

Fearless and Flexible

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[0 : 00] Thank you for reading so well and for your prayer. Morning for myself, good to be with you again here at Brunfield. Let me give you greetings from Greenview Evangelical Church, a few connections there, including Neil who prayed earlier on.

And also from the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, FIEC, that's my full-time kind of ministry job. So greetings from churches and that network.

And maybe I could just highlight a couple of things you could pray for, a couple of church plants. One that you'll be familiar with, I think, the Abbeymore Church Plant. Just to update you on that, that started meeting publicly on Sunday afternoons last November, officially.

It meets in the community hub, which is a primary school complex. And that seems to be going well. There's about 20 to 30 regulars, I think, going along there. And it's starting to find its feet. And this year, hopefully, will be the first full year of normality for it. The first year where it's been having public services that haven't had a kind of start, stop, and all the kind of restrictions of the last couple of years.

[1 : 06] So do pray for Kenny Rogan and the team there. Also just started a toddlers group in the community midweek. And they had a great kind of full page kind of article on it in the local newspaper.

So that's going well. But I pray that it will continue to grow and to be a real central witness in that area. That's a church plant which was quite organised with kind of lots of churches supporting it and funding it.

And a lot of work went into that. But another church plant which has started, just kind of popped up a little bit more organically, is in Forth. Forth is an ex-mining town. It's between here and Glasgow, out in the kind of Lanarkshire hinterland.

Three and a half thousand people. There's one kind of church in vacancy there, Church of Scotland. But there's nothing else by way of gospel witness. And a small group of about 12 people are meeting in a home there.

They'd like to get a public venue to reach that community. So do pray for the folks in Forth. And again, for our support for them in FIEC. So a couple of church plants just for your prayers.

[2 : 09] There's much, much else I could say. But let's get to the word of God in Acts chapter 21. Now the great template for the book of Acts, if you know the book and you've been going through it, so I'm sure you are, of course is found in chapter 1.

Jesus' instructions that the gospel is to be taken out, starting in Jerusalem, then to Judea and Samaria, and then to all nations. And the story of Acts, of course, is that story.

The gospel is first preached on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. It's then taken to the Samaritans, and finally throughout the whole Gentile, non-Jewish world. And in the previous 20 chapters up until our reading today, that is the story that is unfolding.

It initially is focused on the ministry of Peter and Philip. Then from Acts chapter 13, the focus turns to Paul and his missionary journeys. And it's the story of how the gospel took hold in Asia and then into Europe itself.

Men and women coming to faith, churches being planted, God calling people from all nations. But as we come to chapter 21, we are approaching another turning point in the book of Acts.

[3 : 27] Because chapter 21 will mark the end of Paul's great missionary journeys. The work of taking the gospel to unreached places will continue, of course, even as it does today.

But not for Paul himself. Because Acts 21 marks the moment when Paul the missionary becomes Paul the prisoner. So it's a significant moment for the gospel story, not least for Paul himself.

As we come to this turning point, let's observe two things. Two features of Paul's ministry that were at the heart of that great first century gospel advance.

Two features that might at first glance seem a bit incongruous, but actually two things that we need to hold on today. Firstly, Paul was fearless in advancing the gospel.

But secondly, Paul was also flexible in advancing the gospel. Now we'll unpack what we mean and don't mean by those headings as we go on.

[4 : 32] But let me suggest right at the start, those are two aspects of gospel ministry that are really crucial that we hold them together. Because of course there are churches and there are Christians who are fearless.

They are full on in their convictions. And we can't fault their commitment, their passion, their readiness to be out of step and to be unpopular. But in that boldness, they sometimes tip over into a kind of rigidity.

Becoming a bit strident and a little bit narrow. Increasingly alienated from the very people that they are trying to reach. On the other hand, of course, we know there are churches and Christians who are very flexible.

Always looking to accommodate others, to kind of fit in well. Desperate to be as un-off-putting as possible. But in that desire to be accessible can end up watering down some really important truths. Giving away things that the Bible tells us to hold on to. So let's get into the text. At the end of chapter 20, your last time in Acts, you remember Paul made his tearful farewell to the Ephesian elders.

[5 : 52] And if you just flick back to chapter 20, you'll see there that he tells the Ephesian elders about his desire to get back to Jerusalem. Verse 22. Notice that for Paul, this appointment in Jerusalem is something that the Holy Spirit is compelling him to do.

Now one reason he wanted to go there, we know from other parts of the Bible in Acts, was to take a gift from the non-Jewish churches to the poor churches in Judea.

That's the gift that he writes about in 2 Corinthians chapter 9. He mentions it in chapter 24 of Acts.

Another reason, of course, was to go to Jerusalem to report on his missionary work.

That's what he does there in chapter 21 and verse 19. Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

So there are some very practical reasons for Paul wanting to get to Jerusalem. But I think as we stand back, we can also understand there might be even bigger reasons why Paul was really keen to get back to Jerusalem.

[7 : 18] Because there are two big plot points in the book of Acts as you go through it. The first, of course, is the spread of the gospel geographically, moving out of Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

And the story of Acts records something of the adventure of that. But secondly, the second big plot point is the theological challenge for the gospel.

The challenge for it to move out of Judaism. The challenge for it to be more than just a Jewish sect, but to be a message for the whole world.

And the threat to that in Acts particularly comes from certain Jewish Christians who still felt very bound to Old Testament laws and rituals.

And throughout the book of Acts and in Paul's letters, we see that battle being played out, don't we? The ultra-conservative Jewish converts who insisted that Christians should embrace a Jewish way of life.

[8 : 23] Diet, circumcision, religious festivals. And against whom Paul and the apostles recognized that those things were actually fulfilled in Christ.

They were only ever intended to be signposts to the real thing, Jesus himself. That gospel salvation was about one thing and one thing only, faith in Jesus.

But that was a cause that, of course, Paul, more than anybody in the early church, took the flack for. So going back to Jerusalem, where opposition to that gospel was strongest, to the gospel that Paul had been in the lead and proclaiming, we can imagine was something that Paul would feel very, very deeply about.

Feel it was essential almost that he should go there and show face. And explain himself to make sure that the gospel of faith alone and Christ alone was defended in the very place where it was potentially most vulnerable to being undermined.

But notice that Paul is well aware of the risks involved in returning to Jerusalem. Saw that in chapter 20, didn't we? I just read the Holy Spirit warning him about hardships and prison.

[9 : 50] It's a danger and threat in chapter 21, which is confirmed in two subsequent warnings. Verse 4 of chapter 21, We sought out the disciples there and stayed with them seven days.

Through the Spirit, they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. Through the Spirit. And then further on, verse 10, there's Agabus, this prophet.

A prophet named Agabus came down from Judea, coming over to us. He took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, The Holy Spirit says, In this way, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand them over to the Gentiles.

When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go to Jerusalem. What do we make of these two things?

Because Paul then insists that he must go, whatever the consequences. Verse 13, Then Paul answered, Why are you weeping and breaking my heart?

[10 : 56] I am not ready only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, The Lord's will be done.

Some have actually argued that Paul's determination to go to Jerusalem was actually foolhardy, maybe even disobedient. After all, he seems to be getting all these Spirit-filled warnings not to go. And yet, on the other hand, of course, in chapter 20, he himself describes this need to go to Jerusalem as something that the Holy Spirit is compelling him to do. So how do we make sense of this?

Well, firstly, I think there's two observations. Firstly, the warnings are genuine. We'll see them being dramatically filled, or you'll see them being dramatically filled as you go on into Acts.

But secondly, Paul's determination to go, I think, is showing us a very vivid illustration of the fact that avoiding suffering is not a gospel priority.

[12 : 08] We can understand the concern of Paul's fellow Christians to protect, and that's very natural, isn't it, if you care about somebody. But equally, we know that being a Christian is not a call for a trouble-free life.

You see, Paul's big concern wasn't his comfort, wasn't even his personal safety. It was the advancement of the gospel. And being able to defend the gospel, and if being able to defend the gospel caused him difficulties, then as far as Paul was concerned, so be it.

And let me suggest, we need some of that fearlessness today, don't we? I need that fearlessness today. One of the most insidious, indeed devilish, attacks on the gospel is the prosperity gospel. The idea that God's blessings will equate to being rich or healthy or just having an easy, problem-free life.

So if you have hardships in life, well, that must be due to a lack of faith or perhaps even God's displeasure. It's a teaching that is not only unbiblical, but it is pastorally devastating.

[13 : 23] Somebody comes along to your Christianity course and they hear the message and they embrace it. But guess what? Six months later, their partner is still horrible.

They still get made redundant. They still get cancer and so they walk away because obviously Christianity is not true in that case or it's not true for me. I remember one person years ago who discovered that their new house had got dry rot.

And they said, but we prayed for guidance before we bought it. We must have got God's will wrong. As if God's will must be for us all to find a perfect house without any DIY problems.

Maybe it's exactly God's will for you or I to have a house for dry rot, to humble us, to stretch us, to sanctify us, to test our hearts. What is it that is most important to us in life?

The Bible is clear, isn't it, that to be a Christian is to take up a cross. That's the expectation set by Jesus himself that if you're a follower of his, you should expect to face suffering and trial.

[14 : 39] And of course, there are many places in the world tonight where if you want an easier life, the very last thing you should do is become a Christian. Increasingly for us in the UK, indeed for some time now, biblical Christianity is losing and has lost much of its old cultural respectability.

To be a Christian, that is to be a Bible-believing Christian, is increasingly to be thought of by many parts of society as just, well, a kind of despised minority. To say that Jesus Christ is the only way to God is to be narrow-minded, to live by biblical standards of holiness is to be weird.

To believe the Bible is God's word and to stand by its teachings is to be oppressive. So to believe and live out the gospel and be warned is to open yourself up to problems and difficulties, potential

loss, friends, advancement.

So like Paul, we'll need to be clear-minded and fearless for whatever comes. I'm going down to a conference in Wales start of the week.

I'm doing a seminar on the church and the state post-COVID. And one of the issues there is how do we wrestle with some of the proposals of new laws and legislation which are kind of seeming to be squeezing our Christian liberties and kind of antithetical to our faith and how can we get protection against them and how can we mitigate the worst effects of some of these proposals.

[16:15] And it's good to do that and we're so thankful for Christian organisations that are in the forefront of making those cases. But of course, there comes a point, doesn't there, when there are no longer any workarounds, when all the exemptions are exhausted and we just have to face the fact that the Bible doesn't promise us a persecution-free life.

Now, I'm saying this here, it sounds great, doesn't it? I'm not a very fearless person. I don't like confrontation. I cower away at these kind of things.

So I need to pray for that courage and bigger vision in my life as I look forward. To remind myself that what really matters is really valuable, is really lasting, is not temporary comfort, is not avoiding hardships and sufferings ahead, but the honour of Jesus Christ, the proclamation of the gospel, whatever that might entail.

And so Paul was fearless in advancing the gospel. But there's another side to this, of course, because just as he was fearless, he was not intransigent.

He did not just disregard other people's sensitivities. He was flexible. Paul's wasn't a kind of blunt, unthinking, it's my way or the highway approach.

[17:48] Paul was prepared to accommodate others to be flexible where that would remove unnecessary obstacles to the gospel or cause needless offence. Which takes us to the second part of the chapter, verse 17 onwards.

Paul arrives in Jerusalem and while James and the Jerusalem elders are delighted to hear about his work among the Gentiles there, not everybody is quite so thrilled because rumours that are circulating.

It's so real life, isn't it? Jewish Christians still wedded to the law, verse 20. We're hearing stories that Paul was undermining Judaism.

Stories that Paul was telling Jewish Christians to ditch their Jewish heritage. Verse 21. You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed and all of them are zealous for the law. they have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. Paul, what's going on?

[18:59] Are you going round telling people, Jewish Christians, to eat bacon, to play golf on a Saturday? And notice in verse 25 as you go down, it's not, the problem wasn't so much that Gentile Christians weren't complying with the law.

That seemed to kind of be accepted that Gentile Christians wouldn't wholeheartedly embrace Judaism. There were just a few restrictions there. The Acts 15 stuff isn't there about abstaining food from sacrifice to idols and from blood and from sexual immorality.

But rather that Paul was teaching people who had been Jewish, who were Jewish Christians, that they should now live like Gentiles. One writer points out, however, that although Paul wasn't preaching that, it was probably an inevitable outcome of the gospel being preached.

Because any Christian, Jewish or otherwise, would begin to question the need after time for such traditions. As their faith in Jesus deepened, so attachment to those old ways would wane.

As they would see that all of them had been fulfilled in Christ. Now, we know from Paul's letters that he was actually relatively relaxed about secondary customs.

[20:21] Sabbath keeping, Paul's pretty legalistic about that, pretty non-legalistic about that, either way. As long, and only as long, as there was no suggestion that such customs were required for salvation, salvation, or in some way essential for you to live as a holy follower of Jesus Christ.

In that sense, Paul was quite pragmatic. He would eat kosher food when he was in Jewish company. He writes to the church in Rome not to eat certain foods if that's going to cause other people offense.

He was happy for Timothy to be circumcised in order to open up gospel opportunities among that community. equally, however, he refuses to let Titus be circumcised because that was being

demanded as necessary for salvation.

And at that point, it was no longer about cultural sensitivity, but people were trying to add to the gospel itself. So back to chapter 21.

To cut a slightly complicated story short, what happens is that in order to reassure Jewish Christians in Jerusalem that he wasn't going around trashing the law, Paul agrees to take part in a Jewish purification rite with four other men.

[21 : 46] Verse 24. Probably a kind of Nazarite vow where they'd abstain for certain things for a period and then there'd be a little ceremony at the end of that time to kind of acknowledge they had completed their vow, whatever that might involve, maybe to pray for something.

Now this seems strange to us, doesn't it? It seems pretty counterintuitive to us that Paul would do something like that. Indeed, some people argue that Paul makes a genuine misstep here, that he is buckling under pressure in a way that he shouldn't have done and he takes part in something that actually was wrong.

I guess we'll never 100% know because Acts doesn't comment either way on the right or wrong of this particular incident. But it would seem strange, let me suggest, that somebody who was as fearless as Paul evidently was and continues to be throughout the rest of Acts would knowingly go against his conscience.

I rather suspect, although I can't be sure, that for Paul this was not something that he saw was compromising the gospel and that it neither added a requirement to faith in Jesus or undermined faith in Jesus.

But it was simply a way of showing respect, reassuring fellow Jewish Christians that he was not about rubbing their consciences or sensibilities. Perhaps it's an example and practice of Paul's willingness to be flexible that he talks about in 1 Corinthians chapter 9.

[23 : 28] We know the passage well, don't we? Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone to win as many as possible.

To the Jews I became like a Jew. To those under the law I became like one under the law though I am myself not under the law. So as to win those under the law, to those having the law, to those not having the law, I became like one not having the law.

Though I am not free from God's law but I am under Christ's law so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak to win the weak. I become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.

I do this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings. So if Paul was going to meet a friend at a mosque today, he would take his shoes off.

If he was invited for a celebration at a synagogue, he would wear a skull cap. If he was a missionary in India, he wouldn't eat beef. And that of course remains a challenge for us, doesn't it?

[24 : 35] The easy thought is to retreat or to create a kind of Christian subculture, to become a bit culturally detached. That's understandable because there's so much in society which is kind of threatening and feels unwholesome.

person. But our desire to be morally and spiritually different can, if we're not careful, lead to a kind of ghetto mentality. We can hang on to the cultural trappings of eras when we thought things were just a bit more Christian generally.

I became a Christian in my teens, non-Christian background, and I went to a small mission hall in Glasgow. great godly people, but it was from a bygone era, even then.

You were walking into church as it was in the 1930s. There was a sense in which people conflated the culture, the trappings of the 1930s with the blessings of the 1930s.

When we sang these type of hymns, God blessed us, so we need to hang on to these hymns because then God might bless us again. When we wore these type of clothes, the churches were full.

[25 : 52] So we need to wear those kinds of clothes and then God might fill the churches again. Of course, the two things were very incidental. God wasn't blessing the church because people were singing with an accordion or something as opposed to a guitar.

It's a great church, a great place to cut my teeth. But the danger was, looking back, that we were just in danger of creating a slight gospel plus mentality. Not just enough to be saved.

We never have denied that, of course, but you really need to adopt our social customs in order to really be acceptable. Now, of course, just being a Christian will mean that people think you're a bit

weird.

Just deal with that. Get over it. You know, having faith, talking about Jesus, going to church, it's just a bit odd today for a lot of people. But let's be as normal and open and culturally connected as we can be in all those non-essential things.

So if people are offended and put off, it will be by the gospel and not by us. Now, of course, as Paul would find out in the next part of the chapter, sometimes you just can't win.

[27 : 11] He gets accused of the very thing he was trying to knock on the head. Even that, in God's providence, became an opportunity to proclaim Jesus. Another example of how God can use plans gone wrong in surprising ways.

But in summary, as we finish and we leave Paul here in this part of Acts chapter 21, we leave Paul in his final days as a free man, let's pray that in our time we will follow people in those New Testament footsteps.

That we will be people who are fearless, ready to go, ready to suffer for the sake of making Jesus known. We won't hold back, retreat from doing the right thing just because we think it might cause us difficulties.

But in that, we'll also be people who are flexible, more interested in converts than customs. And in those ways, as in the first century, the good news of the gospel might once again fill our communities and nation.

God bless these thoughts from his words.