

Acts 21:1-16 The courage to make the right choices

Introduction

Some things in life are easy to choose. For the average day at school or work or whatever you would typically do on a routine day our choice of clothing or what we might eat for breakfast is easily taken care of. Yet other decisions are much more challenging. On Scott's famous Antarctic expedition in horrific weather during March 1912, Captain Oates decision to sacrifice himself led to his bravery being acknowledged by many. His last words: 'I am just going outside and may be some time' are justly famous. Sadly his three companions died in their tent eleven miles short of their destination. Much more recently, a decade ago, a similar act of heroism took place in the USA. Gareth Griffiths, aged 27, was on his first sky-dive over Umatilla, Florida in June 1997. His life was saved by his American instructor after their chutes failed to open properly. The pair jumped linked together in tandem, and as they fell, the instructor Michael Costello (aged 42) turned his body to hit the ground first, breaking Gareth's fall. The heroic instructor died. Incredibly, Gareth escaped with his life. Last night from his hospital bed, Gareth said: "All I can remember was we pulled the ripcord for the main chute and it didn't open properly. It was just streaming behind. "When we pulled the reserve chute it didn't open fully - but both of them must have helped slow us down." "The next thing I remember was the sensation of the ground rushing up to meet us really quickly." Housewife Chris Rader was first on the scene. As Gareth lay moaning on the ground, still strapped to the dead instructor, he said to her: "I think I've been in an accident." Chris said: "Gareth was in so much pain but tried so hard to be brave, I nearly wept. He had no idea what he had been through." She knelt beside him, holding him and stroking his forehead. Management consultant Gareth suffered severe spinal injuries and underwent a seven-hour operation. Surgeons believed that he would not be paralysed. He was, though, unaware of Michael's heroic sacrifice. His twin brother David said: "He is not strong enough at the moment to cope with that shock. He will be devastated." "Gareth's instructor gave his life to save him. It must have taken extraordinary presence of mind and courage to manoeuvre himself in that short space of time." The chute was supposed to open at 5,000ft but horrified witnesses said it jammed and they spiralled out of control, crashing into a field. Michael's friend Wilma Godwin, owner of the Paragators sky-diving club, said: "Michael knew exactly what he was doing. He would have done that, he was that type of guy." "He must have landed on his back because he was doing all he could for Gareth." Michael's sister-in-law Kathy Gill said: "He died a hero. He knew there was nothing he could do so he tried to save his student's life." Mortgage banker Michael, who was married, had 18 years' experience and had made 8,000 jumps - 3,000 in tandem. [*Orlando Sentinel* date unknown] What these two incidents have in common is a clear and courageous decision of two brave men to sacrifice themselves for others. In Acts 21:1-14 there is a similar picture of courage and conviction. Here the apostle Paul was well aware that by continuing his trip to Jerusalem it might cost him his life. However, no person or circumstance could persuade him to change course. After all he probably reasoned that attempts on his life had taken place on several occasions since he trusted the Lord and, as a result, his death would only occur when God permitted this to take place. Acts 21:1-14 gives us some insights into the life and motivation of the apostle to the Gentiles. It is a reminder that we need a similar focus to accomplish the goals God has placed before us in our generation.

1. The Attitude of Paul's heart (Acts 21:13) *I am ready...to die...for ...Jesus*

How would you describe your own commitment to following Jesus? Paul appreciated the love of these believers mentioned in this chapter and their concerns for his wellbeing, but his determination to continue following the pathway he believed God had laid before him was absolute. Self-preservation is not on the agenda of the man or woman of God who puts Him first. Jesus is Lord and we place our lives in His hands. In a world where people of principle are in short supply we must not waver in standing firm for Jesus Christ. Paul, in Acts 21:13, declared: *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 ...* These are not simply pious words, but ones grounded in his experience of living day by day with the very real possibility of dying

for his faith. He was a follower of the Lord who said in Mark 8:34-37: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? All but one of the eleven disciples who led the Christian Church from the day of Pentecost were martyred for their faith. Until the fourth century AD there were periodic killing sprees of Christians by various Roman Emperors, but the Church continued to grow. Martin Luther King, the great American Baptist civil rights leader, in a speech in Detroit Michigan on 23 June 1963 said: ‘I submit to you that if a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live.’ In other words, that the life of such a person lacks the depth that can give us a real sense of meaning and purpose. A willingness to stand firm until death is the repeated pattern of Christian history. Tertullian, the great Tunisian Christian, in 197AD, made a famous statement: ‘the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church’ (Tertullian, *Apologeticus*, Chapter 50). At my home church in England, until a new pastor introduced new words in the early 1990s, candidates who had been baptised emerged from the water hearing words from Revelation 2:10: *Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.* Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), the great German Christian and opponent of Hitler, who was hanged in Flossenburg concentration camp on 9 April 1945, days before its liberation, declared: To endure the cross is not a tragedy; it is the suffering which is the fruit of an exclusive allegiance to Jesus Christ. When it comes, it is not an accident, but a necessity. ... the suffering which is an essential part of the specifically Christian life. It is not suffering per se but suffering-and-rejection, and not rejection for any cause of conviction of our own, but rejection for the sake of Christ. If our Christianity has ceased to be serious about discipleship, if we have watered down the gospel into emotional uplift which makes no costly demands and which fails to distinguish between natural and Christian existence, then we cannot help regarding the cross as an ordinary everyday calamity... We have then forgotten that the cross means rejection and shame as well as suffering. [D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*]. His brother-in-law and best friend, Gerhard Liebholtz, recorded these words about Bonhoeffer’s time in that evil camp: When war seemed inevitable, Bonhoeffer’s friends abroad wanted him to leave Germany to save his life, for he was unalterably opposed to serving in the German army in an aggressive war.... In June 1939, American friends got him out of Germany. But soon he felt that he could not stay there, but that he had to return to his country. When he came to England on his return from the United States, his friends quickly realized that Bonhoeffer’s heart belonged to his oppressed and persecuted fellow Christians in Germany and that he would not desert them at a time when they needed him most. “I shall have no right,” Bonhoeffer wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr before leaving America, “to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.”... Bonhoeffer never regretted this decision, not even in prison, where he wrote in later years: “I am sure of God’s hand and guidance... You must never doubt that I am thankful and glad to go the way which I am being led. My past life is **abundantly full of God’s mercy**, and, above all sin, stands **the forgiving love of the Crucified.**” Bonhoeffer (together with his sister Christel and her husband, Hans von Dohnanyi) was arrested by the Gestapo in the house of his parents on April 5th, 1943. In prison and concentration camps, Bonhoeffer greatly inspired by his indomitable courage, his unselfishness and his goodness, all those who came in contact with him. He even inspired his guards with respect, some of whom became so much attached to him that they smuggled out of prison his papers and poems written there, and apologized to him for having to lock his door after the round in the courtyard. His own concern in prison was to get permission to minister to the sick and to his fellow prisoners, and his ability to comfort the anxious and depressed was amazing [www.crossroad.to/Persecution/Bonhoeffer.html] We either fear God or death. When we are able to commit our lives fully into His hands then we can truly acknowledge that the future is in His hands. Paul had already told the Church at Ephesus, in Acts 20:22-24, that he was aware of the real possibility of suffering and death awaited him in Jerusalem, yet like His Lord and Saviour earlier he insisted on continuing the work God had given him to do. Luke recorded these words of Paul: “*And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what*

will happen to me there. ²³ I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. ²⁴ However, I consider my life worth nothing to me; **my only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me**—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace (Acts 20:22-24). What is your principal aim in life for the remaining days, weeks, months or years that the Lord has reserved for you and for me? In our beautiful and safe town we do not face the horrendous difficulties many of our brothers and sisters face over seas. However, we like them are equally called to *finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me*—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace (Acts 20:24). Can He count on you and on me in this task?

2. **The Authority in Paul's life** (Acts 21:13) for the name of the Lord Jesus.

The secret of Paul's determination and success in ministry was not primarily because he was stubborn and unwilling to ever concede defeat, even if that was probably true! It was in his loyalty to the Lord who loved him and had laid down His life to save him. A few years later from prison, the great apostle explained his motivation in a letter to Christians in Philippi: *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me* (Philippians 1:21-26). Life is not ultimately about 'me' it is about 'Him' for every Christian. When we grasp this liberating truth it enables some Christians to accomplish some remarkable feats of service for their Lord. For example, American Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) and his wife Ann who endured such persecution for their faith from the Buddhist authorities, yet remained faithful to Jesus. The law of the country, in the early nineteenth century, was capital punishment for anyone who converted to Christianity. No wonder it took them twelve years to see eighteen people come to faith in Christ. The result of such a dedicated witness was a Christian Church that was planted 'in good fertile soil' that is today four million strong, primarily in the north of that land, despite the routine rape and murder of believers by Government soldiers, together with the destruction of their homes, churches and places of work. [J. Mandryk, *Operation World*, 7th ed. 2010, pp. 609-613) Remarkably it is growing currently at around 2.5% per annum. How do you think we would fare in evangelism if the consequences for conversion were as tough in our land? It is sobering to reflect the conditions under which the Church of Jesus Christ is growing around the world.

What was it about Jesus that had led Paul to commit his life to serve in this way?

(a) **Because of what Jesus had done** (Romans 5:7-8) *Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* The innocent dying in the place of the guilty; the deserving One in the place of undeserving humanity; in your place and mine; our desire to live the best we can for Him comes from the fact that we should have been punished for our sin, but Jesus hung there in our place. The agonies He endured were rightly ours, but He bore them as our substitute. Notice the amazing prophetic words of Isaiah 53:4-5: *Surely **He** took up **our** pain and bore **our** suffering, yet **we** considered **Him** punished by God,*

*stricken by **Him**, and afflicted. ⁵ But **He** was pierced for **our** transgressions, **He** was crushed for **our** iniquities; the punishment that brought **us** peace was on **Him** and by **His** wounds **we** are healed.* What could be a clearer statement of the suffering of the Messiah than these words from Isaiah, more than 700 years before the birth of Jesus? It is often said that the Jews up to the time of Jesus never grasped the notion of a suffering Messiah. This is untrue as a number of

Jewish commentaries on the passage indicate not only knowledge about, but also acceptance of this interpretation. In the famous Jewish collection of Bible interpretations, the **Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98b** records these words: The Rabbis said: His name is "the leper scholar," as it is written, Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him a leper, smitten of God, and afflicted. [Isaiah 53:4-- Soncino Talmud edition.]

A leper in that era was someone regarded with horror and put out of civil society. People did not touch them or go near them, even relatives leaving food would be very fearful of approaching a leper in case they also caught the dreaded disease. The only way they could express absolute revulsion of the suffering of the Messiah was to describe him as being like a leper. Many more Jewish scholars in the medieval era acknowledged this interpretation, but were reluctant to accept that the Messiah had come for obvious reasons! In a section of one of his letters that read like a personal testimony, Paul uttered these wonderful words: *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me* (Galatians 2:20).

(b) **Because of what He is doing and will do** (i) His present provision (I John 2:1-2) *My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.* What a wonderful assurance about His present work. God's grace must never be abused, but provision is made for forgiveness and restoration to fellowship with our heavenly Father when we fail. The person who truly knows Jesus and has been forgiven will not want to live without reference to Jesus' plans for their lives; by contrast they will want to experience the quality life He has purposed for us. Paul, in Romans 6:1-4, put it this way: *What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.* We are never on our own as Christians, even though sometimes it may feel that way. Some fearful Italian Christians were encouraged with these words in Hebrews 13:5-6: *God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."⁶ So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"* Why should you and I share the same confidence as Paul? Because the Lord *is the same yesterday, today and for ever* (Hebrews 13:8); At times the Christian faith is hard and we struggle and must be honest about that. No-one will sail through life without any troubles or hardship, but His grace will be sufficient for all our needs our needs in this life. Paul expressed it so succinctly in Philippians 4:19-20: *And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus.²⁰ To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.* This is good news in itself, but the best is yet to come! (ii) His future provision (Hebrews 9:27-28) *Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,²⁸ so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him.* Christ has died, Christ has risen and Christ is coming again, hallelujah! This is the biggest encouragement to realise that the final outcome of our salvation and that of the whole created order is guaranteed. Romans 8:18-21: *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.¹⁹ For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.²⁰ For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope²¹ that the creation itself will be liberated*

from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. What a glorious future in prospect! Therefore, in the light of such a glorious future, let us take heed of the words of I John 3:2-3: *Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.* ³ *All who have this hope in Him purify themselves, just as He is pure.*

3. **The Acknowledgement of Paul's stance** (Acts 21:1-14)

When he would not be dissuaded, **we gave up** and said, “The Lord’s will be done.” The impartiality of Luke’s position as a historian slips on occasions as he remembers vividly being present at this meeting. *We gave up* Paul was not a man easily persuaded by others to change his course. The journey from Ephesus to Jerusalem had a number of stops along the way (a) **The advice from Christians in Tyre** (Acts 21:1-6) *After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea and sailed straight to Kos. The next day we went to Rhodes and from there to Patara.* ² *We found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, went on board and set sail.* ³ *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.* ⁴ *We sought out the disciples there and stayed with them seven days. **Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.*** ⁵ *When it was time to leave, we left and continued on our way. All of them, including wives and children, accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray.* ⁶ *After saying goodbye to each other, we went aboard the ship, and they returned home.* These are difficult words to interpret. After all the Holy Spirit had clearly revealed to these believers what would happen to Paul in Jerusalem, and on that basis they had urged him not to continue his journey. We too when facing choices receive advice from family members; from friends and from fellow church members and at times from other people as well. It is not easy, on some occasions, knowing how to proceed with the course of action open to us. The majority view is not always correct. Paul would have remembered the occasion in his home church in Antioch (Galatians 2:11-21) when he stood alone at a church meeting and rebuked Peter, Barnabas and other people of mature faith who had lost sight of the necessity of Jews and Gentiles being one in Christ and sharing table fellowship with one another. On this occasion the apostle respectfully heard the advice of fellow Christians and continued on his journey. Only God knows who was right that day, but each of us is accountable to one another, but supremely to God. He and we must do that which, with a clear conscience, we believe the Lord would have us do. Yet alongside it each of us must have the humility, when required, to admit it when we make mistakes. (b) **The advice from Agabus** (Acts 21:7-11)⁷ *We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and sisters and stayed with them for a day.* ⁸ *Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven.* ⁹ *He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.* ¹⁰ *After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea.* ¹¹ *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 Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.’”* In line with the words from the Christians in Tyre, what Agabus declared was true. He did not tell Paul how to respond to his message, at least in the account before us, but it was a clear confirmation that a defining moment in Paul’s ministry lay before him. However, Paul, like Jesus (for example, in Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34), did not allow potential suffering or even death to deflect him from making the choices he believed to be right. Agabus was also a good Christian in being willing to provide possibly unwelcome news to someone he greatly respected. Paul received this news with apparent humility recognising the love of a Christian brother towards him. There will be times for all of us when we will need to speak to a fellow Christian about a matter we would rather avoid, but out of love for God, and hopefully out of love for them also, we will

persevere and address the issue in question. When we have demonstrated to someone that we love them we have earned the right to seek to help them address more difficult issues. Pastoral care which is deeply practical sadly sometimes includes church discipline where a situation has become fairly serious, but in each case action must only be taken out of genuine love for the wellbeing of that brother or sister.

(c) **The advice from Christians in Caesarea** (Acts 21:12-16)¹² *When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem.* ¹³ *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.”* ¹⁴ *When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, “The Lord’s will be done.” After this, we started on our way up to Jerusalem.* ¹⁶ *Some of the disciples from Caesarea accompanied us and brought us to the home of Mnason, where we were to stay. He was a man from Cyprus and one of the early disciples.* Notice the consistency of the advice to the apostle from his fellow believers; they were all thinking about what was best for him. This was real Christian love in action. However, the apostle was equally motivated by a selfless motive; in this case the calling he believed had been entrusted to him by God. When life is at its toughest only a sense of divine calling can get us through. It is not just a challenge for a previous century, but in our own as well. On the day I began writing this sermon, 2 March 2011, courageous Pakistani Christian politician, Shahbaz Bhatti, was murdered for standing firm for his principles. He had been threatened with death on many occasions, but would not be deflected from standing firm in defence of what he believed. We thank God for such people. In our community we may never have to pay such a terrible price for standing firm for our faith. However, may we all resolve to honour the Lord each day of our lives. May each of us be able to say with Paul: *I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him for that day* (II Timothy 1:12), Amen.