

When the Multitude of Counselors is Wrong!

Turning the World Right Side Up . . . The Apostle Paul – Part VII

Acts 21:1-14

Introduction

One author that I read recently asked the question, “What do you do when you need advice? Where do you turn?” You may have questions such as:

- Do I take that job offer?
- Do we put our children in that school?
- Do we take an early retirement?
- Do we move to another location?
- Which college should I attend this fall?
- Do I say yes to that marriage proposal?

He went on to say that most of us as Christians, wish God would make things simple and His answers audible. We would all like to be the children of Israel, when God clearly instructed them by audibly directing their leader. He did that, for example, when He told Joshua how to overcome Jericho and make the walls come tumblin’ down.

In our wishful thinking, God would say something like, “Listen, young man, here’s what I want you to do – I want you to drive over to your sweetheart’s house and I want you to march around that girl’s house once every day for seven days.”

“Yes, go on!”

“On the seventh day, march around it seven times and then, go up and ring the doorbell, get on one knee and pop the question. Her defenses will crumble and she’ll fall into your arms.”

“I love that plan, Lord, thanks!”ⁱ

The truth is, life is not so easy. Major decisions; forks in the road; life altering choices – these are trying times that require patience and prayer, meditation and study in the word of God, and, yes, good counsel from other Christians.

In the book of Proverbs, chapter 11, verse 14 (KJV), we are told,

. . . in the multitude of counselors there is safety.

As a general rule, that principle is indeed true. But what happens when all the counselors around you are wrong? What happens when everyone is giving you direction, but that direction would lead you astray. Could such a thing happen to a believer? Yes!

Today, I want to take you to the next stop on our tour through the book of “action” or Acts. It is a rather surprising stop along the way, for we will discover that all of Paul’s counselors and friends were wrong.

While we are studying this, we will learn some valuable lessons related to not only receiving biblical advice, but giving advice as well.

The Trip to Troas

I invite your attention to Acts, chapter 21, verses 1 through 4a,

When we had parted from them and had set sail, we ran a straight course to Cos and the next day to Rhodes and from there to Patara; and having found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. When we came in sight of Cyprus, leaving it

on the left, we kept sailing to Syria and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload its cargo. After looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; . . .

The words translated in verse 4, “looking up the disciples,” or “aneurisko” in the Greek, mean they found the disciples by searching for them. The believers were not waiting for Paul at the dock; they had to be found.

The text does not tell us how they found them. I imagine they found them by talking to people about the resurrected Lord. Eventually, they found one who knew what and whom they were talking about, who then led them to the body of believers who were worshipping together.

I have found, by the way, that you can find Christians just about anywhere you look, if you are willing to talk about the things of the Lord.

I found out the maid who cleaned our floor when I was in India, was a believer. My wife and I discovered a Christian couple sitting across from us on a train to France. A few days ago, I discovered my waitress from Nairobi was a pastor’s daughter who knew the Lord.

Barclay said it well when he penned, “One of the great privileges of belonging to the Lord is the fact that you have friends all over the world . . . friends you haven’t even met.”

I imagine Paul and his companions simply talked to everybody they met about the Lord. In that way, they found out where the disciples of the risen Lord were meeting.

In a matter of days, deep friendships were formed. In fact, skip down to verse 5, where we read,

When our days there were ended, we left and started on our journey, while they all, with wives and children, escorted us until we were out of the city.

They hated to see Paul go. In one of Luke’s rare references to children, we are told that entire families belonging to the church followed him to the dock. What a wonderful scene!

The disciples’ advice: “Don’t set foot in Jerusalem!”

However, read the rest of verse 4 to discover that all is not harmonious!

. . . and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem.

Now in chapter 19, verse 21, we are told that Paul purposed in his heart to go to Jerusalem. In chapter 20, verse 24, Paul describes his trip to Jerusalem as a ministry assignment that he received from the Lord Jesus.

Notice, however, in verse 4b, we read that they were telling Paul through the Spirit, not to go to Jerusalem. “Through the Spirit” would be an idiomatic way of expressing something we often express ourselves. It would be the same as you saying to Paul, “Listen, Paul, the Spirit just seems to be impressing me that you are going to suffer in Jerusalem and therefore you shouldn’t go.”

You got the principle right, but you missed the application. The Spirit of God had indeed predicted persecution, but that was to prepare Paul, not to prohibit him from going.

Now notice the latter part of verse 5 through verse 6.

After kneeling down on the beach and praying, we said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home again.

The whole church was kneeling on the beach praying for Paul. I can just imagine some of their prayers. They might have said something like, “Lord, please help our brother to see the light. Lord, open his eyes. Your Spirit has made it clear to us that Paul is headed for trouble, so we know he’s not supposed to go. We’ve even had a unanimous vote of the body that he’s not to go near Jerusalem, but Lord, he won’t listen. Please help your stubborn servant. Amen.”

So Paul sails away. He is no doubt, grateful for Christian fellowship, but probably troubled by the disagreement over his vision and passion to reach Jerusalem with the gospel.

The Conflict at Caesarea

Now, look at verses 7 through 9 of Acts, chapter 21.

When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais; and after greeting the brethren, we stayed with them for a day. On the next day we left and came to Caesarea, and entering the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, we stayed with him. Now this man had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses.

These four daughters were part of the fading apostolic gift of prophecy – a gift that will be

replaced by the preaching and teaching of revealed scripture. In fact, by the time you read Paul's final letters to the church, you will note he does not even mention prophet or prophetess. Instead he refers to the role of the pastor/teacher; the elder in communicating the apostolic record that we know as the New Testament.

Now, in case you missed it, the proud father of these four unmarried girls is Philip the evangelist. He was one of the first deacons in the church, having been elected to the role of servant in the Jerusalem church. We read about his election in Acts, chapter 6. Luke is reminding his readers of Philip's past by mentioning in verse 8, "[he] was one of the seven"; that is, the original seven deacons.

You may also remember that Philip served with Stephen, who was another one of the original seven. Stephen was also the first martyr of the church. In fact, it was when Stephen was brutally murdered that the church in Jerusalem scattered. Philip left Jerusalem for ministry in Samaria. Do you remember who presided over the murder of Stephen? Paul, then known as Saul.

I say all of that so that you do not miss this historic meeting in chapter 21. Some thirty years after Paul presided over the stoning of Stephen, he is staying in the home of one of Stephen's best friends. It is the first time they have seen each other since that tragic day.

Perhaps you watched the news footage as an American embassy official met for the first time, the Iranian man who masterminded the abduction of the embassy staff. It was an abduction that lasted well over a year and became known as the "Iran Hostage Crisis". Many years later, behind a table and in front of cameras and microphones, these two men met, and the American reached out and shook the hand of his former captor.

That footage does not even come close to what is occurring in this meeting between Paul and Philip. The latter words of verse 8 are overloaded with significance, saying,

. . . and entering the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, we stayed with him.

In between the lines, there is a volume of grace and forgiveness. They were former enemies, and there were tragic results, murder, bloodshed, and lives turned upside down. Now, as you climb into this scene, you watch Philip embrace Paul and welcome him into his home. You can almost hear the whispers of people and see the tears. Paul is forgiven by

Stephen's friend. Grace through the life of Philip, lays out the welcome mat of hospitality and brotherly love.

The prophet's illustration: "The Jews will bind you!"

Continue to verses 10 and 11.

As we were staying there for some days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"

Once again, this is another warning from the Lord – a warning, not a prohibition from the Lord. It is as if the Lord is telling Paul, "Paul, don't go to Jerusalem unless you are willing to suffer for My name."

The church votes unanimously: "Don't go to Jerusalem!"

Notice verse 12.

When we had heard this, we as well as the local residents began begging him not to go up to Jerusalem.

Once again, this was well meant advice, but it was advice that came through the grid of human nature. In other words, "Paul, think about what's good for you. Paul, certainly God doesn't want you to be imprisoned. Paul, think about us. Where will we be without you??!"

Paul's personal companions: "Don't go to Jerusalem!"

Did you notice the subtle confession of Luke, the author of this book, in verse 12. Look again,

When we had heard this, we as well as the local residents began begging him not to go up to Jerusalem.

Who is the "we"? Luke and Paul's traveling companions! Now everyone is begging him not to go, including the very men who should have known that Paul's desire to follow the will of God superseded any desire for self preservation. They, of all people, should have understood Paul's direction, passion, and vision!

Paul's answer and action are told in verses 13 and 14.

Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, "The will of the Lord be done!"

Two principles from Paul's decision to press on

Two principles emerge from Paul's decision to press on.

Sometimes God may want you to do something that no one else will agree with or understand

1. Sometimes God may want you to do something that no one else will agree with or understand.

Now be careful not to use Paul as an example when you want to be stubborn and do your own thing. The point remains – sometimes the will of God is discovered in the minority opinion.

I have never had a person come into my office for advice and eventually say, "You know, pastor, out of the thirty people I've spoken to, you're the only one whose given me that advice. That proves you must be right."

The truth is, we most often want to discover the majority opinion; we want to just go with the flow.

There is a Danish proverb that says, and rightly so, "He who builds to every man's advice will have a crooked house."

Following the will of God may be in the opposite direction of personal pleasure

2. Secondly, following the will of God may be in the opposite direction of personal pleasure.

Sometimes, God's will may not be what you want. Do not think for a moment that Paul wanted prison!

That is why you have to ask God to change your wants to conform to His will. And, as He changes your desires, you can then say with Psalm, chapter 37, verse 4,

... He will give you the desires of your heart.

I like the little girl's thank you note to her grandmother. She was trying hard to be polite, but a

hint of honesty shone through as she wrote, "Dear Grandma, Thank you for my birthday present. I have always wanted a pin cushion, but not very much."

How many of us would be that honest? "Lord, I didn't want this . . . I had my eye on that!"

How do you deal with gifts you do not want? And what about those gifts from God – that we call the circumstances of life?

Desiring and enjoying what God gives us usually demands a radical reconstruction of what we desire. Paul recognized that God's will was not synonymous with personal comfort. And he desired the will of God more than anything else.

Application – For Those Giving Advice!

Frankly, we would all like to apply this passage to ourselves as we identify with Paul, right? He was persevering in the face of difficulty, courageous in the face of danger, stalwart in the face of friends who wept and begged him not to follow his passion for God. We are like Paul, right?

No, we are like "the local residents" mentioned in verse 12. We are like the church members and the friends of Philip that this refers to.

I am afraid we identify more with the people giving advice, right?! We are like that pious old gentleman who used to pray in his church prayer meetings, "Oh, Lord, use me – just use me in some advisory capacity."

Frankly, all you have to do is bump most of us and we will give our opinion on just about anything.

Mark Twain, that great theologian, said it this way, "If you laid out every man's opinion from end to end, there'd be no end!"

I want to apply from this text, some lessons for all of us to consider as we stand ever ready to be used in some advisory capacity.

Lesson #1 – Don't enlist God's name to endorse your advice.

1. Lesson number one: Don't enlist God's name to endorse your advice.

In other words, do not say, "The Spirit of God told me to tell you . . ." or "God is moving in my heart that you need to do this . . .".

This passage is filled with people claiming that their advice is from the Holy Spirit, and they all were wrong.

Be careful not to use the Lord's name in vain.

Lesson #2 – God will not deliver His will for someone's life through you.

2. Lesson number two: God will not deliver His will for someone's life through you.

If that startles you, you are the one who needed to hear it.

God may use you to complement and confirm His will, but we happen to believe in a wonderful doctrine called the individual priesthood of every believer. That is one of the wonderful reformation doctrines. You do not have to have anyone between you and the Lord.

His Spirit bears witness directly with your spirit that you are His (Romans 8:16).

Christ dwells in your heart (Ephesians 3:17), with the result, among others, that you might have a spirit of wisdom (Ephesians 1:17).

Lesson #3 – Your counsel to someone else cannot replace their decision making struggle.

3. Lesson number three: Your counsel to someone else cannot replace their decision making struggle.

The truth is, we would rather survey all of our friends than struggle in prayer before God. So, in order to find a shortcut through the struggle of discovering an answer from the Lord to a difficult problem, we tend to go from counselor to counselor and from friend to friend. Consequently, when someone comes to you for advice, be careful that you encourage the person to struggle through it; to pray earnestly over it; to seek God's face, as it were; to agonize over it.

Only a proud advisor would ever dare suggest that this person set aside the struggle and simply follow his advice.

Lesson #4 – Your advice must be rooted in the word, not personal experience.

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J. Grant Howard, Jr. wrote twenty-five years ago, in his book, *Knowing God's Will and Doing It!*:

When we give counsel that is oriented to the Word, it will be instructive. When we give counsel that is rooted in experience, it may be

nothing more than opinion. Our personal attitudes, opinions, and biases always need to be related to the Word before we prescribe them as the right medicine for others.ⁱⁱ

Lesson #5 – Before offering counsel, listen carefully.

5. Lesson number five: Before offering counsel, listen carefully.

Frankly, if they had only listened to Paul's heart, passion, and commitment, they would have been better companions.

You might say, "Well, for Paul, this was no big deal. So the people all begged him to stay; what of it?"

Well, if you will notice the text, you will see again, in verse 13, that Paul says,

*... What are you doing, breaking my heart?
...*

The word for "breaking" is the Greek word "sunthrupto". It could be translated, "to crush together; to break apart". The word referred to the primitive practice of washing laundry by pounding the garment with stones. Paul is literally saying, "Why are you pounding away at my heart? Why are you crushing my heart with grief."

Paul was in deep pain over the response of his friends and companions. He asks, "Why are you breaking my heart apart?"

Do you know what this means? This means that when Paul headed to Jerusalem, even though he was not traveling alone, he was alone in another sense of the word. He was bereft of the encouraging support of his friends; he could not feel with confidence that people were behind him, praying for his ministry in Jerusalem. Instead, he went virtually alone, with his spirit crushed and his heart heavy, because no one understood him.

No one came to Paul and said, "Listen, Paul, I want you to know that I'm with you. I understand your commitment to Christ. I understand your willingness to suffer. I believe you're doing the right thing. I just want you to know that, when you enter the crucible of Jerusalem, I'll be back here holding you up before the Father in love and prayer."

What made Paul persevere? His own opinion and commitment and passion, bound in the words he said earlier to the Ephesian elders. Look back at chapter 20, verses 22 through 24 of Acts.

. . . [I am] bound in the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

Paul says, “That’s why I’m going alone; that’s why, in the face of all my friends and fellow churchmen disagreeing, I must press on. It is for the sake of the church and for the glory of God.”

Would to God that we had more people who were as resolute as Paul in their faith; as confident in their sovereign Lord; as committed to the testimony of faith to see it to the very end.

So, remember Paul the next time you ask for advice, and remember Paul the next time you give advice to someone else.

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ⁱ Charles Swindoll, “The Strength of an Exacting Passion,” Insight For Living, p. 63.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 69.