

When Christians strive to follow God’s will by pursuing self-denying, cross-centered lives, they should expect Christian fellowship to be encouraging but sometimes emotionally painful and confusing.

Introduction – Scene in Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom when the hero screams “This is serious!” In a flash, the adventure turns potentially deadly, and suddenly he’s not having fun anymore.

Background – Why did Paul feel compelled this time around to go to Jerusalem which was a dangerous place for him? Paul realized there was a growing division in the church between legalistic Jews and the believing Gentiles. Ever since the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), the division had grown as the legalists trailed Paul on his missionary journeys seeking to convert the new Christians to their own faction. Paul understood the gravity of the situation. He saw that since he was part of the problem (being the chief apostle to the Gentiles and the most successful foreign missionary), he should be part of the solution. A substantial love offering collected from the Gentiles churches for the mother church in Jerusalem, delivered by Paul himself, could help to heal the division between the Jews and Gentiles in the church.

I. Following God Through Pain

- A. The pain of final farewells (vv. 20:36-21:1a, 5-6, 13).** Although Paul and his friends knew they would spend eternity together in heaven, this did not erase the difficulty of their farewells. This is a beautiful picture of Christian fellowship. There is obviously deep love between Paul and these fellow Christian laborers. How was Paul, who traveled for much of his ministry, able to build so many lasting bonds of love and friendship? By giving himself away! Selfless service and death to self is the recipe for making lasting friends. This is what Paul told his friends in Ephesus (Acts 20:35).
- B. The pain of fearful expectations (vv. 21:11-13).** At this point everyone agrees that dire consequences await Paul in Jerusalem. Paul is warned (at least) twice by well-intentioned believers to avoid that city. Both Paul and his friends must have been afraid of the Holy Spirit’s prediction that his sworn enemies would finally capture him. Despite these justified fears Paul was not only ready for imprisonment but death as well. [Note the prophetic details. Paul will be captured by the Jews and handed over to the Gentiles (Roman authorities). There is no mention of Paul’s death.]
- C. The pain of giving up my will (vv. 21:4, 12-14).** When you follow God and it gets painful (or at least likely painful), it’s not just you who must give up your will. Even your Christian friends may have to give up their preferences and hopes for you, and give up how your life neatly intersects with theirs. This may entail giving up hopes and dreams and close relationships. Giving up carefully-arranged plans hurts.

II. Following God Through Confusion

At first glance there is a contradiction of divine directions in this passage. Paul is directed by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. Believers in Tyre and Caesarea are led by the Spirit to warn Paul of the dangers that await him in Jerusalem. In essence, Paul sees an “open door” that the Holy Spirit is leading him through; other believers see a “closed door” that the Holy Spirit is prohibiting Paul to go through. Is the Spirit inconsistent? If not, who is wrong? How did he decide what to do?

- A. Carefully discern God’s will (vv. 21:4, 10-12).** There is not a contradiction in the Spirit’s messages to Paul and to the disciples in Tyre. The warning the disciples give to Paul is presumably a fearful misinterpretation of the Spirit’s message. If the Spirit declared that Paul would suffer in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 19:21; 20:22-24), and his friends desired to protect him, then they may have interpreted the Spirit’s message to mean that Paul must not go to Jerusalem. But notice that is an application of the Spirit’s message, not the message itself. Here is a historical example of why prophecies need to be tested (because the interpretation or even the prophecy itself may be wrong; cf. 1 Cor 14:29-33a; 1 Thess 5:20-21). The

Christians in Tyre did not see any good purpose in Paul's future suffering, but Paul interpreted the warnings as a divine confirmation that he must suffer for the name of Jesus (cf. Acts 9:16). Paul correctly distinguished between *prediction* and *prohibition*. Paul rightly relied on the insight given to him by the Spirit, so the other believers had to reinterpret their own prophetic insights to fit with what Paul knew to be God's will for him.

- B. Gently resist emotional pressure (vv. 21:13-14a).** Where did Paul get the strength to continue his journey toward Jerusalem when his friends repeatedly warned him to stay away to stay safe? No one, including Paul, enjoys suffering, so why did Paul ignore their warnings and press on? Because he was convinced that God wanted him to! Paul wanted to follow God, to obey God's will (especially this unique assignment that God had given to him) more than he wanted to escape pain. What we need as faithful followers of Jesus is this kind of resolve to do God's will whatever may come, and the faith to believe that God's will for us is ultimately good despite potential pain.
- C. "Let the will of the Lord be done" (v. 21:14b).** Finally the disciples ceased trying to persuade Paul to avoid Jerusalem. They understood through divine inspiration (e.g., Agabus's prophecy) that Paul would be arrested and would suffer at the hands of the Jews and Gentiles, but they acquiesced to Paul's wishes, recognizing that it was the will of the Lord that Paul must go. Interpretation is the key that unlocks confusion. A warning may mean "Get ready!" instead of "Stay away!" Notice that Paul's friends did not give up on Paul when they turned him over to God's will. They were trusting God to take care of him.

III. Following God By Following Jesus

- A. Paul's example: following in Jesus' footsteps toward Jerusalem (Lk 9:51, 53; Acts 19:21).** As he concludes his third missionary trip, Paul's journey to Jerusalem is accompanied by warnings and foreshadows of suffering and death that await him. Paul's experiences echo those of Jesus when he journeyed to Jerusalem (Mk 10:33; Lk 13:33-35; 9:51; 18:31-33). Paul is a faithful follower of Jesus—literally following him to arrest and death in Jerusalem if God willed it for him (1 Pet 2:21).
- B. Enjoy God's encouragement while pursuing the self-denying, cross-centered life (vv. 20:36-37; 21:5, 7-8, 16; cf. Rom 15:25-32).** In every city he visited, Paul made fast friends because he loved God's people and entered into their lives. He prayed with them, ate with them, ministered with them, taught them, disciplined them for their good, and became emotionally attached to them. He deeply enjoyed fellowship, receiving affection as much as he gave. Paul pursued a life of self-denial by pursuing Christ, but he never ceased enjoying God's blessings. Paul was poor, but he was also a joyful, content man who was rich in friendships.

Conclusion – How is God uniquely calling you to follow Jesus? God's will for Jesus was to follow through the pain (which he counted as joy), follow through the confusion (he was not confused about his mission; but *everyone* else was), and to follow God's will that actually broke his fellowship with his Father! Jesus did all this so that sinners, who struggle and fail to faithfully obey God's will through the pain and confusion, can be brought near to God rather than forsaken. You cannot ask WWJD? until you ask WDJD, and then you must trust in his finished work to lead you in a life of thankful, serving devotion. Christians should expect emotional pain and confusion to sometimes come from Christian fellowship because we still live in a sinful world, and because God's will for you is often not what others want for you. But don't let that stop you from following God when the following gets serious, because the joy you will possess in following the footsteps of Jesus fosters this kind of assurance—since you are united by faith to Jesus in his self-denying, cross-centered life, you will be united to Jesus in his resurrection. C.S. Lewis once said, "You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you," and "Where can you taste the joy of obeying unless He bids you do something for which His bidding is the *only* reason?"