



# 2023 Weekly Devotions

Week of: Feb 27<sup>th</sup> - Mar 5<sup>th</sup>

Sermon: February 26<sup>th</sup>



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH  
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February 27

**Matthew 5:17-18**

It is far more important to us, as preachers, to teach what the Word says than to teach what the Word doesn't, or cannot, mean. Most of the time, preaching is as simple as discerning what the text is teaching and presenting it in a way that is faithful to the truth while being understandable to the audience. Nevertheless, there are times in which certain texts are either easily misunderstood or have been popularly misinterpreted by the masses. In these situations, it is important to refute the false claims even as we present the truth.

Yesterday, I attempted to do some refutation but the meat of the sermon and the importance of the legitimate assertions that are being presented caused me to only lightly deal with some of the problems with many people's understandings of what is going on in Acts 21.

The subject of prophecy remains a hot button issue in America's church culture. Unfortunately, the term has been redefined by many and the result of that changing of the definition is that many circles have an abhorrent and destructive view of what constitutes prophecy. As an example, how many supposed prophets have made statements about future events, claiming that God has given them supernatural insight, only to be publicly wrong?

I think about "pastor" Greg Locke and his prophecy that Donald Trump would reclaim the White House by the end of 2021 or Professor Harold Camping's erroneous claim that Jesus would return on May 21, 2011 (spoiler alert, He didn't!). In these instances, the biblical teaching on the subject of prophecy would lead us to conclude that these men don't speak for God and, therefore, should not be entertained. Unfortunately, this biblical perspective is not very prevalent in our churches, but it should be.

The same view that says that prophets often get it wrong is what leads to the misinterpretation of Acts 21. If prophets, when they speak formally for God, are indeed fallible then it stands to reason that the disciples in Tyre were just incorrect in their exhortation. Many have embraced such a view but does it hold water? The answer, biblically speaking, is a resounding "no!".

Today's passage reminds us that Jesus saw the Old Testament law (something that deals with the subject of prophets as we will see tomorrow) as enduring. Jesus did not assert some sort of artificial distinction between the Testaments. While the Old Covenant would be fulfilled and the New Covenant instituted in Christ's lifetime, the moral teaching and assertions of the law would remain forever. This law reveals God's character and His judgments on subjects like prophecy and should not be discounted as we consider New Testament texts in their proper, biblical contexts.

The point for today's devotion is simple, any interpretation we arrive at must be consistent with the larger biblical teaching on the subject because the Word of God, in its entirety, stands forever. There is no room for disregard of what God has said and when we do choose to ignore or qualify what the Lord has told us, incorrect and harmful interpretations can arise.

February 28

**Deuteronomy 18:22**

Many have taught that New Testament prophecy falls into a different category than its Old Testament parallel. The reason for this thinking is almost always utilitarian. So many people run to folks who predict and proclaim a “Word from the Lord” (which is almost always directed towards what their audience wants to hear, in sharp contrast from biblical prophets) that they have erected a new category of prophecy that essentially uses the logic that “3 out of 4 ain’t bad”. The thought is that nobody can truly be accurate all the time so even the best prophets “miss it” on occasion.

While it is certainly true that mere mortals are not accurate in their predictions all the time, the assertion that this must require us to lower the standard of prophecy misses the entire point of the prophet to begin with! The idea that prophets are sometimes wrong is an unbiblical idea for the simple reason that prophets are not to speak on their own volition or their own Word. Instead, biblical prophets, only spoke the Word that the Lord provided, explicitly for them and their audience. The point is that man’s finitude is not the issue, the issue is the presence and inspiration of the Lord who is never wrong.

If a man truly speaks at the Lord’s behest, there is no reason whatsoever to think that the Lord’s Word would turn out to be inaccurate. While man is limited and his ability to predict is terribly flawed, God is neither flawed nor finite. Our God is Sovereign and Omniscient which means He knows all things and can bring absolutely anything to pass.

Furthermore, our text from yesterday reminds us that God’s law endures. God has not changed His mind about prophecy because God is unchanging. All that He has said is true and lasting and this means His standard for prophets should be ours as well. Some ask us if we still believe in prophecy. The answer is that we still believe in the Bible and the standard that God gives is the standard we will use to measure any and all who stand before us with an extrabiblical Word from the Lord. The simple truth is that I don’t know of anyone who has met this standard since the completion of the Bible, but I am happy to apply it to any and all who claim to be the exception!

If we take this passage and apply it to our text from Sunday, we can easily see that the prophecy that the Spirit led the people in Tyre and Agabus to proclaim did not extend to their exhortation. God’s Spirit absolutely revealed the truth to the people who then relayed that information to Paul but their response to that information was not prophetic, it was empathetic and based on their love of God and Paul.

If we posit that these folks were still prophesying when they encouraged Paul to be disobedient to the Lord’s clear direction in his life, then we put forward a scenario in which prophets are speaking in a way that contradicts what the Lord has clearly said in another circumstance. Paul would absolutely be killed, according to the prophecy, and therefore these people were affirmed in their Spirit provided insight, but this does not mean that their response to the prophecy was prophetic. Instead, it is an example of man’s finitude and a further illustration of the supernatural nature of the prophetic office. No man speaks prophecy from their own intuition, instead they are “carried along” (2 Peter 1:21) by the Holy Spirit and when they are dropped back off, they are subject to their same limitations.

March 1

**Acts 16:6-10**

We have dealt with one interpretive ditch, but we have another to consider. Some would say that the problem in Acts 21 wasn't with those who were exhorting Paul to stay, instead some assert that the issue was Paul's level of obedience! There are those who claim that the Spirit was exhorting Paul, through those in Tyre and the prophet Agabus, to stay and he just wouldn't listen.

This presents a novel approach because, on the one hand, it absolves us of the problem of prophecy. In the proposed solution, the prophets were accurate! However, the solution presents another problem. Is it true that Paul was simply disobedient to the Lord? That is problematic as well!

Today's text shows us that Paul's character was not geared towards disobedience. The Apostle had a history of submitting to the Lord in his life and ministry. In this case, Paul wanted to go in one direction (the continent of Asia) only to be redirected by a Word from the Spirit to go to a totally different location.

This would've been challenging to say the least. All of us have had the experience of planning for something only to have our intentions changed at the last minute. Many times those experiences have been very difficult for me as I tend to try to make my previous arrangements work at all costs. I don't like being redirected and I don't like having my plans obliterated. The very fact that Paul did not react as I typically would is evidence that this man was very much underneath the controlling power of his great God.

If this man was willing to be redirected from one location to another on his missionary journey, wouldn't it stand to reason that he would more than happily accept a change of plans that did not lead to his untimely death? Isn't it hard to believe that Paul would totally scrap an entire journey into Asia but wouldn't submit to God's leadership in preventing him from journeying towards his sure imprisonment and death?

Now, I know what some of you are thinking here... some of you are considering the biblical teaching that all men are sinful and prone to wander. I agree that Paul was far from perfect and I further agree that he could have been disobedient. However, I also would make sure to respond by pointing to all of the places in the Bible where disobedient men are labeled as such.

David is shown in his rebellion against Uriah, Abraham is portrayed as a sinner in his dishonesty, Noah is painted in less than flattering light in his drunkenness, Peter is disgraced at his denial and Judas is shown to be a traitor of the highest order. If God wanted us to see Paul in such a light in this text, wouldn't there be some mention of his disobedience?

The fact that Paul demonstrated the desire to obey God at great sacrifice, the fact that his obedience to this supposed prophecy would have spared him imprisonment and martyrdom and the fact that the Bible doesn't say a word about his rebellion here all lead us to believe that this man was not disobedient and, therefore, the exhortation that he received from the Tyre disciples was not a part of the prophecy they gave.

March 2

**Acts 23:1**

Let's take yesterday's thought a bit further. Admittedly, I used an argument from silence to substantiate the claim that Paul did not sin in disobeying the entreaties from the disciples in Tyre. Is it possible that the Lord didn't think it necessary for us to know that he was being disobedient? I suppose that could be the case but our text for today torpedoed any claim fairly clearly and substantially.

In our text, the Apostle has now made it to Jerusalem and what was prophesied to take place is now coming to fruition. Verse 1 records some of his testimony as he stands before the Jewish authorities. What is of particular importance is the universal nature with which he claims that he had lived his life in "good conscience" until that present day.

To be clear, Paul was not saying that he was perfect. This would obviously contradict his own writing about himself (1 Timothy 1:15) and the larger biblical teaching on the topic of man's sinfulness and depravity. The point that Paul is making is that he is able to stand before the Lord blameless because of his faith in Christ, specifically his faith that Christ atoned for his sins. Jesus had absolved Paul of any wrongdoing, and this meant his conscience was clear.

Still, there is an element here that must be drawn out. How could this man say such a thing if he now knew that he was not supposed to be in Jerusalem? Had Paul simply not come to himself on the issue yet? Had he not recognized or connected the dots between the requests of those in Tyre with his current predicament? The answer couldn't possibly be that! Instead, the clear point that Paul is making is that he is now in good standing before the Lord. Paul needed to repent for many things but the decision to journey on to Jerusalem in opposition to the entreaties of his friends was not one of his transgressions.

So, the argument is quite simple, the only way that this comment could be made, with righteous intent, is if Paul knew that he was squarely standing in the Lord's will. We don't have a situation here where clear confession and repentance needed to take place because God was not exhorting Paul to do something else. Instead, he is simply walking in the plan of the Lord, and this means he is free and clear in his heart and soul of any accusation that could be made against him.

Could you repeat Paul's words regarding your own life and walk? I pray that you are living a faithful and fruitful life today. That you have followed the Lord obediently and that you have been quick to repent when necessary. We should all be inspired by these words as they communicate the desired end for the Christian journey and we should be encouraged that it is still possible to stand before the Lord with a clear conscience solely because of Jesus' work of atoning for our sin.

March 3

**Psalm 18:30**

Let's take one more crack at the objection that there could have been a mistake in the prophecy that was delivered to Paul. Some would say that the real issue in the whole scenario was that the prophets got the message wrong. Other think that Paul was perhaps disobedient and still others (the most extreme group) would simply claim that the Word of God which controlled and informed Paul through the Spirit was incorrect. Stated simply, God just messed up a little.

Is this a possibility? Several more liberal theologians would have us believe that this indeed was the case. They claim that God's Word is wonderful, helpful, and instructive but it isn't perfect. There are times that mistakes are made and, perhaps, God foresaw something that just didn't materialize. For some reason, this argument is usually made in order to make us feel better about our situation but its effect is truly disastrous. If God can't be fully, totally trusted, then what do we have left? The answer is that our entire belief system is grounded in the eternal and universal trustworthiness of the Word that God has provided.

Our text connects two realities that were important for the Apostle. The first is that God's way is perfect. The term "way" means the plan and purposes of God for the believer. The word "perfect" doesn't need to be defined but the synonym "flawless" is used later in the text as a good anchor for what the author intends. The point here is simply that God's intentions and His path to bring about His plan has no flaw. In Paul's case, the idea is that the Apostle's journey to Jerusalem (with all of the suffering and difficulty that would result) was led by God and, therefore, totally flawless in every conceivable way.

Second, we read that the Lord's Word is "flawless". There is not one jot or tittle (to quote Christ's statement referring to even the minutiae of the text) that will pass away. Everything that God says is picture-perfect. There isn't a statement, a story or a sentiment that God has given us that won't endure. Nothing that He says and nothing that He describes is in error. Instead, in all things, the Word of God is perfect and, therefore, there is no possibility of the prophecy being wrong because God did not see all the potential outcomes.

Those who listen to and obey the Word of God will not need to be ashamed. While this doesn't mean that every act of obedience results in our temporal comfort, what we can believe and assert with conviction is that those who trust in the Lord will find His plan to lead them to glorious things. Paul finished his race and that race included persecution and even martyrdom but the finish line lead him into the arms of the eternal King in a place called heaven. That sounds pretty flawless and perfect if you ask me.

March 4

**James 1:22**

At this point, I think we can conclude that Paul was faithful to the charge that he had been given. Specifically, Paul was faithful to go to the very place that the Lord had led him. Tomorrow, we will see this spelled out in our Bibles but I want to begin with the undergirding reason why his faithfulness to the Word of God, as mediated by the Spirit, was so important.

Our text is a famous one in our church and in the larger Christian community. James is a marvelously clear and concise book that deals with many practical realities that should inform and inspire our Christian journey. The first chapter sets the stage, in many respects, for the entirety of the book and it is the subject of our devotion today.

There is a subset of people who are experts in what the Bible says but disobedient in heeding its clear commands. Many folks have attempted to somehow justify this large swath of professing believers. There are numerous reasons for this kind of pursuit. The biggest motivation is the fact that so many who claim to be Christians today give no clear evidence of a desire to obey the Lord at all. They are happy to live their own lives and do what they desire and this means that those who want to believe in their eternal security must somehow explain away the clear rebellion that is manifest in their lives against the Word of God. The result of this kind of thinking is that we have invented doctrines that seek to explain away “carnal Christians”. Specifically, we have sought to concoct some sort of justification that explains their unwillingness to adhere to what is clear in the text. While this might seem appealing to some and while they have gained much ground in the larger Christian world, their sentiments don’t change the objective teaching of James.

The Bible says that those who have faith will work out their faith in obedient action. Does this mean that we will be perfect? Far from it! All of us will transgress against the Lord at times but it does mean that we will not be habitual, ongoing and flagrant sins in our lives forever. Our lifestyle will demonstrate a desire to obey and a trajectory towards holiness.

With this in mind, we need to ask ourselves whether Paul had faith. The answer to the question is obvious but the reason why it is obvious is, in part, his desire to be faithful to what God required. The Apostle was a faithful missionary, a discerning minister and a willing martyr. Why would we conclude that he was disobedient here?

The simple truth is that we see Paul’s level of faith reflected in his willingness to follow the Lord’s leadership even unto death. The idea that Paul had faith but was unwilling to be obedient to God’s direction is a contradiction of the text. The idea that Paul was being faithful to the Lord’s leadership in spite of the pleas of his well-meaning brothers and sisters is in-keeping with the larger, biblical teaching on the subject. This is one way that context helps us discern the right interpretation of a passage of Scripture and it forms a clear grid through which we can rightly interpret the entire counsel of God.



March 5

**Acts 19:21**

So, we have established the fact that obedience is a key indicator of true faith and we have asserted that we see obedience in Paul's life on his journey to Jerusalem but do we have biblical warrant for believing that Paul really was led by the Spirit to Jerusalem? The answer is found, quite convincingly, in our passage for the day.

Here we read of the first hint of Paul's ultimate plan as Luke tells us that Paul "resolved in the Spirit" to go to Jerusalem. The word translated "Spirit" is clearly the Holy Spirit as it is capitalized and consistent with the way that Paul made choices and decisions in his overall ministry. The point then is crystal clear, the Apostle Paul resolved, through the leadership and direction of the Spirit, to go to Jerusalem which means that his journey to Jerusalem was not a decision that was made in his fleshly rebellion but as a product of his obedience to the clear instructions of God.

When we attempt to synthesize yesterday's passage and today's text, we come to the unmistakable conclusion that Paul was simply being obedient to the Spirit's leadership. We saw last Sunday that this does not necessitate a contradiction, rather the Spirit used the response of people who loved Paul to teach them further, strengthening them for the road ahead by illuminating Paul's God-given faith for their encouragement.

There is simply no way to pass over this glorious fact, Paul was being obedient to the Lord. In what ways are you being obedient? Has God called you to some things that will require great sacrifice? How many of you are challenged by the clear teaching of the Word of God? Are there times that you are confronted by a passage or an exhortation that you simply don't want to obey? If so, Paul's life is a reminder to you of the glories that await the faithful.

It strikes me that the Spirit's leadership is often evoked when a decision is being made that seems to benefit the person in the moment. We are led by the Spirit to take the perceived better job or to make a decision that results in more comfort. To be clear, sometimes the Spirit of God, through the Word of God, does lead us to these kinds of decisions but this is not a universal rule. Instead, the Spirit often leads us down the path of self-denial. The Christian journey is not an easy one, there are many challenges and seasons of trial on the path but this doesn't change the beauty of the journey or the glories of the destination.

Our challenge, as we move to a new passage of Scripture this week, is to learn from Paul's example and to be obedient in all circumstances. Paul would tell us today that all of his difficulties were worth it because of the joy and reward of realizing the presence of the One that he gave his all to serve. May we live in light of eternity, obey the clear commands of the Lord and trust that the Spirit of God will never lead us to the place where the power of God cannot sustain us.