

Sailing Away to Jerusalem

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 November 2023

Preacher: Keith Birchley

[0:00] Let's pray. Our gracious and ever-living Heavenly Father, please watch over us now. And please, dear Master, would you grant us that illumination of the Holy Spirit by which we can only understand these things written in Holy Scripture.

We thank you for the wonderful reading we've just heard and we pray that this offering of my words might be a lived-out Amen to what we've just read. For Christ's sake, come in.

Sailing away to Jerusalem. Nonsensical and serious. I begin today with a not-so-solemn confession.

It's a confession of idolatry and the object of my fascination is a sailing boat. It's called the Hobie Tandem Island Trimoran. There's one of the men responsible for it.

I hasten to add that in this I've been led into sin by my brothers, Ian Gentle and one Terry Lester. In the spirit of all pretend confessions, I hasten to blame others.

[1:09] The good news is that in preparing for this sermon today, I've been delighted to find in Holy Scripture a biblical precedent for my idol. Let me show you.

Acts chapter 20 verse 3. There in Greece, Paul spent three months and when a plot was made by the Jews, he was about to set sail for Syria. He decided to return through Macedonia.

Acts 20 verse 6. We sailed away from Philippi after the days of unleavened bread. Acts 20 verses 13 to 16. Going ahead to the ship, we set sail for Assos.

Now it doesn't actually say the Hobie Cat, but by the spirit I'd like to assume that it's in there. We met him at Assos. We took him on board and went to Mytiline and sailing from there we came the following day opposite Chios.

The next day we touched at Samos and the day after that we went to Miletus. For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he might not have to spend time in Asia.

[2:12] Now my confession also doubles as an object lesson in how not to use the Bible and my wife and I have spent nine years in PNG preaching against what I've just done.

But hey, nothing wrong with a bit of proof texting in a good cause and that is my retirement. An activity that the Bible mentions so frequently that is sailing and that the Apostle himself engaged in can't be all bad.

Now enough silliness just for now. Today's passage seriously is about three things. The Apostle pulls long and eventful sea voyage to Jerusalem.

Secondly, it's punctuated by stops along the way with various Christian groups for rest and refreshment. Thirdly, it all takes place under the direction and constraint of the Holy Spirit.

Three things in the text today. Paul's sailing away to Jerusalem, punctuated by stops with Christian groups for rest and refreshment.

[3:20] And thirdly, it all taking place under the direction and constraint of the Holy Spirit. Of those three elements, the one least attended to usually is often the second.

That is the nourishing safe havens of Christian fellowship that sustain Paul along the way. The most poignant of these so far is the farewell to the Ephesian elders that our pastor Roy left us with last week and left us all, I think, close to tears.

Acts chapter 20, verses 36 to 38. There it is. And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of all.

They embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he'd spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship.

So now we come to the first section within this passage. That is the journey, the voyage from Miletus to Tyre, verses 1 to 6.

[4 : 25] So let's take the first four verses. And when we had parted from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Coz, and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patra.

And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. Then when we'd come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left, we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload its cargo.

We notice that Paul's band is both pragmatic and intentional in the matter of Christian fellowship. They seek out the disciples, we're told. They end up staying with them for seven days, while the boat is unloading and presumably reloading.

Fellowship happens, but it doesn't just happen. A virtue is made of the necessity of having to spend some time ashore. They take advantage of the opportunity that circumstances present.

And so should we creatively compromise the schedule. Verse 4b. Having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days, and through the Spirit, they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.

[5 : 41] This verse is a beauty. It can be both overread and under thought. Some have taken it at face value and in isolation that the Holy Spirit actually didn't want Paul to go to Jerusalem.

But this would set up an impossible conflict with what the Holy Spirit sees in two fuller statements in the immediate context. We'll come to verse 11 in a moment. But firstly, back in chapter 20, verses 22 to 23, we've already read, and now behold, I'm going to Jerusalem constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

We notice that the Holy Spirit hasn't said, don't go, Paul. The Spirit has said, this is what will happen if you do go. Hence, this troublesome verse, 21 verse 4, is less troublesome than if it first appears. It must have the sense of a revelation made by the Holy Spirit as a result of which they are telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. It's more about the inference they were drawing from what the Holy Spirit himself was actually saying.

In verses 5 to 6, we meet fellowship, such sweet sorrow. 5 and 6. When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city.

[7 : 19] And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home. What an occasion it must have been to have had private daily tutoring from the greatest theological mind of the New Testament age.

A man of encyclopedic knowledge, fiery zeal, and warm pastoral heart. How those kids would later tell their own grandchildren of our week with the Apostle Paul.

So they all turn up to farewell him with their sisters and their cousins and their aunts, as Gilbert and Sullivan would say. Or like in the Beverly Hillbillies, with Granny in her rocking chair on the top of the truck.

They're all there, notice it? They all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. Parting is such sweet sorrow, but for us as readers of this book, it's not just sweet sorrow, it's sweet and ominous sorrow.

Because we've already had a scene just like this at the end of Roy's sermon last week. Chapter 20, verse 36. And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all.

[8 : 40] A pattern is emerging. This is not just a farewell to Paul. This is the end of an era. But for what that means, we have to read on.

So, second section. The voyage from Tyre to Jerusalem. Verses 7 to 16. Verse 7. Once we attend these little fellowship insertions, or house parties, how prominent they become.

The order of importance starts being reversed, at least in my perception. And as I've reflected on this text, something has emerged that I just didn't see to begin with. The order of importance is changed.

From fellowship times being like islands in the voyage, we start to see these islands as more prominent than the oceans of distance between them. A different paradigm or pattern starts to emerge from the scripture.

From voyage, bit of fellowship, voyage, bit of fellowship, it's increasingly looking like voyage, fellowship. Voyage, fellowship.

[10 : 04] Perhaps we've been misreading this. I think I was. It's worth pondering. Are these merely the means to the end of getting to Jerusalem? Or is fellowship on the way itself part of the end that

the Lord has in mind?

We come then to verse 8 and Philip, a blast from the past. Philip, verses 8 and 9. On the next day, we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the Evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him.

He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied. Well, that's an interesting insertion, if ever there was one. Philip was one of the seven, which seven? Not the rugby sevens.

He's one of the seven who was set aside to wait on tables when a dispute arose concerning the equal distribution of food in the early church, way back in Acts chapter 6.

He, Stephen, and five others were appointed to lessen the load on the apostles so they could be freed up for prayer and the ministry of the word. But a delightful, and no doubt, spirit-engineered reversal takes place.

[11:14] Philip, we're told in chapter 6, was set aside specifically not to do word of God and prayer. Mate, put away the chairs, make sure the morning tea happens.

But within the blink of an eye, he's preaching and teaching and evangelising, which is a gentle reminder to contemporary church not to develop a doctrine of gifts that is set in cement, as though the gift that my old mate Pete Young had 20 years ago is his like a millstone around the neck. No, the dynamic workings of the Holy Spirit are just that. Dynamic. So Philip, who was brought in to wait on tables, is off evangelising his mouth off.

First up the road in Samaria and then in the famous incident converting the Ethiopian eunuch, which story Luke gives us at great length. Last seen, Philip had been whisked away by the Spirit and had turned up in Caesarea, in which we now find him.

In which place we find him now settled down and raising a family. I love this bit. A family of two very, four very talkative daughters. See it in verse 9? He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

[12:33] Now perhaps I am an old male chauvinist but I can't wonder whether these girls weren't unmarried. He hadn't found hubbies for them because they talk so much, because they're prophetesses. But I didn't really see that and please cut it from the recording.

Now why major so much on this minor detail of Philip in his situation? Why this pointed recollection, especially coming after heart-rending, tear-flowing pre-meetings on the beach?

Why is it a big deal that Philip was one of the seven? The answer it must be, I think, is that Luke is building a case and here he's showing that he has done his due diligence.

For in the introduction to the two-volume work, Luke and Acts, he had said this, Luke chapter 1, the opening paragraph, inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished amongst us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you've been taught.

Why the pointed recollection about Philip? Because that recollection licences Philip's recollections about the early Christian movement, which is so important to the case that Luke is making.

[14:09] verses 10 and 11, the prophet Agabus. While we were staying for many 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, thus says the Holy Spirit, this is how the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him up into the hands of the Gentiles.

Agabus, you guessed it, is another blast from a more recent past. Don't you love his name? I think it sounds like a dog in a bad mood. Agabus, Agabus, Agabus.

He was the prophet who back in chapter 11 had foretold the coming of a great famine. Like with Philip, the evangelist, here is another instance of the Luke 1 dynamic at work.

Luke is cross-referencing his sources in order to instill confidence in their authority as witnesses. This is the third and the most dramatic of the Holy Spirit references in this section.

In company with his exotic Old Testament forebears, Agabus acts out vividly and unforgivably, unforgettably, the fate of the wearer of that belt.

[15:32] But again, we notice that the Holy Spirit doesn't say don't go to Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit says this will happen if you do. Something is emerging here that takes us to the heart of today's message.

And I'm going to call it the PPN. Now, PPN, now for some people here, the first thing I thought of was Postman Pat's necktie. But I think here, more appropriately, PPN refers to Paul's passion

narrative.

Paul's passion narrative. If we stand back from the details for a second, we see a pattern that any reader of the Gospels will know. Jesus, before Paul, had a voyage or journey to Jerusalem. Jesus, before Paul, had bands of well-wishers who tried to prevent his going there. Jesus, before Paul, was empowered by the Spirit to take on the terrible task that the Father had for him to accomplish in Jerusalem.

Paul's sailing away to Jerusalem is a second passion narrative. Not in some strange Paul is the saviour of the world sense.

[16:50] There's only one saviour and one sacrificial death upon the cross. But in an imitative sense, this is another passion narrative. Like master, like servant, Paul's life and ministry career is so shaped by divine providence as to recall the life and ministry of the Lord and risen saviour whom he serves.

Of course, we now say, the furthest servant of the Lord has to go the way of the servant of the Lord. PPN is Paul's passion narrative.

Change of gear again, verses 12 to 14, another fellowship house party. This time one of heartbreak and well-meaning discouragement.

12 to 14, when we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. Do you notice how wonderfully realistic and honest Luke is? He includes himself in the misapprehension. See it there in verse 12? When we heard this, Luke is including those who mistakenly urged Paul not to go. Generous brother.

[18:06] When we heard this, we and the people there urged 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 imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.

And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, let the will of the Lord be done. Paul, let it be said, is no cold-hearted stoic.

He is a human being of flesh and blood as his saviour was. He feels deeply the angst of his situation but he feels more deeply the obligation of the divine call upon his life.

Like Jesus, he must go to Jerusalem no matter what happens. What happens there is up to God. Hence, let the will of the Lord be done.

What is up to Paul is reporting for duty. And if that means Jerusalem, then so be it. Now, I've got there in the outline something about comments on prophecy for today.

[19:13] But as I reflected this morning, I really don't want to be talking about prophecy today because that would lose the focus and the dramatic drive of the narrative. If you want to bore me with questions about prophecy over morning tea, please go and talk to Ian Gentle or somebody else.

It's not really what this passage is about. 15 to 16. After these days, we got ready and went up to Jerusalem and some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Nason of Cyprus, an early disciple with whom we should lodge.

Fellowship here is company and a place to stay. How nice it is to have company. I've spent so much of this year sitting there on my own, either recuperating from a hospital visit or getting ready for the next one.

And it's so great when my dear brother Roy just calls around and has a cup of tea with it. It's great to have some company. It normalises us. The restorative and assuring presence of others in Paul's trial.

Some of the disciples from Caesarea, see that, make the journey with him, carrying his bags and bearing his burden. It's too awful a journey to send someone off on their own, unlike our Lord, who had had to battle in Gethsemane alone.

[20:37] These disciples travel with him. In Manassan of Cyprus, God gives Paul a friendly host, and at the same time he gives Luke and us a further early witness, in that Manassan was quite an early disciple.

Verse 16. And so at last, we come to Jerusalem, third section, verses 17 to 26. Again, another fellowship house party, this time a leader's house party.

17 to 20. When he'd come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day, Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.

After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God. Notice that they receive him gladly. It's an important note when future tensions within Jewish Christians are kept in mind. Paul was received gladly, we're told. He was hardly persona non grata with James and the other Jewish Christian leaders.

[21 : 54] We have the sense of the church ministry team with the leaders, sitting around with a coffee at the Monday staff meeting at the Davidson's, eagerly sorting through the response cards from the evangelistic rally over the weekend.

What wonderful things God has done in such and such a life. Isn't it terrific that so-and-so turned up, this guy has moved from an utter pagan, he's now believing that God is real, though he hasn't yet come to Christology.

We have this sense of the ministry team rejoicing in the fruits of the ministry. one by one, they savour the delights of God's amazing doings amongst the Gentiles.

The vibe of all these verses is all good news until a gathering storm in verse 20b.

When they heard it, they glorified God and they said to him, you see brother how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law and they've been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs.

[23 : 10] What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. The gathering storm is there because Paul has been misrepresented.

People have either been twisting truths about him or actively inventing tales about him.

Misinformation or disinformation. Paul had been teaching with the imprimatur of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 that it was okay for Gentile believers to shoulder a minimal load of the Mosaic law, in addition to their faith in Christ.

He had not taught Jewish believers to completely repudiate Moses. As so often in conflicts, we tend to hear what we are predisposed to hear.

We hear what we are most fearful and secretly desiring to hear. Human beings' intentions and conflict is like a keg of gunpowder ready to explode.

Paul's argument for retiring Moses in some respects for Gentiles has been turned into Paul actively repudiating Moses for Jewish people.

[24 : 29] Sorry times. We hear what we most fear to hear and secretly what we most want to hear. Sorry us, God have mercy on us.

And so in 23 to 26 the boys come up with a brilliant strategy. 23 to 26 Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow. Take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they've been told about you but that you yourself also live in observance of the law.

But as for the Gentiles who have believed we send a letter without judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what has been strangled and from sexual immorality.

Then Paul took them in and the next day he purified himself along with them went into the temple giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.

[25 : 40] So the big boys in Jerusalem the leaders think to show their strategic brilliance. In essence the plan is this let me break it down fourfold.

Firstly people gunning for Paul will be looking for him. Secondly therefore let's do something big and obvious in the public eye. The TV cameras will be out.

Thirdly act out in a way that recalls the prophet Acpas just how Jewish Paul really is. Fourthly pause the camera over the ancient Nazarite vow from Numbers chapter 6.

In other words show everybody just how relentlessly Jewish Paul is. Problem solved. Strategy successful.

Aren't we clever? to craft and caress reality into a shape that will work for us in defending Paul's orthodoxy which is a noble goal.

[26 : 47] Yet what happens? The whole thing blows up in their faces. The will of the Lord is done despite them. All that happens is there's a tremendous riot.

Paul's public mea culpa becomes the launch pad for the Jews next attack on him. If only some of the boys in Jerusalem had remembered the words of Proverbs 14.

12. There is a way which seems right to a man but its end is the way of death. There is a way which seems right, strategic, expedient, clever, fought through rational, considered.

There is a way which seems right to a man but its end is the way of death or its end is the way to death. And if they had forgotten Proverbs 14.

12, how about an actual incident in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ? John 7 verses 3 to 5. Now the feast of booths was at hand.

[27 : 56] So Jesus' brother said to him, leave here, go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly.

If you do these things, show yourself to the world. For not even his brothers believed in him. But no one in the Jerusalem leadership thought to say, guys, we've been here before.

We know this scenario. Let me reflect back to when I was a young pastor four or five years ago.

When I was a young pastor, my generation were reading books on strategy. We had a strategy for youth ministry, building the best youth ministry in the cosmos. We had a strategy for teenagers and the romantic relationships.

There were books on the strategy for building home groups and there were books on the strategy for planning churches. Marian and I actually listened to a whole course of tapes on planting churches before we helped Mike and Marian Bennett to plant this church, which meant a year listening to strategic tapes.

[29 : 10] I wish we'd just gone out for coffee. The problem with strategy, it's all very well to have strategy and rational arguments as long as you don't believe them, as long as you toy with them, as long as you play with them and think, yeah, I like that, I don't like that.

The problem is we are so physical and limited, we tend to believe them and think that they have become something like a fifth gospel. Let me suggest that strategy and cleverness and human planning, I know I'm getting old and you might say he's just getting tired, but no, I really think this, strategy is fine as long as Christians wouldn't believe it because ministry before the living God is not a problem to be solved, God is a person to be worshipped, even by means that might appear completely irrational, like in our Old Testament reading today, where the young King David, anointed before the Lord, does exactly not what others were telling him to do.

It's like those cigarette acts on the box, you know, you pick up your box of Peter Stuyvesant, whatever it is you smoke or used to smoke, you pick up your box now and it's got a picture of dismembered lungs and loudly it says, smoking will kill you, so there's cigarettes, smoking will kill you, pick up your camel or whatever it is, my dad used to smoke Peter Stuyvesant, smoking will kill you, if only in the church today we could get all these sociological books on strategy and put at the bottom of Proverbs 14 12, there is a way which seems right to a man and its end is the way of death.

Playing the world's games may show us how little we truly believe, playing with the world's tools and assumptions shoots ourselves in the feet, tools are useful, good tools reflect the wisdom of God and creation, this is not to denigrate sociology, my brother Philip Jensen is much harder on this than I am, it's not to denigrate things like sociology or what God has given us by his common grace and wisdom, such things are to be used gratefully and wholeheartedly but God and his work are not problems we can solve off our own bat, God is a person to be approached in worship, in the spirit of faith seeking understanding, not like a young man with a toolbox of tools which he is tempted to trust more than the one who has given them.

And yet, in the wisdom of God, and this is why we love and worship him so much, in the wisdom of God, he uses their primary school planning to achieve his ultimate purpose, of getting Paul and the gospel to Rome.

[32 : 18] It's precisely on the anvil of Paul's further rejection that the gospel then goes all the way to the heart of the empire. In the same way that salvation came to this world through the humiliation of Jesus, so the gospel of salvation will come to the heart of the empire through the humiliation of his servant, Paul.

as the great Saint Augustine said it in the fourth century, God reigns even in the confusions of men. And I like to think God reigns most of all in the confusions of men.

So it's time to tie this up and reflect some more on applications for us. For us, the PPN, the PPN is the Paul's Passion Narrative.

But there is a link between Paul's Passion Narrative and the MPN, which is the Minister's Passion Narrative. Because so many of the aspects and the patterns that we've seen here in the life of the Apostle Paul are there in the life of every true minister of the Gospel, male or female, whatever the shape of the ministry.

The Minister's Passion Narrative is being worked out on a way that imitates the Paul's Passion Narrative. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11, imitate me as I imitate Christ.

[33 : 50] And it doesn't stop with the Minister's Passion Narrative. It then goes on to the PPN, I can't remember what PPN is. I wrote this this morning and I don't know what it stands for. But I do know what DPN stands for and that is the Disciples' Passion Narrative.

The MPN, I forgot, MPN must be the Missionary's Passion Narrative. In that our experience in cross-cultural mission is very close to the Apostle Paul's. The PPN is Roy, that's the Pastor's Passion Narrative.

And then there's the Disciples' Passion Narrative. That all these different groups within the respite of Christian fellowship, all evidence the same great sweeping arc of God's way.

What is God's way? It's through suffering and humiliation to glory. It's through suffering and humiliation to glory. Jesus has entered into his glory through suffering.

the Apostle Paul, in a remarkable way, duplicated that arc. In a remarkable way modern missionaries do. In a remarkable way modern pastors do.

[35 : 01] It's always entering into glory then through humiliation and rejection now. And for the people of God who provide respite for those in the front line, it's the same again.

All those who want to live godly lives, will be persecuted, says this same apostle. And so our job as a church is to be one of these temporary rest spots along the way, supporting all those involved in this great voyage to Jerusalem and ourselves exemplifying many of the same qualities here at SLBC.

And so I'd like to conclude with some quotes from the German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was hung by the Nazis three weeks before the end of the Second World War, a personal vendetta from Adolf Hitler because he hated the family.

Bonhoeffer's family was Prussian aristocracy, wonderful Christian gentleman. And he wrote this book called Life Together. And I was reflecting on it again and I thought it might have some things to help us in our current travails and difficulties.

So the first bit reads like this. God did not make this person as I would have made him. He did not give him to me as a brother for me to dominate and control.

[36 : 29] But in order that I might find above him the creator. Now the other person in the freedom with which he was created becomes the occasion of joy. whereas before he was only a nuisance and an affliction.

God does not will that I should fashion the other person according to the image that seems good to me. That is in my own image. Rather in his very freedom from me God has made this person in his image.

I can never know beforehand how God's image should appear in others. That image always manifests a completely new and unique form that comes solely from God's free and sovereign creation.

To me the sight might seem strange even ungodly but God creates every man in the likeness of his son the crucified one.

After all even that image certainly looked strange and ungodly to me before I grasped it. So dear friends, brothers and sisters, let's try to be gentle and ointment on each other's wounds at this stage in the life and the voyage of our church.

[37 : 48] We're getting to glory but there are hard times along the way. But try to dare to believe in the bowels of Christ that I might be wrong.

The human heart's deceitful of all things and desperately wicked. Try to hang on to the truth that that's probably more true of me than of anybody in this room.

Our Father in heaven, thank you for this word this morning. Thank you for the wonderful way you enabled Luke to put all this stuff together under the guidance of your spirit. We ask now, Lord, that you would pour the ointment of your Holy Spirit upon us, all our hearts and minds, enable us to long for glory and face the travails along the way.

For Jesus sake, our Saviour. Amen.