

6. Paul's time with the Ephesian elders passed quickly, and soon it was time to depart Miletus and continue the journey to Jerusalem. Concluding their visit in prayer, the men accompanied Paul to the ship, their hearts filled with sorrow and their eyes with tears (20:36-38). From Miletus, Paul and his companions sailed southeast along the southern Asian coast until finally landing at Patara where they located a ship headed for the port city of Tyre in Phoenicia. Once aboard the ship, they set sail and headed east across the Mediterranean toward their destination (21:1-3).

- a. Passing by Cyprus, the men arrived at Tyre and immediately located the community of disciples there. They spent seven days in Tyre, waiting either for the ship to be unloaded and reloaded or for another ship to take them south along the coast. Paul and his companions spent an entire week with the brethren in Tyre, and yet Luke recorded only thing about that time together: the disciples' continual pleading with Paul to stay away from Jerusalem (21:4).

Once again Luke explicitly implicated the Holy Spirit in this warning. For some time the Spirit had been pressing upon Paul what awaited him in Jerusalem (ref. again 20:22-23), and now He was affirming the same thing through the disciples at Tyre. Notable is Luke's apparent inconsistency respecting the Spirit's role in this dynamic. On the one hand, his account indicates that Paul was convinced the Spirit was leading him to Jerusalem (cf. 19:21, 20:22); here, however, Luke's words suggest that the Spirit was warning him not to go there (21:4). This issue will be addressed shortly; for now it is sufficient to note that Luke was careful to everywhere affirm the Spirit's intimate involvement in and oversight of Paul's ministry and its circumstances – even what was coming in Jerusalem.

- b. The disciples finally relented when they realized Paul could not be dissuaded; when the day came for the group to depart, they, like the Ephesian elders before them, escorted Paul and his companions to the ship, entrusting them to God's grace and provision for the ordeal of suffering that lay ahead (21:5). The ship sailed south along the coast to Ptolemais, some 25 miles from Tyre. There the group debarked, again locating the brethren in that city and remaining with them until their departure the next day (21:7).
- c. From Ptolemais the men continued south to the major port city of Caesarea, where they entered the house of a man Luke referred to as "Philip the evangelist." This was the same Philip chosen by the apostles to serve the fledgling Jerusalem church (cf. 21:8, 6:1-5), and Luke's account indicates that he was also the individual whom the Spirit used in the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (ref. 8:26ff; esp. v. 40). Philip's ministry of the gospel had led him to Caesarea some twenty years earlier, and apparently he had settled in that city.

Philip had four unmarried daughters whom Luke described as having a prophetic gift. Luke said nothing more about these women, and his passing comment indicates that he didn't intend this introduction to provoke a side discussion of the role of prophets – especially female prophets – in the Church age.

However, a few observations are in order. First, Luke distinguished these young women from Agabus by ascribing to him the *title* of prophet; of them he simply observed that they prophesied. They weren't prophets in the formal sense, but were given by the Spirit, on occasion, to exercise the gift of prophecy, probably in accordance with Paul's description in his first Corinthian epistle (ref. 14:1-39).

In the broader context of that epistle Paul recognized this prophetic gift as being given to women as well as men (11:1-5), and this egalitarian gifting importantly highlights the scriptural promise regarding the messianic age.

- Joel had declared that the outpouring of the Spirit in the "last days" would be evidenced in men and women prophesying. This promise was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost and Luke was careful to take note of it (2:14-17).
- Thus the prophetic gifting of Philip's daughters should be understood in terms of the gifts of the Spirit in the new creation in Christ, not the female prophets of the Old Covenant preparatory age (Exodus 15:20; Judges 4:4).

These observations don't answer the question of the existence of prophets in the New Covenant era, but they do show the sense in which the gift of prophecy continues as a mark of the new creation. And whatever one believes regarding the cessation of the *office* of prophet, it is undeniable that prophets existed in the early Church (if only prior to the completion of the New Testament text).

- d. Given Paul's preoccupation with getting to Jerusalem, his willingness to continue in Caesarea for "some days" (21:10) may appear a little puzzling. Perhaps the Spirit orchestrated some sort of providential delay in order to facilitate Agabus' arrival; perhaps the team was ahead of schedule and could afford a longer visit in Caesarea. Whatever the reason, the Spirit saw to it that His prophet made his way to Philip's house before the men had moved on.

Nothing is known of Agabus except what Luke recorded in his Acts account. He introduced Agabus as one of the prophets who came to Antioch from Jerusalem during Paul's early days there. These men prophesied of a coming famine, which provoked the saints in Antioch to later gather and deliver an offering to the saints in Judea (11:27-30). In the present context Luke has him again coming from Judea, which strongly suggests that he was a Jew. What is certain is that Agabus was a Christian prophet since he spoke under the leading of the Holy Spirit – the Spirit who, in the age of fulfillment, is the Spirit of Christ.

Unlike the saints at Tyre, Agabus didn't try to discourage Paul from continuing on to Jerusalem. Rather, he simply affirmed what the Spirit had been communicating to Paul for some time, namely that captivity and suffering awaited him there. Agabus did, however, make explicit what Paul sensed: Bonds and affliction were going to come to him at the hands of the Jews, but such that he would find himself delivered over to the Gentiles (21:11).

- e. This prophetic word likely conjured up in the minds of the hearers images of Jesus' own experience in Jerusalem. The Jews had likewise set themselves to destroy Him and had employed the instrument of Gentile authority to accomplish their end. The merciless fury directed toward Jesus by the Jews and Gentiles in Jerusalem had been terrifying; now the same sort of scenario was being prophesied concerning Paul. It was no wonder that even his companions – men who had heard both warnings and pleadings several times during their journey – joined in the chorus of voices begging Paul to not set foot in Jerusalem (21:12).

Agabus' prophecy is the third time Luke made mention of the Spirit warning Paul concerning Jerusalem. The first instance of it had come as a direct and repeated ministration of the Spirit before Paul even began his journey (20:22-23; cf. 19:21); the second (21:4) and third warnings followed through other men, but as one-time occurrences. These three warning episodes corresponded with Paul's movement toward Jerusalem, and as he drew nearer to his destination so did the intensity of the Spirit's admonition. What began as a personal internal leading culminated in a formal and graphic prophetic pronouncement. The closer Paul got to Jerusalem the more intensely he was pressed to reconsider his decision – seemingly even by the Spirit Himself.

This raises the question of the Spirit's role and intention in this whole process. As noted previously, Luke's account indicates that Paul's compulsion to go to Jerusalem was the result of the Spirit's leading (ref. again 19:21 and 20:22, where the phrase "in spirit" should likely be rendered "in the Spirit"). At the same time, Luke also suggests that the Spirit was seeking to warn Paul not to go there (21:4). The apparent contradiction is resolved when the Spirit's warning is distinguished from that of the various men.

- The Spirit was warning Paul in the sense that He was disclosing to him what was coming in Jerusalem and so preparing him for it.
- The Spirit's revelatory warning came through the mouths of men, but it was the men themselves who sought to dissuade Paul. Their reasoning and pleading were their own and not the Spirit's.

When Luke recorded that the disciples at Tyre sought to dissuade Paul "through the Spirit," he meant only that the Spirit had impressed upon them what lay ahead for Paul and they had responded in accordance with their own judgment and concern. To interpret Luke's statement otherwise is to make Paul disobedient to the Spirit on the one hand and the Spirit duplicitous on the other: Why would the Spirit reveal with absolute certainty Paul's future and then work to keep him back from that future?

The broader context leaves no doubt that the Lord Jesus – and so also the Spirit who acts in His name – intended Paul to go to Jerusalem. For the Lord had purposed the circumstances he was going to encounter there to finally bring him to Rome. The same Spirit who impressed on Paul the need to go to Jerusalem also showed him that the eventual goal was Rome itself, and that according to Jesus' will (19:21; cf. 23:11).

Paul was determined to go to Jerusalem, not simply because he was committed to delivering the offering to the saints there, but because he evidently sensed that it served the Lord's larger purpose for him. Paul didn't know the details of that purpose and its outworking, but he knew the parameters and goal of his calling (9:15-16) and he'd come to believe that Rome figured into it.

- For some time Paul had felt compelled to minister the gospel in Rome (ref. Romans 1:1-15, 15:20-32), and he must have believed that Jerusalem was a crucial step toward realizing that end. If he wasn't entirely sure there in Caesarea, he soon would be (ref. again 23:11). Jesus had appointed Paul to be His witness among the Gentiles and their rulers; how could he truly fulfill this calling and not testify of Jesus in the very seat of the Gentile world power?
- And since Paul's only concern was to finish the course and work appointed for him, there was no way anyone was going to dissuade him from going to Jerusalem. The assurance of imprisonment and affliction couldn't deter him; quite the contrary, Paul considered it his profound privilege and therefore a matter of great joy that the Lord had condescended to him to allow him to share in His own suffering (21:13; cf. Philippians 3:1ff). He knew that it is those who suffer with Christ who share in His life and glory (Romans 8:16-17; cf. 2 Timothy 2:8-12).

Many commentators have noted the parallels between Paul's forthcoming ordeal in Jerusalem and the final days of the Lord Jesus and assumed that Paul himself made those connections. It's impossible to know to what extent that was the case, but Paul's theology of the Christian life as "new creation in Christ" shows that he perceived the totality of his life as being lived in union with Jesus Christ. Paul viewed his life as a Christian as the life of Christ in him, and so regarded his own experiences as an extension of Jesus' life and experiences. Paul recognized the truth of the Lord's words: *"If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you... If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also."*

Paul understood that the Christian who lives authentically into his identity in Christ bears the Lord's fragrance in every place and situation. The world sees Jesus in those who share in His life and likeness and it responds to them accordingly. But beyond that, the Father has purposed, by His good Spirit, to perfect in His children the life of His Son by joining them to His life experience in this world. The Father reared His only-begotten Son in the life of obedience – that is, the life of true human sonship – through the instrumentality of suffering (Hebrews 5:7-8); so it is with all who are sons in the Son.

So Jerusalem – the symbol of a world in rebellion against the Lord and His Christ (cf. Galatians 4:21-31; Revelation 11:1-8; also Isaiah 1:1-10) – would receive Paul the way it had received its Messiah (Luke 13:34-35, 19:29-44). Paul would not die in Jerusalem, but like his Lord, his entrance into the city would mark the beginning of the end of his labors. Paul was convinced that Rome lay ahead for him, but he also saw his return to Jerusalem as a culmination of sorts (Romans 15:14ff). But until the end, he'd continue to stay the course, eagerly bearing Christ's reproach (2 Corinthians 4:1-18; Colossians 1:24-27).