

Gospel Triumph: Given for Others – Acts 21:1-36

Maybe you've heard this phrase before, "If it drains you, it's not for you." It's a fairly popular sentiment today and one you can find people repeating and accepting without much thought. Here's an expansion on this idea from one online writer: "I don't care if it's a relationship, a job, a friendship, or some role society told you to play. If it constantly pulls the life out of you—emotionally, mentally, physically—then you're clinging to the wrong thing. And deep down, you already know it."

If you accept this slogan and attempt to live your life by it, you will effectively place self at the center and never actually live for the good of others. Every relationship, friendship, social event, job, or responsibility will be evaluated based on how it makes you feel and what it contributes to your awesomeness.

In response to this slogan let me first say that I'm really glad people I'm close to don't think this way about me. I know for a fact that I drain people, and I know for a fact that you do to. You can see how this sort of self-centered thinking assumes I am great and every else is here to bolster my good feelings. Difficult relationships shouldn't have to be endured for one such as myself, and surely other people don't think of me as difficult.

Second, let me just say that the entire scope of the biblical story, beginning with the Lord Jesus, indicates that giving of yourself for difficult people as an act of grace is the pathway to joy and fullness of life. Hebrews 12:2.

In the book of Acts, we've followed the ministry of the Apostle Paul for many chapters, over many miles of travel to multiple cities and through great difficulty. No doubt Paul encountered emotionally taxing people, but he kept giving of himself. Now we've reached the point in Paul's story where he is traveling to Jerusalem to give a financial gift to struggling Jewish believers, and he knows it's going to be difficult. Listen to Acts 20:22-23.

Paul's self-sacrifice has been a driving force in his ministry and today we are going to highlight that in Acts 21 as he finally arrives in Jerusalem. So, here's what we will see in Acts 21:1-36. **3 Signs of a Life Lived for the Good of Others.**

1. Fellowship in the Spirit (vv. 1-16)

Keep in mind that Paul has had his goal to get to Jerusalem since Acts 19:21. You can follow the red line on the map and see his journey from Ephesus to Greece and back to Macedonia and to Troas. Once he left Troas he wanted to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost and so he had to bypass Ephesus. Listen to 20:16.

Paul landed at Miletus and this is where we spent the last two weeks studying his speech to the elders from Ephesus who came to see him at Miletus. We saw last week that after his speech ended they prayed with him and accompanied him to the ship. As chapter 21 begins we find Paul resuming his journey to Jerusalem. You can follow the route on the map on the screen as we read verses 1-3.

You can see that Tyre is just north of Caesarea and then of Jerusalem. Clearly Paul had made good time, so he seeks out other believers in Tyre and continues his practice of encouraging Christians wherever he can find them. Look at the first part of verse 4. This is the pattern we've seen throughout Paul's travels and we will see throughout verse 16 until he reaches Jerusalem. Every chance Paul gets he finds followers of Christ and spends time with them. He does this because the Spirit has united believers to Christ and now we are united in fellowship with one another. And in this section the Spirit is clearly guiding the conversation and concern. Look at the rest of verse 4.

We've already seen that the Spirit is the one guiding Paul to Jerusalem for His purposes. Is this influence from the Spirit a contradiction here? What's most likely happening is that they understand through the Spirit the same things Paul does. Suffering and imprisonment await him in Jerusalem and so they interpret that to mean he shouldn't go. There are obvious care and concern for Paul. Look at verses 5-6. And this care and concern continues in the next city. Look at verses 7-8.

You may remember Philip, who shared the gospel with the Ethiopian Eunuch early in Acts. He has settled in Caesarea and lives with his 4 daughters who prophesy. Why point this out? Listen to Acts 2:17. It's further confirmation that God's last days are upon them and that the Spirit is at work in the church here. Continue reading in verses 10-11. Agabus gave a prophecy in Acts 11 about a famine and

now he enacts a prophetic demonstration of what will happen to Paul. Again, notice the Spirit is right in the middle of the fellowship of the church and notice the care and concern for Paul. Look at verses 12-14.

Paul is heading to Jerusalem, knowing suffering awaits him, and yet he's giving of his time to be with other believers. The Spirit is working in their midst and there's love and care and concern all around. Notice Paul's reaction in verse 13 that they are "breaking his heart".

Everything in our culture pushes us toward individualism. We pull away from social interaction and real-life physical relationships. The church of Jesus Christ provides genuine communion with others through the Spirit and this doesn't happen without each of us intentionally giving up time and energy to be with others. And it often means embracing people who are different from you and occasionally draining to you. Living for others goes beyond gathering in fellowship. It also means sacrificing my own freedom and desires for others.

2. Forsaking Freedom for Others (vv. 17-26)

Paul and his companions arrive in Jerusalem in verses 15-17. It's been a minute since Paul has been in Jerusalem with the key leaders of the Jerusalem church. Verse 18 paints the picture of a rather formal gathering for Paul to share what has happened in his ministry to the Gentiles. Look at verses 18-19. The Jewish leaders react very positively to this at the beginning of verse 20. And they report to him how the gospel has been advancing among the Jews as well in the rest of verse 20, but notice the phrase they use to describe some of the Jewish believers; "zealous for the law". This goes beyond just a desire to keep practicing the law.

Paul was "zealous" for the law before his conversion to Christ. Phil 3:4-6. The Pharisees were zealous for the law and Jewish zealots sought to rid Israel of Rome through political violence. This phrase was probably concerning to Paul when he heard it. The church leaders communicate a real problem that Paul would face on his return to Jerusalem. Look at verse 21. Many Jewish Christians believe that Paul has been telling Jews all over the place that they shouldn't circumcise their children or maintain Jewish customs. These are the same accusations made

against Stephen in Acts 6:13-14. This is a wrong understanding of what Paul has been teaching. No where does Paul tell Jews not to circumcise their children or maintain Jewish customs. In fact, Paul doesn't mind at all if he or others keep certain parts of the OT law, as long as it is clear that this isn't necessary for salvation. Listen to 1 Corinthians 9:20-23.

The Jewish leaders are in a tough spot. They are thrilled with Paul's report of God's work among Gentiles and they are also trying to patiently shepherd Jewish believers. How can they bring these two together? This requires one group to give up "rights" and "freedom" for the good of others. Look at their suggestion. Verses 22-25. They recommend that Paul participate in a Jewish ceremony of purification and even pay the living expenses of these other Jewish men. This is a sacrifice for Paul and they hope it will help people understand his teaching and mission accurately. But notice in verse 25 that they make it abundantly clear that observance of the law isn't an issue of salvation as the Jerusalem counsel showed. How does Paul respond? Paul says, "If it drains you, it's not for you."

Not at all. Verse 26. One author summarizes Paul's response like this: *"Here Paul shows the greatest expression of Christian freedom, namely, living for the benefit of others. As a new covenant believer, Paul is free from the necessity of taking vows according to the Mosaic law. He is, however, compelled to love his neighbor and free to keep some aspects of the law if doing so is beneficial to others. Going along with the plan means unity for the Jerusalem church, so Paul agrees."* – Brian Vickers

Paul explains this approach several times in his letters. We've already seen one from 1 Corinthians 9, but listen to this from Romans 15:1-7. Now, there's certainly an application here for areas of conscience that believers differ on. But let's think in terms of even a more basic way to give up freedom for others. Give of yourself and your time and your energy. I'm reading a book right now about a high school football team from 25 years ago where the coaches took a radical approach to coaching. They decided their goal was to train the boys on the team to be men and they wouldn't know if the season was a success until 20 years after they played their last game. They did this by teaching the boys that the essence of

manhood is doing good for others. Of course, this is true for men, but it's true for all of us as Christians. What does it look like to follow Jesus? My life is not my own. But everything around you, including Bon Jovi, tells you your life is your own! Paul models how to live for others because Christ lived and died for us. This enabled Paul to give up his freedom for others and even to suffer for others.

3. Fortitude in Suffering (vv. 27-36)

Look at verse 27-28. The irony here is thick. Paul is participating in a ceremony required of Jews and paying the expenses of these 4 men to demonstrate his respect for the law and this is how the Jews respond. It's pretty wild that some Jews from Asia, probably Ephesus, recognize him and Trophimus, who is traveling with him from Ephesus. Look at verse 29. Both accusations are untrue but all of the sudden, Jerusalem begins to look and feel like the riot in Ephesus. Look at verses 30-31.

The Romans had a fortress during this time that was connected to the temple complex. The soldiers at this Antonian Fortress could probably hear and see the commotion of the riot and they were able to get to it immediately. Look at verses 32-33. Why do they arrest Paul? Their goal is not to adjudicate justice on the spot. They are present to stop the riot and the quickest way to do that is to arrest one guy and not the hundreds trying to kill him. Look at verse 34. It's a wild scene. Look at verses 35-36.

This last line reminds us of the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus and really this whole journey to Jerusalem with the expectation of arrest has been in the pattern of Jesus. Listen to Jesus's words to his disciples in Luke 18:31-32.

Paul had fortitude in suffering because he expected this as a follower of Christ and because he knew God would work good for others out of it. What ultimately happens in the rest of Acts because of this riot in Jerusalem and Paul's arrest? Paul ends up sharing the gospel with multiple key political figures and finally ends up in Rome. Listen to Acts 28:30-31.

Paul knew his suffering was a part of God's larger plan and it would be used for the benefit of many people. Have you ever thought about your suffering and difficulty as something God uses for others?

As followers of Christ, our expectation is that life, ministry, relationships, and suffering will certainly drain us. But that doesn't mean we run away from those things. Instead we embrace them for God's glory and the good of those around us. Let's pray.

Sermon Reflection Questions – 9/28/25

- Had you ever heard the phrase, “If it drains you, it’s not for you.” Is there any sense in which this phrase can be helpful for us? What are the problems with it?
- How do you see self-centeredness showing itself in your life? What strategies have you used against it?
- What are the benefits of fellowship with other believers outside of the Sunday gathering? What are the challenges?
- What practices do you have in place to build relationships with other believers? What is the hardest part of cultivating fellowship with others?
- How would you explain Spirit’s work in Acts 21:1-16? What can we learn from His ministry and what is probably unwise for us to copy?
- Do you think there are still prophets in the church today who can predict the future? Why or why not?
- What is the heart of the concern that the Jerusalem leadership have over Paul in Jerusalem?
- What modern day examples can you give that would be similar to how Paul gives up his own freedom in Acts 21?

- What's one concrete way you can give of yourself for the good of another person this week?
- What gave Paul fortitude to face his suffering?