

When a seven-year-old girl called 9-1-1 and then hung up, the Burnett, Wisconsin Police were dispatched to her home. When they arrived, they discovered the problem—the girl’s grandfather was cheating in a game of cards. (Ananova.com) A burglar in Shelby County, Ohio, was caught by police after he accidentally pocket-dialed 9-1-1 while breaking into a home. Making matters worse: The crook hid in a closet, but was ratted out by his phone yet again when the low battery alarm went off. (wdtn.com) When I first read that, I thought, “This guy must be one of the dumbest criminals of all time.”

As I read through Acts 21, it sounds as if Paul’s friends were some of the dumbest friends an Apostle could have, because they would have called 9-1-1 to keep Paul from going to Jerusalem, even though he didn’t want them to shed tears or try to talk him into staying in Caesarea. He was ready to go. I only wish that Paul’s friends at Caesarea (and that includes Luke) had said to Paul in the very beginning what they said to him in the end. Only after pleading with Paul not to go to Jerusalem, and breaking his heart in the process, they said to him, *“The Lord’s will be done.”*

After a short journey from Tyre by way of Ptolemais, Paul had stopped for a visit at the home of Philip in Caesarea. Philip was one of the deacons elected by the church (Acts 6:5) who had been sent down to Samaria to preach the Gospel (Acts 8:4-24) and had introduced the Ethiopian eunuch to Christ. Remember that remarkable story that is told in Acts 8:26-39? Later in Acts 8 Luke records that Phillip went to Caesarea. He settled there and continued the ministry of an evangelist. His four daughters had the gift of prophecy.

While Paul was there, a prophet named Agabus came down to Caesarea from Jerusalem and dramatized his prophecy for Paul in a vivid way. He took Paul’s belt, or girdle, which gathered his outer tunic around his waist, and bound his own hands and feet. Like an Old Testament prophet, he acted out his prophecy: *Coming over to us, he took Paul’s belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, “The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.’ ”* (v. 11). This was nothing that Paul didn’t already know, except that his own Hebrew people would be the conspirators in his arrest and persecution in Rome.

Paul could have handled that clarification of the road ahead from Agabus. But what troubled him was the combined restraint imposed by Philip, his prophetic daughters, his companions, and even Luke. Note the plural “we” in verse 12. Together they all pleaded with him not to go to Jerusalem. The Spirit’s prophetic word through Agabus did not forbid Paul from going to Jerusalem. He simply made it clear what would happen when he went.

Dr. Lloyd Ogilvie says, “The difficulty for Paul was that he had to digest the information about what the Jews would do to him and at the same time deal with his grief-stricken friends who wanted to keep him out of danger. It’s not easy to fly in the face of a host of friends, all of whom believe your decision or direction is wrong-headed. They had all prayed their prayers and Paul stood alone in the guidance he received. How do we account for these counter convictions? The Spirit had not given different guidance; Paul and his friends interpreted the guidance differently. It is what the friends and Paul added to the guidance that made the difference. Paul added the *resoluteness* of previous clarity; his friends added the

*reserve of tender affection for the Apostle*" (*The Communicator's Commentary*, Vol. 5, Acts © 1983, p. 297).

Through Luke's eyes, we are given an inside look at the warm and caring relationship between Paul and his friends. They sincerely cared about the Apostle. He was not only the spiritual and intellectual giant we meet on the pages of Acts and in the epistles; he was also a man capable of receiving and giving deep affection. Christ in him had softened his rigid, cold Pharisee's heart and made him able to share in profound friendships in the family of faith.

It was this openness to his friends that nearly closed him to the Spirit's guidance. He felt the full impact of his friends' anxiety for him. It began to wear on him, troubling his own spirit, and clouding his vision. All the physical exhaustion of the days of travel, the persistent questioning of his guidance, and the internalization of the panic of his friends burst in an explosion of emotion. "*Why are you weeping and breaking my heart?*" Paul asks in verse 13. Who is it that can really break our hearts? Why, it's the people who are dearest to us. The people we love the most. It was as if he was saying, "Why are you doing this to me? I need your encouragement to follow the Spirit's leading. Instead you are crippling me with your grief over what is going to happen to me in Jerusalem!"

The Greek word used here for "breaking" is a form of *sunthrupto*, from *apothrupto*, meaning to crush together. The implication is that Paul's friends were trying to crush his guidance from the Lord. Perhaps it also meant that they were crushing their will for his safety into the Lord's will for his obedience. The reason for Paul's outburst of emotion was that his weeping friends were making him question his own heart's desire to obey the Lord.

When he had regained his emotional equilibrium, he went on to explain why his friends should not persist further in crushing his spirit: "*I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.*"

Paul did not fear dying if it would glorify his Master. He was so sure of the Lord that he did not fear rejection, physical beatings, political persecution, or even death. He knew he was alive forever. The only concern for however long he lived was to obey the Lord's guidance and to honor him in all he did and said. We are not free to live the abundant life Jesus promised until we have been brought to an unreserved commitment to and trust in Jesus as the Lord of our lives.

Only after this courageous statement were Paul's friends able to say what they should have said all along. Verse 14 is very telling: "*When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, 'The Lord's will be done.*" Does this suggest that they had tried to talk Paul out of doing the will of God? Or was it just resignation? Or, what's worse, did they echo the oft-repeated idea that the only explanation of tragic events is that they must be, or have been, the will of God?

I would not call any of these alternatives commendable. What is tragic is that no one stepped forward to say, "Hey Paul, I'm in your corner. I'm standing with you. You have received guidance from the Lord to go to Jerusalem. So go. I think that will mean arrest, persecution, and imprisonment for you. But I praise God that he will be with you and will use whatever you must go through for his ultimate purposes. Do what you must do!" No one said that (Ogilvie, p.298).

Personally, in Paul's friends I see a lot of Simon Peter who reacted in the very same way when Jesus announced that he must go to Jerusalem. The scene unfolds in Matthew 16 this way: "*From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns"*" (Matthew 16:21-23).

In Acts 21 we are left to wonder about Paul's friends. And then our criticism of them turns back on us. What would we have done? What *do we do* in similar situations today?

I'm going to suggest some reflective questions that may help us to apprehend the deeper meaning of this passage.

- Do we have clear guidance from the Lord about what he wants us to do in obedience to him?
- Have we ever been dissuaded from following the Lord's direction because of conflicting guidance from others?
- Has our own or others' concern for safety or popularity or success ever kept us from pressing ahead to follow God's guidance in difficult circumstances?
- Do we tend to equate being in the Lord's will with all of the circumstances working out with ease and happiness?
- Has our own fear of radical obedience ever prompted us to crush someone else's determination to do the Lord's work and will in their lives—especially in the life of someone we love very much?
- Has tender affection ever been substituted for courageous love in wanting God's best for someone else?

(*The Communicator's Commentary*, Vol. 5, Acts © 1983, p. 298).

These are the questions, I think, we must ask if we are to make a bridge for this passage into our own lives. We all want to know and do God's will in our lives. However, we need friends who do not twist God's guidance for us with well-meaning and overly protective thoughts and emotions.

The goal for each of us ought to be to live as adventurers into the will of God, completely trusting in him, knowing that the way forward is always best outlined by God's Word and Spirit, and then considering how we can spur others on in faithfulness to him.

We are called to be faithful.

That's the bottom line.

Amen.