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Acts 21:1-26

Outward Church: When Facing Resistance

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Jamie is a Senior in college. That summer, she works at a Christian camp as a camp counselor. She leads hikes, runs workshops, and leads her cabin time small group. She even gives some of the devotionals in the large group setting. Over the course of the summer, she begins to sense, not with audible words, but deep in her soul that the Holy Spirit might be calling her into Christian ministry.

Jamie doesn't know what that means, so she talks it over with her camp director. He encourages her to continue praying, reflecting, and asking others for input. She invites a few of her fellow counselors to pray and fast with her, and discern what the Spirit might be doing. They affirm that they too have seen a love for God's people in her and that she seems to be gifted for ministry. Maybe she could work at a Christian camp, or maybe the Lord would call her to college ministry or even to serve a local church.

At the end of that summer, she goes home excited by this new potential calling on her life. She determines to spend her final year in college serving her church, exploring her gifting, and praying about where the Spirit might be leading. At first, things seem to go well in her church. The pastor and leadership are grateful for her increased volunteering and service, but when she starts to talk about a call to ministry, her family and church don't express the enthusiasm or support she received from her fellow camp counselors.

Her parents would much rather have Jamie continue her original plan and go to medical school. They were hoping for a doctor in their family. Couldn't she go to med school and do medical mission trips on the side? Jamie recognizes that that is a legitimate and good calling, but she's not sensing that's what the Holy Spirit is doing. She's especially surprised when a well-meaning church member asks her if she wants to go to seminary to marry a pastor. "No," she replies, "I'm thinking about going to seminary because I sense that may be where the Holy Spirit is leading."

It all comes to a head when her pastor preaches on male headship and male church leadership. She catches a few church members glancing her way. She felt like the pastor was preaching at her. She goes home discouraged and wondering if she misheard the Holy Spirit. Is the Holy Spirit calling her to ministry? Should she go to medical school or seminary or just marry a pastor? What should she do?

This is not my story, but I don't think this type of situation is so uncommon. We hear the Holy Spirit direct us to do something, but when we talk to other Christians, they seem less convinced, sometimes resistant, and even opposed to what we think God is calling us to do. How do you navigate something like that? We care about what our church family and other Christians think. So what should we do? Trust the Holy Spirit is speaking through our church family or you personally?

As believers, we will face resistance.

When we look at Paul's life and ministry, we see he faced a lot of resistance. Our minds immediately jump to examples of him being accused by false teachers or being beaten up by angry mobs. But he faced resistance not just from external sources but from within the church as well. He faced push-back from well-meaning Christians. I'm sure none of us can relate to that.

We're in Acts 21 now. Paul just finished passing the ministry baton to the Ephesian Elders at Miletus and is now sailing for Jerusalem. I'm putting up the same map I used last week. This is the end of Paul's third

missionary journey. This last portion shows Paul's journey from Miletus to Cos, then Rhodes, Patara, and then Tyre north of Jerusalem. When Paul gets to Tyre, the believers do something really interesting. They try to divert Paul from going to Jerusalem.

Acts 21:4 (ESV)

And 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.

Notice that it wasn't just that they were well-meaning, but they did this "through the Spirit." Now, this could mean that the Holy Spirit told them to warn Paul not to go. However, Paul just said that the Holy Spirit was compelling him towards Jerusalem.

Acts 20:22-23 (ESV)

And now, behold, I am 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.

Now could the Holy Spirit convict one person of one thing and another person of something else? I'm actually fine with that. Jesus said this about the Holy Spirit.

John 3:8 (ESV)

The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The Holy Spirit is like the wind. He has a mind of his own and doesn't have to fit into our boxes. I think it's possible the Holy Spirit convicts people in different ways. This is not a sin and truth issue, but about God's plans. Some think the Holy Spirit simply revealed what was going to happen to these believers, and they took it upon themselves to try and stop Paul. Perhaps, I don't know.

So what do you do when a well-meaning, possibly Spirit-filled Christian, tells you not to do what you think the Holy Spirit is calling you to do? We're supposed to listen to our church family and fellow Christians. We put stock in the words of those we love and trust, and God has given us for our good.

I was thinking of my own life, not so much how I've been stopped by well-meaning Christians, but how I've been a well-meaning Christian who put a stop to what God seemed to be doing. I once served at a church where a group of teenagers wanted to create a self-run Bible study. Doesn't that sound amazing? These teens wanted to get together and study God's word and talk about it?

But I was like, "You can't do that! You need adult supervision. You know, because you might hurt yourself, . . . studying the Bible." So I came up with a bunch of guidelines for them to follow if they wanted to study the Bible together. I suspect that my resistance did not ingratiate those teens to the church or studying the Bible. I suspect my desire to protect those teens actually hurt them. Have you ever done that? You want to protect a fellow believer, but you actually end up hurting them? That's kind of like what the believers at Tyre do. They so badly want to protect Paul they try to stop him doing what the Holy Spirit has called him to do.

So what is Paul to do? What should someone like Jamie, the High School Senior sensing a call to ministry, do? What should you do in a similar situation?

When you face resistance, listen to the Holy Spirit.

That's what Paul does. He hears these Christians, but he listened to the Holy Spirit and kept going. And you know what, the believers at that church recognize the Spirit's presence and bless him on his way.

Acts 21:5-6 (ESV)

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. 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.

Look how his brothers and sisters in Christ support him, despite seeing things differently. There's a lesson for us in here, isn't there? We, as Christians, are not always going to see eye-to-eye. But also, shouldn't we give each other the benefit of the doubt? If someone is saying they are sensing the Holy Spirit is leading them in a particular direction, and they're clearly walking in step with the Spirit unless they're disobeying God's word, I can show I care about and support them as people even if I see things differently.

Paul and his companions go down to Caesarea and stay at Philip the evangelist's house. That's when Paul encounters the stiffest resistance, even from the author of Acts himself, his companion Luke.

Acts 21:10-12 (ESV)

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 at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.

So now a prophet comes, takes Paul's belt, and binds his hand and feet. Then he says the Holy Spirit says suffering is what is going to happen to Paul if he goes to Jerusalem. It's interesting the Christian church's first response is, "Well, don't do it then!" But I think one of the ways we can tell if the Holy Spirit is speaking to us is if we look closer to Christ, if we're transformed into his likeness. Jesus was bound. He was led away and handed over to the Gentiles (Matt 27:2). And then he was crucified, all to pay the penalty for the sins of any who would repent and believe in him. It should be no surprise the Holy Spirit would call Paul to be bound and led away, just like Jesus. When Paul hears the Holy Spirit tell him to go to Jerusalem, it doesn't advantage him. It disadvantages him. His obedience requires his suffering, persecution, and sacrifice.

If anyone tells you, "The Holy Spirit wants you to give me money," pause and take stock. They might be right, but you should be very careful. If, on the other hand, you are arguing with your spouse or are in a church meeting, and things aren't going your way, I'd really resist the temptation to say, "the Holy Spirit says so" unless you're absolutely certain, especially if the decision gets us something that advantages ourselves. I do think the Holy Spirit can lead us to do things that are a blessing to us, which are even financially rewarding (like being a doctor), but I also think the Holy Spirit will call us to do sacrificial things too (a doctor who serves those who can't repay her). Look at how Paul responds to their resistance.

Acts 21:13-14 (ESV)

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."

Now Paul is an Apostle, and so he has a special kind of authority you and I don't have. Only rarely should we go against our church family, and only if we're certain and walking by faith and have spent the time praying and seeking God. Then we look at if it's a sacrificial thing, but also a gospel thing. Paul is going forward not for his own sake but for the gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ.

When you face resistance, listen to the Holy Spirit and do what's best for the gospel.

Paul and his companions finally sail down to Jerusalem. Paul meets with James, the brother of Jesus, and the other church elders. He reports what God has done among the Gentiles, the non-Jews, and they all praise God. But Paul has a reputation for being someone who cares most about Gentiles, and so the church leaders raise a concern and a request.

Acts 21:20b-24 (ESV)

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 have 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. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. 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 have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law.

They tell Paul what his critics are saying about him. “Hey Paul, don’t forget about all the observant Jews in Jerusalem and the church. They think you are teaching the Gentiles to reject Moses and our traditions. So why don’t you do something an especially observant Jew would do. Why don’t you take the Nazarite vow and go through its ritual purification and even sponsor four other men to do the same? That will show the observant Jews in Jerusalem you still care about the law.” A man or woman could make a Nazarite vow for a period of time by promising not to drink alcohol, by not cutting their hair, and by not touching a dead body (Numbers 6:1-21). Samson was a Nazarite for a lifetime, not just for seven days like Paul (Acts 21:27).

Acts 21:26 (ESV)

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

So why would Paul go through the trouble of doing this? Paul knows that going through these religious motions won’t bring him salvation. He argued heatedly against salvation through the law, which leads to the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 (see Acts 21:25). See, when people will only listen to the gospel of Paul makes cultural changes, Paul is willing to do it. Paul isn’t willing to take full advantage of the freedom we have in Christ if it means others won’t listen to the gospel message. He wants them to hear, and again, he’s willing to sacrifice his own rights for the benefit of others. Paul does what’s best not for himself but for the gospel. He’s willing to compromise his own rights and freedoms for the success of the gospel.

If I were to go back to Jamie’s story, as she senses her call to ministry, I think she needs to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. I believe the Scriptures grant her to pursue her calling wherever God may lead. But, I would also say there may be times when she will need to think about contextualization. For example, if she thinks the Holy Spirit is leading her to do ministry in a conservative Islamic country, she’s going to have to take into account that as a woman, she will face some cultural limitations. She should act differently for the sake of the gospel in that context. Church unity matters for the mission field (Romans 14:1-15:7; 1 Corinthians 10:23-33).

So how might this apply to you? If you think the Holy Spirit is leading you to do something or say something, but are encountering resistance, take time to pray, fast, and really seek the Lord. Know that you are in tune with the Holy Spirit. Dive deep into the word. Make sure you’re operating within what Scripture says. Pray, pray, pray. Listen. Pray some more. Examine if this costs you something and if that’s honoring to God. And then trust the Holy Spirit and do what’s best for the gospel message. That’s not easy. As you faithfully follow Jesus, I’m sure you’ll encounter difficult situations too, but the Spirit can lead you through.

When you face resistance, listen to the Holy Spirit and do what's best for the gospel.

I want to close by reminding us of the gospel. Jesus faced resistance, a lot of it. He encountered resistance from the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and at times his own followers. And yet, he continually followed the Holy Spirit and shared the good news. And you know what, it cost him his life. It cost him everything. Sometimes it will cost us everything to follow the Holy Spirit. Paul took the vow, but his critics in Jerusalem are about to throw a riot anyways. He'll almost lose his life in Jerusalem and will one day lose it in Rome. Jesus lost his life in Jerusalem. *When you face resistance, listen to the Holy Spirit and do what's best for the gospel.*

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above. You can also listen on [Apple Podcasts](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. What type of resistance or opposition are you facing? Is this of your own doing, or because you are faithfully following Jesus?
2. What do you sense the Holy Spirit is leading you to do? Why do you think it's the Holy Spirit and not your own imagination? Does it line up with Scripture? Is it sacrificial?
3. How might you faithfully follow the Spirit's leading? What is your prayer time going to look like, preparing you for the sacrifice and resistance you may face?
4. What is the gospel message, and how can you prioritize it above your own needs or wants?