such an encouragement, isn't it?

To have this sort of fellowship. Verse 4, again, having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days, and through the Spirit, they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.

[5 : 48] The early church had prophets. Now, you only find prophets when the Bible is actually in the process of being written.

It doesn't mean that these particular prophets were writing the Scripture, but it is only at times in history when the Bible is actually being written that you find prophets.

The New Testament isn't fully written at this point. There are prophets in the churches, and they bring direct revelation from God to the people while the Scriptures are being written.

When the Scriptures have been written, there will never be another prophet in the history of the world. As is made perfectly clear, isn't it, by the last chapter of the Bible in the book of Revelation.

Once Scripture is finished, there cannot be any more prophets. But there were prophets at the time of the early church. And some of them are telling Paul in this little church, in those seven days, that he's not to go up to Jerusalem.

[6 : 54] Now, we have a problem. Did Paul disobey? Or was it simply like later on with Agabus, as we'll see in a minute, was it simply that they were saying that when you get to Jerusalem, there will be trouble?

That is God's Word. And then they concluded that he shouldn't go up. Whichever way it was, Paul was a prophet to remember, as well as an apostle.

He's reminded in this wonderful time of Christian fellowship, that though there are fair winds, ill winds are coming. And so when you get fair winds that blow, you cannot forget ill winds.

And the journey is traced to us. They go from one place to another, from verse 7. He comes to Ptolemus. And he only stays there a day, but he doesn't forget to greet the Christians. They come to Caesarea, and they stay with Philip.

We've met Philip before, haven't we? Act 6, one of the original deacons. And it must have been some household. Philip, Mrs. Philip, the four unmarried daughters, who were prophetesses. And nine visitors carrying thousands of pounds.

[8 : 03] They stay there a little while, but the prophetesses aren't the only ones bringing the message. Storming down from Jerusalem is a man we've met before, Agabus. Compelled with the weight that the message he's carrying.

And he comes into the room, there's Philip, Mrs. Philip, four daughters, Paul, his eight companions. Maybe other Christians as well. And here he is, verse 11. Coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, thus says the Holy Spirit.

This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles. Don't think of a leather belt.

Don't think of that. With a buckle. Go back to the first century. He unwinds this long cloth belt, piece of cloth. That would have been holding Paul's garments together.

It could have been five or six feet long. And he binds his own hands and feet. And he gives a prophecy. He says, thus says the Holy Spirit. So note there that like the Old Testament prophets, he is speaking with the same authority.

[9 : 17] He says, this is God's word, not my word. And he gives a prophecy. Note that like the Old Testament prophets, he's speaking in God's name.

This is God's word, not mine. Thus says the Holy Spirit. The same Holy Spirit that worked in the prophets Isaiah, Elisha, Daniel. Here is a word from God. It says, so shall the Jews in Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt and they will deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.

Paul has come on a mercy mission. Giving a gift of love to the church in Jerusalem. And he's already been told trouble awaits. But now here is Agabus.

And he says, it's going to be worse than that. When you get to Jerusalem, the Jews will hand you over to the Gentiles. And you will be bound by your hands and your feet. Philip, Mrs. Philip, the four daughters, the eight companions, plead with Paul, don't go, don't go.

God's word through Agabus did not forbid him to go. God's word from Agabus says this is what will happen when you do go.

[10:34] It was those who heard the word pleaded with him not to go. There's fair winds blowing out there. What fellowship, what friendship, what solidarity.

It's a marvellous thing, isn't it, to go through the Christian life with Christian friends. It's a marvellous thing to go into Christian homes and spend your time there.

It's a marvellous thing to meet Christian young people who love the Lord. But there's trouble ahead. And when the fair winds are blowing, God won't let Paul forget that there are going to be ill winds blowing.

Now at this point I need to stop and I wish I didn't have to stop. Over the past kind of 60, 70 years there are churches that have said there are really three types of prophets.

They are saying what nobody has said before. The Bible says there are two types of prophets. There are true prophets and there are false prophets.

[11:43] But many churches in the UK want to say there are three types of prophets. There are false prophets. I don't think they talk about them very much. And there are true prophets of the sort like Ezekiel and Obadiah who wrote books.

But they want to say there's a third type of prophet. Who speaks in God's name but he doesn't carry the same authority. So for example the Old Testament prophets.

They can't make mistakes. But this new type of prophet, even though they speak in God's name, they can occasionally get it wrong. They can make mistakes.

When you listen to them, they may be 80% right, 90% right, 70% right, a little bit right. You've got to sift it. And the big passage that they go to is they say, well Agabus didn't get it quite right.

Agabus is one of those third types of prophets that didn't get it quite right. Look at verse 11. And they say actually that didn't happen, did it?

[13:01] They say the Jews didn't bind him and the Gentiles didn't receive him. They grabbed him. Agabus got it wrong. Well before the end of this sermon, we will see Paul in two chains.

Two chains means chains on the hands and chains on the feet. And we will see Paul being attempted to be killed by the Jewish people and the Romans intervening.

And when the Jews who are trying to kill Paul see the Romans, they stand back. And Luke is silent about what happened next. But Paul himself tells us in chapter 28 of this book that he was handed over to the Gentiles.

Agabus' prophecy was exactly fulfilled. And we will see over the coming weeks that again and again the Romans say release this man. And again the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem say never, never, never.

They put enormous pressure that not only should Paul not be released but that he should be condemned. So he was kept in chains which is very, very unusual for a Roman citizen.

[14:12] Agabus' prophecy was not only fulfilled on one occasion but actually over the next couple of years we'll see it's fulfilled numerous times. When a man speaks in the name of God.

If he is a true prophet. He knows what is the word of God and what are his own thoughts. Agabus' prophecy was a true prophet. Agabus' prophecy was a true prophet.

No true prophet would mix up his own thoughts on the word of God. It rules out modern day prophets. Agabus was a true prophet.

Agabus' prophecy was a true prophet. and he is reminding Paul that where fair winds blow, ill winds follow. So that's Paul's journey. Let's move quickly into Paul's arrival.

Verses 16 to 25. He now walks with the others. He travels 70 or so more miles from Caesarea to Jerusalem. It's two days for a good worker, three days for most.

[15:15] He arrives in Jerusalem where there's hostility towards him. And not only by the unconverted Jews, but by the converted Jews who are believing rumours. Where will he stay?

Where is he going to get his head down for the night? Fortunately, there's a man who's been converted. He owns a large house in Jerusalem and he stays there. He's one of the early disciples.

Perhaps he's one of those men that was converted on the day of Pentecost. And Paul and his friends and his relations stay there. And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing to us the house of Manasson of Cyprus, an early disciple whom we lodge. Verse 17. And when he'd come to Jerusalem, the brothers receive him gladly. The joy of Christian fellowship. The next day he's able to see James and all the other elders of the Jerusalem church. And they said to him, verse 20, if you look down, you see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law. And they've been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.

[16:26] That is a lie. We've seen, haven't we, Paul just a few chapters ago had circumcised Timothy. And Paul himself, a few months ago, had made a vow with a ritual haircut.

There's often rumours about preachers of the gospel. And here there is an ill, chilling ill wind that's blowing.

Fair winds, they welcome gladly, lovely fellowship. Welcome from the elders. They listen to what God has done through Paul and they're thrilled by it. But ill winds because there's suspicion and animosity and tension and bad feeling.

And rumours. And people believe those rumours. So the elders come up with a wonderful plan which will backfire. They say here are four men.

I can't go into all the details because I don't think anyone else can either because I'm not sure we understand them all. And so here are four men who've made a vow and they're coming to the end of their vow.

[17:32] Their vows are for a certain time. And at the end of their vow they will have to make offerings. And when their vow is over they will have their head shaved to show that they're released from the vow.

And they say, you sponsor them, Paul. You get purified richly with them. You go into the temple for their final exercises. And when people see you in the temple with those people and their vows. When they see that you're paying for their offerings and sacrifices. They will know that the rumours about you aren't true. That you're not someone who just kicks off the old ceremonial law.

Paul agrees. It's an example, isn't it, of for the Jew he became a Jew. He would not have done any sacrifice that was a sacrifice for sin.

Because he understood very well that there's only one sacrifice for sin. The Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. But because Paul is so concerned about peace in the Christian church.

[18:35] And because Paul is so concerned for the Jewish believers who've come to know the Lord Jesus. He agrees to the strategy that's suggested to him by the elders of the church.

Remember, this is Paul. Who will stand up and he'll say, you don't have to be circumcised to be saved. This is Paul who will stand up and say to those Gentiles, you do not have to become Jewish to be born again.

But it is for the peace of the church. For his love. For his Jewish brothers and sisters. He will submit himself to this.

In the words of the great theologian Kenny Rogers, Paul knew you've got to know when to hold. When to fold up. When to walk away. And you've got to know when to run.

We're going to see that again and again. That Paul, he changes his behaviour. Not to contradict the dark gospel.

[19:40] But because he is so passionate about Jewish and Gentile believers. That's thirdly, we've seen Paul's journey. We've seen Paul's arrival. Let's see Paul's arrest.

Paul takes the man. He goes into the temple with him. He goes through the various rituals of purification. The time of their vow was coming to an end. There's a week of special things to do. And he's involved with that.

But you see, Paul had seen there were people from all over the known world in Jerusalem. At that time, it was Pentecost. People came to Jerusalem. There were Jews from Asia who knew Paul. And his friend, Trophimus. They knew him too. He was a Gentile. These Jewish people had seen Paul walking through the streets of Jerusalem with Trophimus.

And now they see Paul with unknown men in the temple. They'd seen him with Gentiles in the city. And now they see him with unknown people in the temple.

[20 : 42] And two and two makes five. And they assume that the people he's been walking around with in the streets are the same people that he's been walking around with in the temple. That Paul had brought a non-Jew into the temple.

A Gentile. And the outcome is a riot. Verse 28. Can you see it? When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stood up the whole crowd, laid hands on him, crying out, men of Israel, help.

This is the man who's teaching everyone, everywhere, against the people, against the law, against this place, the temple of God.

Moreover, he's even brought Greeks into the temple and he's defiled this holy place. It was a lie. It was a misreading of the evidence. It was false. But the devil uses falsehood, doesn't he?

And when the devil can't answer truth with fact, he has to answer truth with falsehood. And when the devil can't destroy the gospel message, he has to destroy the gospel messenger.

[21 : 54] And when the devil knows that people are beginning to understand, he sows seeds, weeds, to make them misunderstand. And where the fair winds are blowing, he will make sure there are ill winds blowing.

And if God wasn't in control, he would ruin it completely. But praise God, he is in control. The whole city is a riot.

Paul is taken out of the temple. The doors are shut and they are in the process of killing him. They're beating him. Fortunately, in the providence of God, the Roman cohort comes onto the scene.

Right next to the temple is the tower with barracks. With steps coming down from the Roman barracks and right into the outer court, the troops come.

They can be there in minutes. And in the mercy and the kindness of God, the Romans arrive. When they appear, the Jews step back. And later on, he and Paul's word is handed over and chained.

[23 : 03] Agabus' prophecy is fulfilled. The crowd is so hostile that Paul has to be carried up in the air so that the angry mob can't get hold of him. Acts 21 is a difficult chapter to preach.

It's such a mixture. There's fellowship and prayer. There's hospitality and joy. There's pleasant travel. There's laughter. Christians surrounding Paul and his companions with love.

Welcoming him and rejoicing in him. Receiving God's word. But there's also rumours and suspicion. And the promise of future persecution and hate and misunderstanding.

And twisted evidence. And riots and beatings. And near murder and chains. And just escaping with his life.

And if you follow apostolic Christianity. Do not be surprised if there are fair wins. If there are good times.

[24 : 07] Great times. Encouraging times. In church life. Many good moments. But don't be surprised. When there are ill winds.

And there is spite. And there is spite. Of others. And there are broken relationships. And your own heart. Broken beyond measure.

That is the Christian life. One of my favourite places in London. Is the tiny little watch shop.

In Piccadilly station. If you've got an old watch. It's the best place to go. And it's a tiny little cubby hole. It's probably the size of this kind of carpet here.

And when you go. And you take an old watch like this. The man puts his thing on his eye. And he takes the back off your watch. And he'll show you the workings of your watch. And when you see an old watch like this.

[25 : 01] You'll see that there are wheels going one way. And there are wheels going the exact opposite way. And there are parts moving in every direction. And there's a stopper in the watch. That stops it.

Stops it. Stops it. So it ticks. And you can watch him work on old watches. Wheels going one way. Wheels going that way.

And the wheels have to go in opposite directions. For the watch to work. And you'll see the stopper. Keeping stopping the wheels.

As it ticks. And the whole mechanism is going in different directions on an old watch. And when you look at your Christian life.

You will see things that are very hard and very difficult. And maybe awful. Things that you would love to stop. And when you look at your life.

[26 : 01] You will see things that seem to be going well. And are happy and encouraging. And there are things in your life that are going in different directions. Wheels going in different directions. Things that are for you. The winds that are for you. And things that are against you. The winds that are against you. And you might look today. And you might think nothing is going right. Nothing is working out. But the promise of Acts 21. And the promise of the Bible. Is that God is working out his plans. And God is working out his purposes. And all things work together for good. For those who love him. Who are called according to his purpose. And you are in the place. God wants you to be. And he is making you into the person. That he wants you to be. And so we look at Acts 21. With the fair winds and the ill winds.

[27 : 03] And we look at our lives. With the fair winds and the ill winds. And it is a marvellous assurance to us. To carry on. To keep on going.

To keep living for the Lord Jesus. This week. And the rest of our lives. Let's pray.