

Acts of the Apostles

Part 44 – Walking Forward when it's Hard

Acts 21

Context: taking donation of mercy-money back to Jerusalem from churches he had planted (so he had a job to do)

Emotionally hard (20.36-38) – saying goodbye, dealing with grief

Physically hard (21.1-3) – the travel back then wasn't a cruise ship

Spiritually hard (21.4-6) – all encouragement from fellow followers of Jesus was NOT to go to Jerusalem and that hardship awaited

Questions to think about:

- Where are you most challenged right now (emotional, physical, spiritual)?
- Where are you feeling most empty?
- Where are you feeling most committed? (I **have** to do this difficult physical / emotional / spiritual task)

Lessons Learned:

Don't be surprised when it gets hard

- This whole section of Acts is one trial / riot / hardship after another for Paul
 - 1 Peter 4.12
- Anyone who sells a version of Christianity that doesn't have hardship in a broken world as a primary component is the Ford dealer who drives a Chevy – don't buy it

You are not alone

- When it gets hard, the temptation is to think that you're the only one – you're not
 - Paul went through this and had people beside him the whole way
 - 1 Peter 5.9 – 1 Cor. 10.13
 - Devil's lie sounds like: This is ONLY you – why is this only you? – why would God let it be only you? – what kind of God would do that to you? – He must not love you – you can do better than that kind of God – He deserves your anger (which poisons you and others)

Obedience can be costly

- For the record, it doesn't have to be and isn't always, but it can be
- Agabus: imprisonment, handed over to Gentiles, death (which is what happened) (21.10-11)
- Discouragement from his companions
- What do we do?
 - Obey anyway
 - Take joy anyway
 - Have perspective anyway (Phil. 1.21)
- 1 Peter 4.14 – suffering for Christ = #blessed (which is different than how the t-shirt portrays it)

Keep doing good

- Paul was intent on delivering the gift to Jerusalem
- He didn't seek hardship or persecution
 - It's why he went ahead and went to the Temple (21.17-26)
 - Sometimes doing good means accommodating others with patience and sacrifice for the sake of the Kingdom
 - Temptation in our day and age is to pick a fight or organize a boycott – which emphasizes the negative instead of the positive of doing good
- Sometimes doing good means being a blessing even to those who curse you because you trust God so much
 - 1 Peter 4.19
 - Polycarp's martyrdom (<https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1-300/polycarp-11629601.html>)

Polycarp was a personal disciple of the Apostle John. As an old man, he was the bishop of the Church at Smyrna in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey). Persecution against the Christians broke out there and believers were being fed to the wild beasts in the arena. The crowd began to call for the Christians' leader Polycarp. So the authorities sent out a search party to bring him in. They tortured two slave boys to reveal where Polycarp was being hidden.

It was a Friday afternoon. Polycarp was resting upstairs in a country home. They came in like a posse, fully armed as if they were arresting a dangerous criminal. Polycarp's friends wanted to sneak him out, but he refused, saying, "God's will be done." (The Christians there taught that a believer was not to make oneself available for martyrdom and should not seek it out, but neither should he/she avoid it when there was no choice.)

In one of the most touching instances of Christian grace imaginable, Polycarp welcomed his captors as if they were friends, talked with them and ordered that food and drink be served to them. Then Polycarp made one request: one hour to pray before they took him away. The officers overhearing his prayers (that went on for two hours) began to have second thoughts. What were they doing arresting an old man like this?

Martyrdom of Polycarp

Despite the cries of the crowd, the Roman authorities saw the senselessness of making this aged man a martyr. So when Polycarp was brought into the arena, the proconsul pled with him: "Curse [Christ](#) and I will release you."

REPLY: "Eighty-six years I have served Him. He had never done me wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?"

The proconsul reached for an acceptable way out: "Then do this, old man. Just swear by the genius of the emperor and that will be sufficient." (The "genius" was sort of the "spirit" of the emperor. To do this would be a recognition of the pagan gods and religion.)

REPLY: "If you imagine for a moment that I would do that, then I think you pretend that you don't know who I am. Hear it plainly. I am a Christian."

More entreaties. Polycarp stood firm.

The proconsul threatened him with the wild beasts.

REPLY: "Bring them forth. I would change my mind if it meant going from the worse to the better, but not to change from the right to the wrong."

The proconsul's patience was gone: "I will have you burned alive."

REPLY: "You threaten fire that burns for an hour and is over. But the judgment on the ungodly is forever."

The Death of Polycarp

The fire was prepared. Polycarp lifted his eyes to heaven and prayed: "Father, I bless you that you have deemed me worthy of this day and hour, that I might take a portion of the martyrs in the cup of Christ. . . Among these may I today be welcome before thy face as a rich and acceptable sacrifice."

As the fire engulfed him, the believers noted that it smelled not so much like flesh burning as a loaf baking. He was finished off with the stab of a dagger.