

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP STUDY IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES - PART TWENTYONE - CHAPTERS 20 AND 21

Paul had one last major project on his mind, the great city of Rome, capital of the Empire. (19:21) The last nine chapters of Acts describe the adventures and ordeals through which he finally got there, and so had the opportunity to be a witness for Christ to the Emperor and his court. Paul does not seem to have known at this stage how he would arrive in Rome but somehow he knew that Jerusalem was the first step, and so, like Jesus in Luke 9:53, he set his face towards Jerusalem, and trouble.

Although Paul had distant goals burning on his heart he did not waste one moment along the path that led there. Knowing this would be his last opportunity he wanted to leave the churches, with whom he had invested so much time, strong and healthy. First he exhorted, literally 'drew alongside to strengthen', the Ephesian Christians, (20:1) then did the same thing in Macedonia, presumably visiting Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea. He continued encouraging in Achaia at Corinth and probably Athens. (20:2) But just how do we encourage and strengthen one another? The rest of chapter 20 explains and illustrates.

Paul preached to tens of thousands but he never forgot that the most effective way to have a lasting effect on the crowds was to spend a lot of time with a few key individuals. Chapter 20:4 describes Paul's travelling Bible School, young men drawn from all over the area in which his ministry had been spent. They were a varied group in terms of backgrounds and future ministries. Aristarchus had already been involved in the riot in Ephesus, (19:29) together with Gaius, and would accompany Paul all the way to prison in Rome. (Col.4:10) Timothy was to be a teacher, (I Tim.4:13-16) and a writer. (II Cor.1:1) Tychicus was willing to be a servant going where he was needed, delivering Paul's letters and keeping Christians in touch. (Eph.6:21; Col.4:7,8; II Tim.4:12; Tit.3:12) Trophimus shared in the drama of Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, (Acts 21:29) and was later left sick at Miletus. (II Tim.4:20)

Luke rejoined Paul at Philippi after four years leading the young church there. Together they returned to Troas where they had first met. (20:5,6) A new phase in Luke's training was about to begin. Teaching from Paul would make much more sense than before because of all he had learned in practical service in the years between.

Paul's way of encouraging was not flattery and a pat on the back, but to fit in all the teaching he could. Hence in Troas with only one opportunity to talk to the Christians he continued beyond midnight. In a modern European church they would have all gone home to watch TV hours before. He was willing to teach and they were hungry to learn. (20:7) Here and in I Cor.16:2 are the only two hints in the New Testament that Sunday was becoming a special day for Christians to meet. For the most part they met every day on which they had opportunity, such was their desire to grow. Eutychus provides us with a warning about the dangers of sitting on a window sill during a long sermon. His restoration to life was a sovereign act of God perhaps designed to leave a memory of

joy and triumph rather than tragedy for Paul's ministry among them.  
(20:7-12)

Luke gives us precise detail of Paul and his friends' movements as they came down the eastern Aegean Sea between the mainland and the islands. Paul was driven by an inner sense of urgency to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost. (20:13-16) On the one hand he was determined not to be sidetracked but on the other hand he always had time for a worthwhile opportunity such as a talk with the elders of the Ephesian church.  
(20:17)

Paul gives us a fascinating glimpse behind the scenes in his own ministry as well as some very useful guidelines for elders. He was always totally involved in time and emotion, and had the courage to teach everything that would be helpful even if it would be unpopular. (20:18-21) He kept a balance between public meetings and house groups; he was concerned about all races and refused to deviate from his message.

Paul dropped into his speech another helpful glimpse of how God had slowly unfolded His plan for him. He knew something but not everything of what would happen in Jerusalem. He was prepared in Christ to face tough times because he was keen to complete the whole plan God had for him. He also knew this would be his last time with these people so he wanted to be sure to say everything that was important while he had opportunity. (20:22-27)

He gave a final warning to leaders about their care of others. He compared them to shepherds who would have to defend the sheep against wolves who will be disguised as sheep. (Matt.7:15) False teachers usually start off as professing Christians which makes them harder to recognise. (20:28-30)

Paul returned to his own experience and example to explain to leaders how to guard their flocks. He emphasised again the 24 hour a day, long term, deeply feeling relationship he enjoyed with the same flock of which they had been some of the sheep. 'Admonish' means 'put into the mind' and describes the teaching aspect of counselling. They had not been guarded by his advice and opinion but by the word of God, built into their thinking, which kept them aware of how good God had been to them in Christ. (20:31,32)

He was acutely aware of the temptation that money is to the shepherd. He had long ago determined that it was so much healthier to work for his own support than to live off the flock and give them the impression that the grace of God had to be paid for. (20:33-35; I Cor.4:11,12; 9:14-18; II Cor.11:7; 12:13; I Thess.2:9; 4:11; II Thess.3:8)

While the rewards of ministry should not be financial, there is a tremendous bonus of love returned if we invest our lives in the lives of others.

Chapter 21 describes the journey to Jerusalem and prison.

21:1-14 Q.1 Paul's journey to Jerusalem brought him to two groups in Tyre and Caesarea. What insight did they both have into his fate in

Jerusalem? Was he wrong not to listen to their advice? Does God tell us His will for someone else so that we can tell them what to do?

21:1-6 Q.2 If God did not tell the Tyre Christians about the trouble facing Paul to allow them to talk him out of going to Jerusalem, for what other reason might He have told them? How would the memory of verse 5 have helped Paul in the years of imprisonment ahead?

21:7-9 Q.3 What does this section tell us about the life of Philip after he left the Ethiopian in Acts 8? What can we assume from verses 8 and 9 about the quality of his family life and the role of women in the early church?

21:10-16 Q.4 When God gives us a glimpse of someone else's destiny how can we use or abuse that knowledge? What important principles about suffering in the will of God does Paul teach us on this occasion? Why do some of the Caesarea Christians travel with Paul? How is this story similar to Acts 11:27-30?

21:17-26 Q.5 Over ten years had past since Paul's last visit to Jerusalem. (Acts 15) What changes had occurred in the Christian church since that time? What effect had the gospel had in Jerusalem? Was the church there in a healthy condition?

21:17-26 Q.6 How did Paul and the Jerusalem elders seek to reconcile the very different ministries they had had in the intervening years since they last met? What can we learn from this story about the effect of having different backgrounds and ministries on our oneness in Christ, and about how to handle those differences?

21:23-26 Q.7 What was the purpose of the four men making a vow, purifying themselves and shaving their heads? Was this consistent with their Christian lives as Jews? Was it a good idea for Paul to join them? Wasn't he compromising his stand over grace and the law of Moses? (Acts 15; I Cor.9:19-23) What comparable situation may we find ourselves in today? Why were Gentile Christians to be treated differently from Jewish ones?

21:27-36 Q.8 What does this incident teach us about (1) the methods of those who oppose the gospel, and (2) the reason God tells us to be subject to all governing authorities, (Rom.13:1) even if they are ungodly?

21:37-40 Q.9 Tarsus was a city whose citizens were automatically privileged Roman citizens. Why did Paul use his privileged position so often? (16:37; 22:25) Should we do the same if we have opportunity? Why did Paul offer a defence? Should we not just keep quiet and put up with criticism and persecution? (Isa.53:7; I Pet.3:15)