

PAUL ... who could be as stubborn as a mule
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(Acts 21: 4-13)

Paul was one of the greatest of all Christians. He was a man of steel, and never turned back from his duty. Possessed of unending courage, he took the Gospel to all parts of the known world ; and when many contemporaries failed, this brave missionary continued until the end of his earthly journey. Yet, as is often the case with men of his caliber, his strength was his weakness. His will power was a snare. He mistook bravery for guidance.

An Intense Desire

Paul loved his nation, and his greatest ambition was to win fellow Jews for Christ. When God called him to be the apostle to the Gentiles, the man of Tarsus could not hide his disappointment. He honestly believed he was the man to win the Jews, and even argued with God over the matter.

" And it came to pass, that, when I was come again to Jerusalem, even while I prayed in the temple, I was in a trance ; And saw him saying unto me, Make haste, and get thee quickly out of Jerusalem: for they will not receive thy testimony concerning me. And I said, Lord, they know that I imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed on thee. . . . And he said unto me, Depart: for I will send you far hence to the Gentiles " (Acts 22: 17-21). Paul obeyed his Lord ; but the synagogues always attracted him. At every opportunity he entered these buildings, to expound the word of life ; and it is very problematical whether he was justified in doing this. At one time he confessed he could wish himself a castaway if only his people might be saved. This intense desire to reach Israel eventually led Paul into much trouble.

An Inspired Discernment

" . . . and we landed at Tyre: for there the ship was to unlade her burden. And finding disciples, we tarried there seven days: who said to Paul through the Spirit, that he should not go up to Jerusalem. And when we had accomplished those days, we departed and went our way." This was disobedience. Paul interpreted the message as having arisen from brotherly sentiment and not from the mind of God.

". . . And we came unto Caesarea: and we entered into the house of Philip the evangelist. . . . And the same man had four daughters which did prophesy. And as we tarried there many days, there came down from Judaea a certain prophet named Agabus. . . . He took Paul's girdle, and bound his own hands and feet, and said, Thus saith the Holy Ghost, So shall the Jews of Jerusalem bind the man that owneth this girdle." This was God's second warning to Paul. Alas, the apostle had made up his mind to go to Jerusalem. He was as stubborn as a mule!

An Insistent Demand

Luke records, " And when we heard these things, both we, and they of that place, besought him not to go up to Jerusalem." Philip the evangelist ; his four prophesying daughters ; Doctor Luke, the beloved physician ; and all the brethren, united to ask Paul to obey the commands of the Holy Spirit. Paul answered, " What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart? for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased." Paul,

PAUL . . . who could be as stubborn as a mule these were very brave words, and your sentiments were of the highest order ; but to die for Christ is all wrong when God desires you to live and preach the Gospel. The glory of a martyr's death cannot take the place of a lifetime of service. Paul, you were very unwise ; but we admire your zeal nevertheless. Oh, that such devotion could be found in the hearts of all the people of God! Yet, that does not alter the fact that you were disobedient, and lost two years of valuable opportunities.

An Inexcusable Disobedience

" And after those days we took up our carriages, and went up to Jerusalem." Within a short time Paul was taken by the authorities and imprisoned, and for the agonizing period of two years he could only think of the vast opportunities which had been lost. Instead of sitting on a prison bench, he could have been telling the glorious Gospel message in the market places of Asia. We know that God over-ruled in these matters ; but the truth remains that Paul's stubbornness robbed him of many chances to spread further the kingdom of Christ. And all this goes to prove that God's way is better than ours. Sometimes we need more courage to deny self than we need to go to prison, and even Paul would agree that it is far better to be leading souls to Christ than to languish unnecessarily in a dungeon.

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