

Derek French:

One of the great delights of belonging to God's people is to be in the company of fellow believers. Indeed, such meetings are essential as we seek to encourage one another in the things of God. Our faith in Christ is strengthened and challenged, our love and desire to do good works is stimulated, and our hope of heaven and being with Christ is nurtured.

While these benefits are supremely enjoyed in the local church where we belong, fellowship is wider than that, as we shall see in today's programme. We're in Acts 21, verses 1-17 which recalled the journey Paul took after meeting with the Ephesian elders at Miletus, ending up in Jerusalem.

Phillippa Chrispin will read these verses for us and then Gerard Chrispin will guide us through their teaching.

Phillippa Chrispin:

*'Now it came to pass, that when we had departed from them and set sail, running a straight course we came to Cos, the following day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. And finding a ship sailing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. When we had sighted Cyprus, we passed it on the left, sailed to Syria, and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload her cargo. And finding disciples, we stayed there seven days. They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem. When we had come to the end of those days, we departed and went on our way; and they all accompanied us, with wives and children, till we were out of the city. And we knelt down on the shore and prayed. When we had taken our leave of one another, we boarded the ship, and they returned home.'*

*'And when we had finished our voyage from Tyre, we came to Ptolemais, greeted the brethren, and stayed with them one day. On the next day we who were Paul's companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied. And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"*

*'Now when we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, "The will of the Lord be done."*

*'And after those days we packed and went up to Jerusalem. Also some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us and brought with them a certain Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we were to lodge.'*

*'And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly.'*

Gerard Chrispin:

Paul and his accompanying team leave their Ephesian brothers in Christ. They are soon on the move again. They sail a straight course to the Greek island of Cos, then the day after to Patara on the mainland of Asia Minor, bypassing the larger Greek island of Rhodes on the right hand side.

At Patara they find a ship sailing east to Phoenicia where those escaping the initial persecution of the early church had fled and preached the gospel. They passed to the south of Cyprus before landing at the port of Tyre, where the ship's cargo is to be unloaded.

Paul demonstrates an important principle and practice which he follows in his life of discipleship and now applies with his companions at Tyre. Paul's principle is to encourage himself and other Christians, wherever he goes, by having fellowship together. His resultant practice is to look for and visit fellow believers when away from home. At home or away, he never willingly misses fellowship meetings with fellow believers, whether on the Lord's day or during the week. That is why, during the seven day stay at Tyre, he and his companions find and share fellowship with the Lord's disciples there.

When they meet, the Tyre Christians are concerned to warn Paul not to go to Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit reveals to them the dangers awaiting Paul. Out of loving concern for Paul they try to dissuade him from going there. Paul's travelling companions and friends at nearby Ptolemais will soon also try to dissuade him until they surrender to God's will for him.

Paul already has said that the Holy Spirit has revealed to him there will be trouble ahead. Despite that he will resolutely follow God's leading to go to testify to the gospel, whatever the cost. How that challenges

Christians to be bold for Christ in our age and environment. Then as now, relatively few follow or care for Jesus. By most, he is still despised and rejected, a Man of Sorrows. This precious time with the Tyre believers is over for Paul and his companions. They will soon part company, but not before the local Christians take their wives and children with them until they reach the city boundary, reminiscent of the Ephesian elders, they kneel down there on the shore and pray together. They say their farewells. The local Christians return home while Paul and his travelling missionary team board the ship. Travel again beckons after another blessed time of fellowship.

The voyage from Tyre to Ptolemais is 25 miles to the south. Having left the ship, the travelling evangelists spend a day there with their brothers in Christ, readily profiting from further fellowship. The day after, they continue south to Caesarea and stay there at Philip's house for many days.

Philip is one of the original seven deacons appointed at the request of the apostles in Jerusalem. He recently led Candace's Ethiopian treasurer, a eunuch, to Christ. He has four virgin daughters who prophesied. Agabus, a recognised Judean prophet, comes to them. Using Paul's belt he acts out his prophecy, confirming that the Jews will bind Paul in Jerusalem and deliver him to Gentiles. We will see soon how this is fulfilled through the religious leaders in Jerusalem and through the Roman occupying power.

The hardest kind of pressure to resist, that coming from people who care for us and seek our good, is now put on Paul. His travelling friends and the Christians in Caesarea unite to plead with him passionately with tears not to go up to Jerusalem. Paul is not an iron man without emotions, he feels his heart is being broken by the weeping of so many keen followers of Christ who believe he should not allow himself to be taken by the Jews and passed over to the Romans.

But spiritual logic dominates his very soft and loving heart. He asks, 'What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? This apostle to the Gentiles has work to do for the Lord in Rome.' God will soon reconfirm that this is so. The former arch enemy of the church now declares himself willing not only to be bound but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. After all, he knows that he can say truthfully and confidently, 'For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.' He could never be willing to die for Christ if he did not first live flat out for him.

His loving Christian friends accept God's will for him. They cannot persuade this amazing apostle otherwise. They do what we all should do when we do not get our own way, either in our own lives or in the lives of others. They commit everything to their sovereign Lord, saying, 'The will of the Lord be done.' That is another lesson we need to learn.

We all naturally shrink from persecution and death. But if we know Jesus we have nothing to fear 'if the worst comes to the worst.' Like Paul, we too can know that, 'For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.' Whether we fear opposition, imprisonment, cruelty or death itself, we can have the same confidence that bolstered John and Betty Stam as missionaries in China. They asked effectively, what need we fear? Betty Stam's poem, written years before they were martyred together on a hillside by Japanese forces invading China, puts it clearly, beautifully, movingly and challengingly.

'Afraid of What?  
To feel the spirit's glad release?  
To pass from pain to perfect peace,  
The strife and strain of life to cease?  
Afraid – of that?

Afraid of What?  
Afraid to see the Saviour's face,  
To hear His welcome, and to trace  
The glory gleam from wounds of grace?  
Afraid – of that?

Afraid of What?  
A flash, a crash, a pierced heart;  
Darkness, light, O heaven's art!  
A wound of His a counterpart!  
Afraid – of that?

Afraid of What?  
To do by death what life could not –  
Baptise with blood a stony plot,  
Till souls shall blossom from the spot?  
Afraid – of that?

The travelling team still includes Luke, the writer of Acts, as a first hand witness. The word ‘we’ shows that again as Luke writes, ‘We packed and went up to Jerusalem.’ Disciples from Caesarea, along with ‘an early disciple’ from Cyprus called Mnason, travel with them. Fellowship and travel feature again.

A warm welcome is given to them at Jerusalem. Unsurprisingly, they are received ‘gladly’ by their Christian brothers there. ‘They’ includes all the people in Paul’s party, not just Paul. What a privilege it is to be in God’s born again family world-wide. Truly, with Christ the Son as their Saviour, God the Father as their Father, the Holy Spirit as their divine Comforter, Heaven as their home, and reaching a lost world with the gospel as their passion, they have so much in common with all others who truly have called on Jesus to save them.

For Paul, this last visit to Jerusalem will prove to be the springboard to the rest of his life and service, with all its dangers, blessings and adventures. We will soon see all that God has prepared for him and through him.