

Sermon 67, When Suffering Is God's Will for You, Acts 21:1-26

Proposition: Paul's journey to Jerusalem shows five major Kingdom values, and these in turn reinforce the Kingdom's certainty because these values transcend the world's power structures and overcome death itself.

- I. Kingdom Values, vv. 1-26
 - A. Hospitality, vv. 4, 8, 16
 - B. Love, 20:37-38, 21:5, 12
 - C. Prophecy, 20:38; 21:4, 9-14
 - D. Suffering, 20:38; 21:4, 9-14
 - E. Submission, vv. 14, 18-26
 1. To the Will of God, v. 14
 2. To the Elders, vv. 18-26
- II. Kingdom Triumph, v. 13

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we saw last week that Paul entrusted the congregation at Ephesus to the care of God and the word of His grace. Now Luke tells us about Paul's trip from Ephesus back to Jerusalem, and what happened when he got to Jerusalem. The trip was relatively uneventful; they sailed from port to port for a time, and then took a ship from the south coast of Asia Minor around Cyprus and landed at Tyre. Then they traveled down the Syrian coast into Palestine and thence to Jerusalem. Why does Luke include this story? What does it have to do with his theme of the kingdom's certainty? The answer is that the story highlights five of the key values and practices of the Kingdom. How do people live when they have submitted to Jesus' reign? Luke shows us that they live hospitably, lovingly, and in submission to the will of God expressed through prophecy, even when God's will is for them to suffer. That's how they live. And that, in turn, shows us the certainty of the Kingdom's triumph. Its values transcend and overcome the world's values, for love is stronger than death.

I. Kingdom Values, vv. 1-26

Luke has a thing for journeys and trips. But he does not give us a stop-by-stop itinerary for most of the travel in the book (thank God). When he does, then, we should pay attention to discern what we need to learn from these itineraries. As always, we remember that the overall point is the Kingdom's certainty.

A. Hospitality, vv. 4, 8, 16

The first thing that stands out on this trip is the hospitality that Paul experienced everywhere. It begins when they land in Tyre, a place where Paul had never been — at least, a visit there is not mentioned anywhere else in Acts or his letters. Yet they looked up the disciples, finding a church community within the city. Verse four does not directly state that Paul and his team, which as Luke told us in the previous chapter was at least nine men (Paul, plus the seven representatives

of the Gentile churches, plus Luke) stayed with the believers in the Tyrian church. But it certainly seems likely, particularly when you look at v. 8, which specifically says that these nine guys came into the home of Philip the Deacon and Evangelist and stayed with him and his four virgin daughters. And they stayed there for some days!

Would you be comfortable letting a team of 9 men stay in your home? I know that everyone in this room has the highest respect for the Apostle Paul. But if he somehow called you up and said “I’m bringing 8 of my closest friends and we are going to stay with you for a decent amount of time,” what would you say? “No! I don’t have room!”? Or would you say “Yes, hospitality is a kingdom value and it’s one that I’m happy to participate in?”

Would you say “I would love to, but my dog isn’t good with strangers”? “I would love to, but I’m worried about my house collapsing from all the extra weight”? “I would love to, but I really need all the floor space in my living room and I just can’t accommodate you”?

Well, Luke goes on to tell us that the team stayed with Mnason of Cyprus. I remember this name because it appears in *Pilgrim’s Progress*. One commentator suggested that it is probably a Greek form of the Hebrew Manasseh. In any case, I mentioned the name in a paper on Bunyan’s classic that I wrote in college, and still remember how Dr. Veith circled the name “Mr. Mnason” and put a question mark next to it in red ink. This fellow is not the best-known character in Acts, but he had been with Jesus from the beginning. Luke wants us to know that he was an early disciple. And not only had he walked with the Lord for a long time; he was a hospitable chap. Luke appears to be saying that Mnason was willing to host all 9 men for the entire period of their stay in Jerusalem.

Brothers and sisters, everyone has some excuse for not being hospitable. I have excuses too. But I just want to point out that if we take the text of Acts seriously, we see that hospitality is a kingdom value. Luke is not surprised that Philip and Mnason are so hospitable; indeed, he seems to expect it. What could possibly motivate people to be so generous with their home which is their castle?

B. Love, 20:37-38; 21:5, 12

The answer is the master virtue, love. The disciples were so eager to open their homes and host Paul & co. because they loved each other! That is something that should be obvious to us. We’ve talked about it at length already in our study of Acts. But brothers and sisters, you and I need to understand that love is not just a feeling, but an action. One of the actions of love is to open your home to someone else who needs a home, who needs a family, who needs a place to belong.

The love that existed between Paul and the people converted under his ministry was intense and real. It manifested itself in a lot of crying in this passage, as Paul has to tell all these people who love him that this may be the end that they will probably or certainly never see him again. Thus, as he leaves Miletus, the elders began to weep aloud and repeatedly kissed Paul while embracing him. Is that the kind of scene you have ever witnessed in your church career? We may hug our fellow believers a little bit here and there. But in our culture, a scene like this would emphatically NOT take place among the elders of the church. You would know that you had particularly touched an elder’s heart if he squeezed your hand a little harder than necessary,

or if you saw a tiny bit of a tear tremble in the corner of his eye. But to see a total breakdown like this, weeping, embracing, kissing — well, that's not done in our culture. Remember that this was a Mediterranean culture, and they are known for being far more emotionally expressive than us buttoned-up Northerners.

Well, Paul had spent three years in Ephesus and countless hours shepherding these people. But the same kind of scene takes place in Tyre, where he spent only a week! Yet despite that, the people of Tyre brought their whole families and escorted Paul out of the city in order to pray with him on the beach.

Have you ever thought of taking your whole family to escort a visiting missionary to the airport? The love that bound Paul to these people was strong, really strong. It's manifested again in Caesarea, a town where Paul had not done a whole lot. And yet even there, after the prophecy of Paul's death, the whole church starts weeping and crying and begging him to turn around head back to Asia or on to Rome or anywhere, essentially, but Jerusalem! At this point, even Luke joins the chorus, along with the seven men who had accompanied Paul specifically to go to Jerusalem and present the monetary gift to the elders there. They are all telling Paul to stop, not to go on, not to die!

Why are they doing this? Because they love him. That's why. Love is the supreme Kingdom value. In the face of our culture and its obsession with equality, in the face of antique culture and obsession with status, the church must lift up its banner that shows the bleeding hands and bears the word "Love." The greatest of these is charity, brothers and sisters. The biggest reason we don't hold with the moral crusade for equality is that love has and must keep holding the top spot in our ethical hierarchy. The supreme Kingdom value is not equality, not being heard, not power, not even obedience as such, but love. That love is manifested in hospitality. It's manifested in weeping and kissing and public displays of affection — not only romantic and erotic PDA, but also public displays of friendship, of care, of delight.

C. Prophecy, 20:38, 21:4, 21:9-14

Another Kingdom value that comes to the fore in this passage is the value of prophecy. We are citizens governed by King Jesus. He rules us by love rather than by pain or fear. And one major way He expresses that love is by speaking to us through prophecy. Now, I believe that today the prophecy you can expect to hear from Jesus will all be found written in the Old and New Testaments. Everything I've heard about people today who believe themselves to be prophets leads me toward skepticism. But be that as it may, the point of this passage is not to comment on the future of prophecy in the church, but to show that prophecy is a kingdom value like love and hospitality.

Paul prophesied to the Ephesian elders that they would not see his face again. Then, a number of Tyrian disciples prophesied, telling Paul not to go to Jerusalem. Some readers have wondered how the Spirit could tell Paul to go to Jerusalem, then not to go to Jerusalem. The answer seems to be that Luke has given an extremely short summary of their prophecies. The point of what they said was "Don't go to Jerusalem." But what the Spirit actually revealed to them was the same thing He revealed to Paul and the other prophets mentioned in Acts 20 & 21,

namely, that chains and imprisonment were definitely going to happen to the apostle in Jerusalem. The prophets took this to be a warning not to go there; Paul took it as confirmation of his calling from God to go and suffer like Jesus in the city that kills the prophets.

In other words, brothers and sisters, here as in other domains of life a split between fact and meaning has opened up. It may be a fact that this particular enzyme cuts the DNA strand at these ten key points. Great. But what does that fact mean? Here is where the rubber meets the road, and where misunderstanding starts to occur. It may be a fact that if you don't turn in that assignment, you will get a zero on it. But what does that fact mean? Does it mean that you should turn in the assignment at any cost, even if your parents were just killed in a fiery car crash, even if you have just been diagnosed with a dread disease and given six days to live? In other words, part of the meaning is context-dependent.

The fact is that the Spirit revealed chains and imprisonment awaiting Paul in Jerusalem. But the meaning was not something immediately vouchsafed to the church at large. Paul knew, and told them, that the meaning was that he had to suffer like his Master. The rest of the church wasn't so sure. They wanted the prophecies to mean "Paul will not suffer chains and imprisonment in Jerusalem, because he was forewarned by the prophets in every city who urged him not to go where these bad things would happen." But that isn't what the prophecies meant.

In the same way, brothers and sisters, we don't often take the NT warnings about suffering as though they really apply to us. Actually, just like these early Christians, we begin to think that the warnings about chains and imprisonment and so on are there to help us avoid those things. Since that could happen if I follow Jesus too closely, well then, I just will be careful to never come across as weird or, God forbid, serious in my belief that others need to repent and turn from their sins!

The four daughters of Philip prophesied; here we see emerging in the NT, just as in the OT, the concept of hereditary ministry in the church. It's a well-known thing; many of the pastors I know are married to pastors' daughters, and many of their sons become pastors, their daughters marry pastors, or perhaps their sons and daughters marry pastor's children. For instance, the son of my childhood pastor is a cop, not a pastor — but his wife is a pastor's daughter. There is a strong connection there. Furthermore, Agabus prophesied by showing a sign. In this he followed the tradition of Ezekiel, Ahijah the Shilonite, and other prophets who enacted things to make their prophecies more memorable.

Don't expect to find prophets in the contemporary church; most of what passes for prophecy in those circles, at least that I'm familiar with, is simply guesses that anyone with some observational skills could make.

D. Suffering, 20:38, 21:4, 21:9-14

But you see, brothers and sisters, when we actually embrace the Kingdom value of prophecy, and start listening to the words of God, we will hear that we need to suffer. Paul was up front about that. He told the Ephesian elders. He told the Tyrians. He told the Cesareans. Indeed, when it came to a climax in Caesarea, being so close to Jerusalem, his own team joins the chorus and tells him that he needs to avoid the suffering that's coming his way!

Brothers and sisters, suffering is a kingdom value. It's not an American value. We don't hold with suffering. We are the land of comfort. We invented air conditioning here.

But here's the thing: Our symbol is a cross, aka a torture machine.

Our leader died by mob-demanded, state-sponsored violence. And before He was killed, He told us that He was sending us out as sheep in the midst of wolves.

Brothers and sisters, if you have made the decision that comfort is more important to you than love, you have already apostatized from the faith. Paul had to correct church after church on this point, because they, up to and including Luke himself, were convinced at the time that suffering must not be God's will for him. Here's the thing: It is indeed not God's will for us to go seek imprisonment and martyrdom. We are never supposed to go looking for trouble. But we are also never supposed to think that trouble is bad just because it's trouble. Paul valued suffering because he valued something more than comfort.

E. Submission, vv. 14, 18-26

He valued submission to the will of God. That's because he loved — God, and the people of God. He showed his love to God by submitting to God's will, and his love for God's people by submitting to the elders of his local church.

1. To the Will of God, v. 14

How did Paul submit to God's will? He insisted on going to Jerusalem. It was a resolve made under the direction of the Holy Spirit, and it was a resolve he insisted on keeping. The church in Caesarea figured it out, eventually. They resigned themselves to God's will and agreed to let Paul do what God was calling him to do.

2. To the Elders, vv. 18-26

But what was he supposed to do when he got to Jerusalem? Well, we know that he wanted to deliver money from the Gentile churches to the Jerusalem church. Maybe he requested to meet with the Jerusalem elders, or maybe they set up the meeting. Either way, what is clear right off the bat is that Paul is in submission to them. Paul recounts the progress of the Kingdom among the Gentiles. The elders respond by glorifying God. And then they give Paul specific instructions. Now that he is in Jerusalem, he is supposed to participate in what looks like a bit of a hare-brained scheme. As any pastor can tell you, proving your credentials to people who already believe you are a heretic is essentially impossible. But the elders tell Paul to try anyway.

If I were Paul, I would have serious difficulties submitting to this. We all know how Paul rebuked Peter to his face, in front of everyone, for acting like purity laws were still an issue in the church. Yet now, Paul, in submission to his fellow elders, has to go and purify himself and pay the expenses of four Jewish Christians who are also involved in some kind of ritual vow. Now, those expenses could get really high. We may be talking a couple of bulls, five or six sheep, and various other offerings of food and oil. I guarantee that even today, the best-heeled among us would find the expense to be noticeable. And Paul just walks into Jerusalem, bringing a huge monetary gift that he has been collecting for two years as a sign of church unity, and gets whacked with this: "You know, a lot of people in this church are extremely suspicious of you."

Ouch.

But does Paul try to fight back? Does he say “I’m the apostle to the Gentiles and I’m sick of your Jewish antics?” No. He says “Okay.”

When was the last time your elders specifically asked you to do something that would put you significantly out of pocket? Yeah, I thought so. Never. At least, that’s the case for me.

But because the ultimate kingdom value is love, the value of submission is not underrated in Christ’s kingdom either. Brothers and sisters, Paul submitted to his brothers in the Lord. The importance of this cannot be overstated. It is one of the ordination vows that I took to become pastor of this church. It is an ordination vow that every elder in our denomination takes. Why? Because we believe in team ministry and submission to the will of the body.

Notice how careful Luke is to avoid saying that James said “Go make this offering.” The group of elders as a body said it. It was the principle of elder rule in action. James is not “bishop of Jerusalem” bossing Paul, his fellow apostle who wasn’t bishop of anything. At least, that is definitely not what the text says. It is the elders whose decision as a body is being conveyed here. You may believe in diocesan bishops, but you can’t believe in them on New Testament grounds.

Anyhow, Paul is told that he must prove his Jewishness to the Jewish believers of Jerusalem. And so he does. He submits. The consequences are brutal; he is taken into custody and ends up being shipped off to Rome, still a prisoner at the end of the book even though he has done absolutely nothing illegal.

II. Kingdom Triumph, v. 13

Well, some commentators and preachers claim that Paul erred here and that Luke is suggesting to us that he went too far in being all things to all men. That’s nonsense. Yes, at the time Luke himself told Paul not to go to Jerusalem. But Luke later thought better of it, and I believe that his final verdict on the values of the kingdom, and whether they work, is found right here in v. 13. Paul says “Quit blubbing. Stop trying to abuse our emotional connection to influence me to change my mind about going to Jerusalem. I am ready to be bound in chains. I am ready to be put into dungeons indefinitely, and even to die, for the name of Jesus.”

Why does Paul say this? Because the Kingdom comes not only in power, but also in weakness. The way Jesus conquered Satan was by being crucified. Our leader died. He was killed. And that is the way of the Kingdom. That is the way Paul was walking, and he was really not interested in anyone telling him to get off it. He wasn’t going to get off it. He was going to stay on it, because it’s the path Jesus walked.

Are you ready to walk that path? Do you believe in the five values of the Kingdom, and especially the values of love and of suffering? Both values are under massive attack today. We are assured in no uncertain terms that all suffering is illegitimate, that pain is the worst evil, and that a rightly ordered society avoids unpleasantness at all costs.

That’s not how God ordered society in the garden. There was quite a bit of unpleasantness relating to the presence of the serpent.

That’s not how God ordered His own Son’s life on earth. There was quite a bit of unpleasantness relating to the whole crucifixion by a deranged mob and spineless Roman authorities. And yet through that death, Jesus conquered. He beat Satan by taking the punishment

of sin onto Himself. And brothers and sisters, you and I will beat Satan by being conformed to the death of Jesus too.

The one who would save his life will lose it.

Do you think that's why Paul refused to turn around and run from Jerusalem? Of course it is! He didn't want to lose his life in Christ. He was willing to confess Christ where it was least safe to do so. Are you?

Because that's how the Kingdom comes. Yes, the Kingdom is present when we all slap each other on the back and congratulate each other on being Christians. We need that affirmation. But the Kingdom is also present when we are placed in chains and hauled off to suffer. Jesus rules even there. Believe Him. Trust Him. Look beyond suffering to the resurrection of the dead. Amen.