

Facing Trouble

Sometimes trouble is a result of choices, and we can expect it. Often though, trouble comes when we're not expecting it. Imagine knowing ahead of time that you're going to experience a time of trouble; how would you prepare? How should Christians prepare when trouble awaits? This is the circumstance that the Apostle Paul found himself in. To set the stage, in Acts 9:16, the Lord speaks the following about Paul, ***"I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."*** God wasn't punishing Paul, but God would use Paul's suffering as a way to deepen Paul's dependency on the Lord, and to teach us about faithfulness amidst trouble. Paul understood that throughout his missionary travels, trouble would regularly be awaiting him, ***"the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me,"*** Acts 20:23.

On one of Paul's missionary journeys, Paul and his companions are about to travel to Jerusalem where impending trouble awaited him. One of Paul's traveling companions was Luke, the author of the book of Acts. We pick up in Paul's story in Acts 21:4-6, where Luke speaks the following after they come ashore on Tyre, ***"After looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem. When our days there were ended, we left and started on our journey, while they all, with wives and children, escorted us until we were out of the city. After kneeling down on the beach and praying, we said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home again."***

It's interesting to note that the Holy Spirit had previously directed Paul's heart to go to Jerusalem, in Acts 19:21, ***"Paul purposed in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem."*** Now though in chapter 21, it's an interesting statement that's made, where fellow disciples, ***"kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem."*** On the surface there appears to be a contradiction; the Spirit prompting Paul to go to Jerusalem, while other disciples ***"through the Spirit"*** are telling Paul to avoid Jerusalem. To clarify, the Spirit of God wasn't telling Paul to avoid Jerusalem. The Spirit had foretold the other disciples of the trouble awaiting Paul in Jerusalem; that's what they received ***"through the Spirit."*** Those disciples in turn reasoned in their own hearts that it would be best for Paul to avoid Jerusalem all together. Human reasoning sometimes blurs or alters what the Lord has really told us.

Application #1 - When we hear that trouble awaits, we can wrongly assume God wants us to avoid it. God often brings His people through trouble in order to refine them and that they might minister to others.

A quick subpoint that I think is great in this story, is found in verse five, speaking about the disciples at Tyre praying with Luke and Paul before they leave, ***"they all, with wives and children, escorted us until we were out of the city. After kneeling down on the beach and praying, we said farewell to one another."*** What a great inclusive time; the disciples with their wives and children, all knelt down with Paul and Luke and prayed together. What a cool picture of the family unit, seeking God together, as directed by the fathers, to include everyone. It's great to show our kids the need to seek the Lord together, and to humbly show our dependency on the Lord in tough times. I remember growing up, and I was about eight years old, when my dad lost his job. He called a family meeting and we prayed together for a new job for him. This could have been something that was kept from me and my brothers, due to shame and embarrassment. Instead, many years later, it stands out as an example of my parents saying, ***"Let's seek the Lord together, as a family."***

Application #2 – Parents should pray through tough decisions as a family, not always separately from the kids.

Picking up again in Paul's journey, they've traveled to Caesarea and stayed there for a while. Acts 21:10-14 says, ***"As we were staying there for some days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, 'This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.' 'When we had heard this, we as well as the local residents began begging him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, 'What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.' And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, 'The will of the Lord be done!'"***

Notice the decisive language, ***"the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt."*** The Spirit was not saying, ***"Warning! If you decide to go, this will happen."*** Instead, the Spirit was saying, ***"When you go, you can know that God sent you because these things will be fulfilled."*** This prophecy implies that the Holy Spirit expects Paul to go. These disciples in Caesarea act the same as the disciples in Tyre, ***"begging him not to go up to Jerusalem."*** Paul wouldn't be deterred. Paul's commitment to the Lord exposed the sin in the hearts of the disciples and ultimately changed their hearts, from, ***"Don't go"*** to ***"The will of the Lord be done!"***

Application #3 – A person lead by the Spirit isn't swayed by the opinion of others.

God had readily told Paul that he could expect a life of trouble. God also told the Church to expect trouble, as 2 Timothy 3:12 says, ***"Indeed all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."***

Application #4 - The key to life is abiding in grace, not trouble-free living.

Paul had indeed suffered for the name of Jesus, as God said he would in Acts 9:16. He talks about some of his sufferings in 2 Corinthians 11:23-27, ***"in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure."*** In all these things, Paul had learned to trust that God's grace was sufficient. He reiterates this truth in Philippians 4:11-13, ***"I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."*** This last verse, verse 13, is so often taken out of context, ***"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."*** People pull this verse out by itself and take it to mean, ***"With Jesus, I'm unstoppable. I can do anything!"*** That's not the meaning, as Paul points out in the context. It really means, ***"Lord, I'm ready for trouble today, because You'll give me the strength to endure it."*** So, be careful before you write "4:13" on your sneakers, thinking that doing so will make you invincible on the court!

Back to Paul's journey in Acts 21. The disciples that were urging Paul avoid trouble have stopped speaking those foolish things, and instead accepted the will of the Lord, ***"The will of the Lord be done!"***

Application #5 – Our faithfulness in times of trouble teaches weaker brothers that suffering has purpose.

Paul's faithfulness exposed the fact that the Holy Spirit had been foretelling the other disciples all along what would be, not giving a warning to avoid Jerusalem, but a heads up so the church could pray for Paul. If Christians know that the Lord is directing one of us into a time of persecution, then prayer is the best solution, not running away. Seek the Lord for strength, guidance, wisdom, when trouble comes. Trouble always comes, it can't be avoided indefinitely.

Application #6 – The Spirit tells us to seek God's wisdom when facing trouble.

James chapter 1 reminds us to ask God for wisdom, and not the removal of the trouble. Trouble has purpose, and growing through it results in many things; glorifying the Lord, strengthening our faith, and modeling righteousness for others to see. Bear in mind that trouble befalls three types of people, 1) People doing the right thing; like Paul preaching the gospel, or missionaries being arrested and persecuted in countries where the gospel is illegal. 2) People doing the wrong thing; like Jonah running from God, or a drunk driver crashing his car. 3) People doing nothing at all; like Job, just living in a fallen world, or an infant battling cancer.

So, how should Christians respond to trouble? To start, pray and ask God for two things; *"God, how can I navigate this? How can I glorify You in this?"* Allowing God to govern you through your troubles, serves as a testimony to others.

Application #7 - The trouble you face today may not be because of the name of Jesus, but your response can still bring glory to the name of Jesus!