

“LET THE WILL OF THE LORD BE DONE”

Acts 21:1–26

Key Verse: 21:14

“And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, ‘Let the will of the Lord be done.’”

Are you ready? “Ready for *what?*” you might ask. Don’t only *some* people need to live in a state of constant readiness? Firemen famously need to be ready 24/7 for that firebell to jump on the truck and go put out a fire. ER staff need to be ready anytime to treat urgent patients with any injury or disease. Baseball players need to be ready to catch and throw that ball, no matter how it bounces or how fast it comes at them. A nursing mother is ready at any hour to respond to her baby’s cries. But do Christians need to be constantly ready? For what? In this passage, Paul the witness is ready to be imprisoned, and even to die for Jesus. It seems extreme. But actually, there’s something here meant to be normative for all believers. On his final trip to Jerusalem we’ll see where Paul and his team go and what they do in each place. We’ll think about why God is sending Paul to Jerusalem. Most of all, we want to know how and why we all need to be ready to do the will of Jesus, whatever it may be. May God speak to us through his word.

First, ready to embrace the nations (1–8a). The Risen Jesus told his disciples that they would be his witnesses to the end of the earth (1:8). Then God poured out his Spirit on them, and people from all the nations gathered in Jerusalem saw and heard it (2:1–13). In the first half of Acts, God mainly used Peter and the apostles to bring the good news of Jesus to Jews in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria. In the second half, God has mainly been using Paul to bring the gospel to Gentiles. Paul has already been to the island of Cyprus, to Galatia, Macedonia, Greece, and Asia Minor. Now he and a team of seven young leaders representing new Gentile churches (20:4), along with Luke the author, have seen beautiful coastal places like Assos, Mitylene, Chios, Samos, and Miletus (20:13–16), each with its own unique history, culture and peoples.

After Paul’s words to the Ephesian elders, Luke describes the last leg of their journey to Jerusalem. Let’s see where they go. Look at verse 1. Again it’s one place per day, traveling by smaller boat (map). They stop by the islands of Cos and Rhodes, then go to Patara. Cos (image) is famous as the birthplace of Hippocrates, the father of medicine, and it’s known as an island of healing. Rhodes (image) is famous for its navy, trade dominance, sophisticated financial system, and for the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Patara (image) is the seaport for the many wealthy cities of Lycia known as the Lycian League. So its port can handle larger ships. Look at verses

2–3. Here Paul and the team get on a cargo ship, most likely loaded with grain (map). It sails a much longer distance over open waters to the ancient Phoenician city of Tyre. Tyre (image) is famous as a major shipping hub, known for its immense wealth, trade, and purple dye. Look at verse 7. Now their ship stops at Ptolemais (image), which used to be a Greek and Jewish settlement, but recently added a Roman colony, where many retired army veterans and their families have settled as Roman citizens. Look at verse 8a. Now the team likely travels on the popular 40-mile coastal road connecting the cities. Caesarea (image) was built by Herod the Great. It has a large port, Roman-style streets and buildings, and is the Roman administrative center for Judea, with over 100,000 residents and a large Jewish community. Each place on this journey has its own history and culture. In the eyes of Paul the missionary, each one is unreached; most locals have no knowledge of Jesus. We tend to just avoid people or places different from us. But every place he goes, Paul’s heart is open to people who need the good news of Jesus. How could Paul be a man so ready for the nations? It’s because he’s filled with the Holy Spirit. God wants us, too, as Spirit-filled witnesses of Jesus, to be ready to cross barriers and share Jesus with anyone, anywhere, at any time.

Second, ready to encourage believers (4–9, 15–17). Now let’s see where Paul and his team have fellowship with local disciples. In Tyre, they stay for seven days (4a), probably waiting for their ship to finish unloading. It’s surprising that disciples of Jesus are here. How did that happen? Actually Jesus himself ministered to people from Tyre.¹ Maybe some are still alive or shared their faith with others. Later, persecuted believers from Jerusalem came to this Phoenician city, though they were talking only to Jews (11:19). Now, Paul and his team seek out these Jewish disciples of Jesus. It becomes a time of listening to each others’ stories, sharing the love of Christ, and hearing God’s word from Paul. Look at verses 5–6. At week’s end, Paul and his team and the local disciples have gotten so close, they all go to the beach, with their wives and children, kneel down and pray together one last time. Their faith in Christ has made them this close.

In Ptolemais they find more Christian brothers but stay only one day. Look at verse 8a again. Caesarea is where Philip the evangelist settled (8:40). (map) It’s also where Peter shared the gospel with the Roman centurion Cornelius (10:1–48). So there’s likely a mixed community of Jewish and Gentile Christians in Caesarea now. Paul and his team stay here “many days” (10a) waiting to go to Jerusalem by Pentecost (20:16). Where do they stay? Look at verse 8b. Philip was originally one of the seven deacons in Jerusalem (6:3–6), so he had known Stephen, who was also one of the seven. Stephen had been stoned to death for his faith in Christ. And Paul, who used to be called Saul, had been there,

¹ Matt. 15:21; Mark 3:8; 7:24; Luke 6:17.

approving of his execution (7:58–8:1). Now in Caesarea, Paul is staying at the home of Philip! Former enemies, Philip now welcomes Paul as a servant of Jesus. Paul might be sharing his own life testimony. It's a time of God's grace. Philip and Paul are now kindred spirits not only because of the grace of Jesus, but also because they both have evangelized Gentiles. The four unmarried daughters of Philip who can prophesy (9) are inspiring. The testimonies of the Gentile journey team are also inspiring. If Cornelius and his household are there, they too are inspiring. They share deep and rich fellowship in the grace of Jesus. In Christ, they're much closer than their cultural or ethnic bonds. God is building a new humanity, a new history, through the gospel of Jesus.

Look at verses 15–16. Here's another example of fellowship in Christ. Disciples from Caesarea escort Paul and his team all the way on their 63-mile journey to Jerusalem (map). There they find the house of a man from Cyprus named Mnason, an early disciple. He may even have followed our Lord Jesus himself. Being familiar with life among Gentiles on Cyprus, he's ready to welcome Paul and his team into his place to lodge. As the author Luke often emphasizes, hospitality is a key part of practicing our faith. And Paul isn't traveling just to get to a destination. At each stop, he's always ready to encourage the local believers. At the same time, he's always ready to build up his team, helping them meet people God has been using. How is Paul so ready to encourage believers wherever he goes? It's because he's full of the Holy Spirit.

Third, ready to suffer for Jesus (10–14). The main event here is in Caesarea. Look at verse 10. A Christian prophet from Judea named Agabus hears that Paul is in Caesarea, so he goes there. What does he do? Read verse 11. This is so dramatic! Back in Tyre, the disciples had warned Paul in the Spirit not to go to Jerusalem (4). Earlier at Miletus, Paul himself said that he is going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, “not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me” (20:22–23). Now Agabus prophesies that going to Jerusalem will bring Paul much suffering. Despite what people are telling him, Paul knows it's the Holy Spirit who's leading him to suffer in Jerusalem. But why? Hasn't Jerusalem already had many chances?² Jerusalem has strongly rejected the gospel. Couldn't Paul be used more effectively elsewhere? Why waste the life of another servant of God in Jerusalem? But through the upcoming turn of events in Jerusalem, God is going to work out his own long-term plan to get Paul to Rome, where he can reach even more people. In Jerusalem, God is going to mold Paul even more into the image of Jesus. Through being handed over to the Gentiles in

² Jesus himself went there multiple times until they killed him. Peter was there until he almost got killed. Stephen testified there and got stoned to death. Early after his conversion, Paul went to Jerusalem, sharing his testimony, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord, but they were seeking to kill him, too, so the brothers sent him away (9:25–30).

Jerusalem, God is going to use Paul to defend the gospel of Jesus against slander and show that it's the fulfilment of all his promises, the ultimate hope of Israel. Through Paul's visit to Jerusalem, God is going to move the center of gospel ministry to Rome.

What happens when these people hear how Paul will suffer? Look at verse 12. Even Luke joins in, to get him not to go. Of course, they care about Paul and want to protect him. They're not just talking; they're *weeping*. How does he respond? Read verse 13. Paul knows they love him, but they don't realize they're hindering him from doing what God wants. He says they're "breaking his heart." But Paul won't budge. He says, "For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." What does he mean?

First, he's not afraid; he's ready to embrace any suffering. After three missionary journeys full of persecution Paul is a veteran sufferer. He recently wrote that he had "far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death" (2 Cor.11:23b). Why go through *this again*? Paul is not just a tough guy, or a glutton for punishment. He says it's "for the name of the Lord Jesus." Paul is this committed to Jesus. He's this loyal to Jesus. He loves Jesus this much. How can he love Jesus like this? We all come to love Jesus when we receive his gospel. Paul writes, "For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor.5:14–15). If we're filled with the love of Christ, his love controls us; we now live for Jesus, ready to suffer for him, ready to die for him.

"For the name of the Lord Jesus" means Paul has a clear purpose in going to Jerusalem: his aim is to exalt, honor and glorify the Lord Jesus. "His name" is not just the word "Jesus"; it means who he really is. Paul wants all people, including the Jews, to know *who Jesus is*. Humanly, Jesus was a lowly carpenter from Nazareth. But he's the one who fulfills all God's promises (13:23,27–29). He's the one who died and shed his blood to purchase us as his own (20:28). He's our Risen Lord and Savior who frees us from the power of sin and death (13:30–33,38–39). And he's the final Judge of all humanity (17:30–31). To know him means not just to know information; it's to repent of our sins and believe in him, receive the Holy Spirit, God's forgiveness, and living hope in his kingdom. Paul wants to bring the real knowledge of Jesus to Jerusalem. He's ready to suffer and give his life for it, just as our Lord Jesus did, just as Stephen did.

What happens? Read verse 14. This is not a resignation to fate; everyone there has realized an important truth. *God's will may be different from our will*. We shouldn't try to force God to do our will. We shouldn't try to force people to do

our will, either. Instead, we need to be ready to obey God's will, whatever it is, whatever suffering it involves. Our Lord taught us to pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt.6:10). When he faced his own cross in Jerusalem, he withdrew, knelt down and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:41–42). He modeled for us what it looks like to submit to the will of God. Choosing my will or God's will always require self-denial and struggle. We like to do what we feel like doing. Some pursue their own ambition. Some try to do nothing. As believers, God wants us to pray, "Let the will of the Lord be done."³ As we face our real life, let's pray: "Let the will of the Lord be done!" As we pray for those we care for, including family, friends, and those who come to Bible study, let's pray: "Let the will of the Lord be done!" Are you ready to do the will of God, whatever you may have to suffer?

Fourth, ready to share what God has done (17–20a). Here Paul and the team arrive in Jerusalem, and the brothers receive them gladly. The next day they visit James, the leader, and all the elders present. After greeting them, Paul relates one by one the things God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. He probably tells the stories of the seven young men with him. When they hear it, they glorify God. Though he knows the Spirit's warnings, Paul is ready to share the work of God's grace. The team with him are living examples of this grace. Through the Spirit, God gives us this same readiness, this boldness, to share the work of his grace in and through us, even in a hostile environment.

Fifth, ready to embrace the Jews (20b–26). This part is sad. They now tell Paul about the rumors against him and ask him to go through a Jewish purification rite along with four others, and to pay for it himself. Only quoting a letter to Gentile believers, they seem uncomfortable with the Gentile converts present. It's a far cry from the fellowship they enjoyed in Tyre, Caesarea and at Mnason's house. Yet Paul humbles himself to become all things to all men, even to the legalistic.⁴ But this plan to appease the Jews doesn't work, because it's not God's will.

So, are you ready? Ready to embrace the nations? Ready to encourage believers? Ready to suffer for Jesus? Ready to share what God has done? Ready to humbly embrace difficult people? Let's read verse 14 again. May God fill us with the love of Christ through the Holy Spirit, so that we can be Jesus-centered, ready to suffer for Jesus, ready to do anything for Jesus, ready to do his will.

³ Cf. 1 Pet.4:2; 1 John 2:17; Rom.12:2.

⁴ For the four men, this would involve a male and female lamb, a ram, and cereal and drink offerings, which Paul paid for (Num.6:14–15; cf. 1 Cor.9:19–23).