

Beware of Detours

by Warren Wiersbe

Warren Wiersbe's sermon warns against the spiritual detours in life, using the Apostle Paul's journey to Jerusalem as a cautionary tale about obeying God's will over human logic and burdens.

Duration: 35:56

Scripture: Acts 21:4-25

Topics: "Detours"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the Apostle Paul's journey to Jerusalem and the challenges he faced. The preacher mentions that Paul had a burden for Israel and wanted to deliver his soul and clear his conscience. The preacher acknowledges that there are different interpretations among preachers regarding whether Paul was right or wrong in going to Jerusalem and entering the temple. However, the preacher emphasizes that the basic application of this passage is to help all believers in their own spiritual journey.

Transcript

It was the Apostle Paul's lifelong purpose to minister the gospel of the grace of God. And this is why he was traveling, preaching to Jew and Gentile alike. In Acts chapter 21, we have the Apostle Paul heading toward Jerusalem, and without any qualifications whatsoever, or any equivocations, I say to you this is one of the most difficult parts of the book of Acts.

Mr. Moody, when he used to read the Bible, if he came to a word he couldn't pronounce, he would stop, make a few comments, then start reading on the other side of the word. I have sometimes wished I could do this in preaching, come to the end of chapter 20, and then pick up in chapter 22. But of course, I can't do that and be a faithful preacher of the word of God.

You see, in chapter 21, we find Paul going to Jerusalem and getting into some hot water. Then he goes to the temple, plans to offer some sacrifices. It's all very bewildering to those of us who have experienced the grace of God, and who have read Romans and Galatians and Hebrews.

If he was wrong in going to Jerusalem, and he was wrong in going into the temple, he shouldn't have been there. If he was right in going to Jerusalem, he may have been wrong in going into the temple, or he may have been wrong in both, or right in both. If you've got ten preachers together, you might get ten different attitudes about this.

Fortunately, though we may disagree on some interpretation, I think the basic application of this passage will help all of us. I'd like to approach these verses by asking and trying to answer three questions. Question number one, was Paul wrong in going to Jerusalem? Now, immediately when you say this, you say, well, that's rather a daring question.

Who are we to ask whether Paul was right or wrong in doing anything? After all, he was Paul, and I'm the first one to admit that I'm not worthy to clean the Apostle Paul's ink pen or carry his shoes, far be it from any preacher of the Word of God ever to attempt a judgment on so great a man. But even though his writing was inspired, I don't think we have to believe that his total life was inspired, and great men in the Bible made mistakes. Moses did, and Abraham did, and David did.

There are those who say that the Apostle Paul was perfectly right in going to Jerusalem. After all, the city needed the witness. They had rejected the witness of John the Baptist and had permitted him to be killed.

They had rejected the witness of Jesus Christ and had asked to have him killed. They had rejected the witness of the Apostles and had killed Stephen, one of the deacons, and had killed James, one of the Apostles. And surely they would listen to one of their former rabbis, one of the great students of Gamaliel, Saul of Tarsus, who had become the Apostle Paul.

And they say these warnings that were given were not prohibitions, and this is true. In fact, up in chapter 21, verse 4, when it says that the people there through the Spirit told him that he should not go up to Jerusalem, the word that's used there for not is not the usual Greek word for absolutely not. It could be translated, I understand, from scholars who know much more about this than I do, that perhaps he should not.

It's true that these warnings were not definite, open prohibitions. God did not seem to be putting up a barricade. It seems he was flashing a red light.

And later on, after Paul had been arrested and put in prison and was in danger of his life, really, if the conspiracy had gone through, in verse 11 of chapter 23, the Lord stood by him and said, Be of good cheer, Paul, for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome. And they tell me that if the Apostle Paul had been in the wrong, the Lord Jesus would not have encouraged him in this way. Now, I have wrestled long and hard with this section of scripture.

And without being judgmental or seeking to establish any kind of new denomination based on this truth, I have come to the conclusion once again, it's the second time I have been through this, that I believe Paul was wrong in going to Jerusalem. Paul's ultimate destination was Rome. He had said to the Ephesian people he was going to go to Rome.

He had written to the Roman people saying, I want to come to Rome, then go to Spain. Jerusalem was really just a stopping off place, although he had some very good reasons as far as he was concerned for going. Let me explain to you why I think the Apostle Paul was wrong in going to Rome.

And once again, I'm not being judgmental, far be it from me to be critical, but I'm trying to examine the Word of God and learn something from my own heart. And in the study of this passage, God has said some very definite things to me about the will of God and how the Spirit leads us. When Paul was saved on the road to Damascus, God did not permit him to go to Jerusalem.

For three years, Paul was kept out of Jerusalem. When he did finally go to Jerusalem, they wouldn't take him in. Even the believers wouldn't have him.

If it hadn't been for Barnabas, Paul could never have joined the Church. It seems that God from the very beginning kept Paul away from Jerusalem. Now, as we know, Paul had a very special mission.

He was called to be a preacher to the Gentiles. Of course, he had a great burden for his own people, the nation of Israel. When Paul finally did get to Jerusalem, he was in the temple.

In chapter 22, Paul tells us this event that took place many years before, verse 17. This happened many years ago. It came to pass, says Paul, 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, here's Jesus speaking to Paul now, many years before, make haste and get thee quickly out of Jerusalem, for they will not receive thy testimony concerning me.

That sounds pretty definite, doesn't it? It seems to me at the very beginning of Paul's ministry, Jesus was saying to him, I know how much you love your people. I know how concerned you are about Jerusalem. And therefore, I hate to tell you this, but it's true, get out.

I'm sending you to the Gentiles. They will not receive your testimony here. Now, the Apostle Paul, long before he heard any of these warnings from the different Christians, and these warnings were repeated over and over again, he knew that there was something lying ahead of him in Jerusalem.

Romans chapter 15, Paul was in Corinth. He was writing his letter to the Romans and he asked for their prayer support as he planned to go to Jerusalem. Romans chapter 15, verse 30.

Paul says, now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake and for the love of the spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, that I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judea, and that my service, which I have for Jerusalem, may be accepted by the saints. He had collected an offering for the saints in Jerusalem, that I may come unto you with joy by the will of God and may with you be refreshed. So Paul knew, even before he got on board that ship heading for Jerusalem, that something was lying ahead of him.

He had had warnings from God even before he started off on the trip. So when you look at the past and realize that God kept him from Jerusalem, God warned him, they won't accept your testimony in Jerusalem. Long before he started on his trip, he had an intuition, a spiritual premonition, something was going to happen in Jerusalem.

He asked the prayer support of his friends. And then when you read the rest of the book of Acts and you realize how things sort of fell apart. You see, everything Paul asked them to pray about failed.

He was not delivered from the enemy in Judea. They almost killed him. He was not accepted by the church.

Now we'll get into this next week, the Lord willing. But if you ever want to talk about a cool reception from a bunch of believers, it's there. When Paul was arrested, we have no record that anybody in the Jerusalem church lifted one finger to try to help him.

And of course he did finally get to Rome. It was not by a joyful route. He went through two years of imprisonment in Caesarea, cooled his heels there for two years.

And then he went on board ship and had shipwreck and almost lost his life and finally got to Rome. But you could hardly say he arrived with joy to be refreshed by the saints. When he got to Rome, he discovered they were split about him.

Some were for him, some were against him, and there was all sorts of difficulty. You sort of get the impression that everything that was nailed together fell apart. Now, I want to make it very clear before we move to question number two, that Paul's going to Jerusalem was not a departure.

It was a detour. Our theme today is beware of detours. You know what a detour is? A detour is a road that gets you to your destination by a different route.

It's my own conviction, without once again being judgmental, that the apostle Paul could have had another route to Rome. But God ruled and overruled and got him off the detour ultimately and got him to his destination. I think there are times in our Christian lives when we go on detours and we ultimately get to our destination.

God has a purpose he wants fulfilled and he'll have that purpose fulfilled. But it would have been easier if we had stayed on the main road. I think I've heard Dr. Vance Havner say many times, the detour is always rougher than the main road.

Was Paul wrong in going to Jerusalem? I think he was. It got him on a detour. Now, the second question automatically follows, then why did he go? The apostle Paul had been to the third heaven.

He knew how to determine the will of God. The apostle Paul was a prophet. God spoke through him.

Paul was certainly a man greatly filled with the Holy Spirit. Who are we to investigate the inner workings of the mind and heart of the apostle Paul? Except for this reason, it's written in scripture and we should learn from it. Why then did Paul go to Jerusalem and get on this detour? It's because the apostle Paul was a man who was burdened.

First of all, he was burdened for Israel. Now, I want you to look with me at Romans chapter 9. You've read these verses many times, but let's read them in their setting now. When Paul wrote Romans, he was at Corinth and thinking of going to Jerusalem.

Romans chapter 9, I say the truth in Christ, I lie not. My conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.

Paul was an amazing man. Paul wrote to the Philippians that he was willing not to go to heaven for their sake. And he writes to the Romans and says, I'm willing to go to hell for the sake of the Jews.

Here was a man with a tremendous burden on his heart for the Jewish people. Over in chapter 10 of the book of Romans, he continues, brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved. This is one reason why he was collecting this offering from the Gentile Christians to take to the Jewish Christians to help to convince the unsaved Jews how much the Christian people loved them.

Sad to say it didn't work, although God used that offering as a blessing to other people. Now, Paul was burdened for Israel. Paul had a tremendous burden for Israel and the place to reach them would be Jerusalem at Pentecost because there would be Jews from all over who would be there.

And Paul was anxious to get there, to preach to them. You certainly can't condemn a man for having a burden on his heart, but there are many people in the Bible who had burdens on their heart and God didn't let them do what they wanted to do. David had a tremendous burden on his heart to build the temple and God said, no, you're not going to do it.

You're not the one. Moses had a tremendous burden on his heart to go to Canaan land. God said, no, I'm sorry, you just can't do it.

The fact that a person has a burden on his heart does not always mean that his way of delivering that burden is God's way. Why did Paul go? He had a burden on his heart. He was burdened for Israel.

Secondly, Paul was a man whose conscience was convicting him. Look at chapter 22 of the book of Acts. I've already read verses 17 and 18 where Jesus said to Paul many years before, don't stay here, get out of Jerusalem.

They will not receive your testimony concerning me. And here is the apostle Paul arguing with him. Here's the apostle Paul debating with the Lord Jesus.

And here's what he says. And I said, Lord, they know that I imprisoned and beat in every synagogue those that believed on thee. And when the blood of thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by and consenting unto his death and kept the raiment of them that slew him.

And he said unto me, depart, for I will send thee far from here under the Gentiles. Now look at the apostle Paul. During those years, he was the rising rabbi, Saul of Tarsus, who had trained at the feet of Gamaliel.

He had done damage. That's the sad thing about a person whose zeal is not according to knowledge. Paul is saying to Jesus there in the temple, he's saying, Lord, I persecuted Christians.

Lord, I helped to kill Stephen. I made it easy for the Jews to reject you. Now, if I can go back and tell them, won't this make it easier for them to accept you? And the Lord said to him, depart.

Now, I think it's a dangerous thing for us to argue with the will of God. There are times when you and I want to do something to ease our own conscience. Now, I'm not criticizing Paul.

I'm admiring Paul for being honest. He said, Lord, my conscience is bothering me. When I was Rabbi Saul in Jerusalem, I killed people and arrested people.

I hindered your cause. Actually, when you read the record carefully, he promoted the cause. Christians were scattered all over and preached the gospel because of the persecution under Saul.

He says, I led them astray. I hurt them. Now he said, I'm going to come back.

I'm coming back to Jerusalem. I used to hurt the Christians. Now I want to bring an alms to them.

I want to bring a gift to them to kind of take care of that. And I want a witness to Israel. I want to make up for what I've done.

We won't go into it now. We may go into it next week. But it's interesting to notice that they treated Paul exactly the way they treated Stephen, almost to the very word.

Paul got to this word Gentiles in his speech, and they began to scream away with him, away with him. He's not fit to live. Kind of a strange word to use in a Jewish temple speaking to a Jewish congregation, isn't it? But Paul couldn't get away from it.

That was his calling. So he went to Jerusalem because he had a burden for Israel. He went to Jerusalem because he had a burdened conscience.

He wanted to relieve that burden that was on his heart. Before anything else happened, he wanted to deliver his soul and clear his conscience. Now, it's worth noting that Dr. Luke, who wrote the Gospel of Luke and who wrote the Acts of the Apostles, devotes one-third of the Acts of the Apostles to Paul's journey to Rome.

He devotes 40 percent of the Gospel of Luke to our Lord's journey to Jerusalem. When you put Luke and Acts side by side, it's amazing how they parallel each other. Here is our Lord Jesus setting his face like flint to go up to Jerusalem and praying, not my will thine be done.

Here is the Apostle Paul saying, why are you weeping and breaking my heart? None of these things move me. Neither count I my life dear unto myself that I may finish my course with joy and the ministry which God has given me to testify the Gospel of the grace of God. I think the Apostle Paul was also sharing in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings.

I wonder if Paul wasn't saying to himself, you know, my Lord went to Jerusalem and died for me. If I go to Jerusalem and die for him, what better thing could I do? Of course, his destination was Rome. I think that Paul went to Jerusalem because he was burdened for the Jewish people.

It's good to have a burden for souls. He was burdened in his own conscience. It's good to have a conscience that works.

He was burdened to glorify Christ even to the point of death if necessary. It's good to want to glorify Christ. Which leads us to our third question.

What lessons do we learn from this? If Paul had good motives for going to Jerusalem, he was concerned about the people. He was concerned about the church. He was concerned about his conscience.

He wanted to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ. If he had good motives for going to Jerusalem, why was it wrong to go? This is where God's been searching my heart. It has not been easy to prepare this message because, you see, the preacher has to preach the message to himself before he can preach it to anybody else.

Otherwise, he's a hypocrite. God has been saying some things to me that hurt, but they're helpful. My Lord hurts me, but he never harms me.

First of all, he is saying to me, obey the will of God. Now, I believe it was the will of God for Paul to go to Rome. I do not believe it was the will of God for Paul to be in Jerusalem.

Once again, I am not going to be judgmental. I'm simply interpreting the word of God as I see it. Obey the word of God in spite of circumstances.

It looked to be such a logical thing to do. Go to Jerusalem. Bring the offering.

Identify yourself. Mingle with the people. It seemed so logical, and then when it was all over, the whole thing fell apart.

There are many things in the Bible that seem very logical, but they were out of the will of God, and when it was all over, there was trouble. It seemed so logical. For the Jewish nation not to enter into Canaan land, there were giants and walled cities and problems, and it seemed so logical, but it was wrong.

It seemed so logical for Abraham to go down to Egypt when the famine came, but it was wrong. It seemed so logical for Hagar and Abraham to get married and for her to bear Ishmael, but it was wrong. It seemed so logical for these things.

It seemed so logical for David to build the temple, but he wasn't supposed to. What I'm saying is simply this. Man's logic sometimes falls far short of God's wisdom, and I hear people who say, well, now, pastor, if we do this and this and this, this is going to happen.

Not if you disobey God's word. Oh, how many times in situations people have logically worked out how to do it, and then the whole thing fell apart. I wonder how many fellows and girls I have heard say, but pastor, I know she's not a Christian, I know he's not a Christian, but this is the way it happened, and after we get married, she'll get saved.

It doesn't work that way. Obey the word of God in spite of circumstances, in spite of human logic, in spite of the way you feel. Now, I want to dwell on that for just a moment.

I don't question one bit Paul's love for Jesus Christ. Far greater than mine. I don't question one bit Paul's love for souls.

Far greater than mine. I don't question one bit Paul's love for the church. I'm trying to get that way in my own heart.

But you know, you never separate love and truth. I hear a great deal said these days about love. All sorts of people can fellowship together in church meetings because they love each other apart from truth.

Now, if I understand my Bible correctly, we speak the truth in love. And for someone to say, but you know, my heart tells me, praise the Lord, I'm glad your heart is functioning, but the word of God has to tell you. There are times in my life as a pastor when I have to make decisions that break my heart.

There have been times in my life when I have made visits or I have had counseling sessions and I have had to make decisions involving people I love and it breaks my heart. The easy thing would be to say, well, my heart tells me to do this. The important thing is the word of God tells me to do this.

And more than once, I have been off by myself weeping over a broken heart. But you see, as a pastor, you don't do the will of God because your heart tells you to. You do the will of God because the word tells you to.

My heart changes. The word never changes. You don't build your life on subjective feelings.

You build your life on the word of God, which is objective and never changes. And so the first lesson that we learn is to do the will of God, not to try to rationalize, not to try to be emotional about it. Just do the will

of God.

Now, the second lesson I learned from this is this. We are never too old to go on detours. I want to say it again.

Paul did not do what Jonah did. Paul did not say, God, you want me to do this? I'm going to do that. It was not a rebellious disobedience the way Jonah did.

No, no. His heart was right and his motives were right. But I think his actions were wrong.

We're never too old to go on detours. Abraham was not a young man when he went on a detour down to Egypt. Jacob was not a young man when he went on a 20 year detour.

Paul was not a young man when he went on this detour. No matter how well trained we may be, no matter how much Bible knowledge we may have, no matter how devoted we may be, it's still possible for us to go on detours. We've got to be careful.

There's a third lesson here. It's the value of Christian fellowship. Now, granted, these warnings were not prohibitions.

Any more than a railroad crossing, red signal flashing is a prohibition. I'm free to go across the track if I want to. I go down to North Avenue Beach, which I would not do, but I go down there.

There's a sign that says no swimming today. Warning, undertow. I can.

That's not a prohibition. It's just a warning to me. I can violate it if I want to.

Paul's friends loved him. Even Luke was involved in this and they wept and they said, look, there's something here. And Paul said, don't try to change me.

That word, what are you trying to break my heart? What do you mean? Bend my heart. Don't bend me now. I realize that I must determine God's will for my life.

I have always resisted people who have come and said, now God told me to tell you this. I'm always glad when people have counsel and advice, but let me pick out my own wife. Let me name my own children.

Let me decide what God wants me to do in these matters. I don't think it's anybody else's business. But we do need Christian friendship and Christian fellowship.

And I think that at this point, the apostle Paul was resisting the guidance of God from his spirit led friends. I'm always afraid for the isolated Christian. I'm always afraid for that saint who doesn't need the church, doesn't need the Sunday school class, doesn't need the fellowship of God's people.

I was counseling with a saint recently and said, do you ever pray with anybody? And she said, no, I said, I think you ought to do you a world of good. If you just pray with somebody, get someone who can pray with you and read the word of God. We need each other, the value of Christian fellowship.

The fourth lesson God spoke to me is this. Good motives can never excuse disobedience. Well, my heart is right.

I don't think that good motives ever excused disobedience. Now we're going to see that next week, Paul got into some deeper disobedience here. We have a disobedience of a practical nature next week, a disobedience of a doctrinal nature.

Paul turned his back on some of the things he'd written in Romans and Corinthians and Galatians. Good motives do not excuse disobedience. Paul himself had written in Romans chapter three in verse eight, they accuse us of saying, let us do evil that good may come of it.

I hear this. Oh, but my heart is right. Good motives don't excuse disobedience.

Now we've been very negative all morning. Let's say, and then a positive note, the one great lesson that came to me with overpowering force was this. Even though I may go on a detour and I'm sure I've done it.

Even though we may go on a detour, not a deliberate, hard-hearted, rebellious disobedience, but with motives we think are right and a heart we think is right, a detour. Even though we may go on detours, Jesus Christ will not forsake us. That's what encourages me.

Paul went down to Jerusalem. He went into the temple, a mob jumped him. They would have beaten him to death.

A Roman soldiers came and rescued him. Paul made his speech. He got as far as the word Gentiles.

They threw their arms up and screamed away with him, took him off to scourge him. Paul said, you can't scourge me. I'm a Roman citizen.

Put him in prison, a trial here, a trial there. Ah, but a couple of nights later, Jesus came to Paul and said, now don't be afraid. I wonder why Paul was afraid.

Paul wasn't afraid to die. He'd said that none of these things moved me. Of what was Paul afraid? That he wouldn't reach his destination.

You see, Jerusalem was just a pit stop. Rome was where he was going. I wonder if Paul wasn't sitting in that prison cell saying, well, you're on a detour, old boy.

I wonder if you'll ever get to Rome. And Jesus showed up and said, don't be afraid. As you have testified for me at Jerusalem, you're going to bear witness of me at Rome.

Now here's the lesson friends, where God cannot rule, he overrules. If everything I've said up till now, you disagree with perfectly. All right.

We love you anyway, but learn this. The whole lesson of this passage is in spite of what may have been done when God cannot rule, he overrules and the Jewish mob said, kill him. God said, oh no, you won't.

The Romans are going to protect him. The Roman soldier said, scourge him. God said, oh no, you're not.

The conspirators said, let's kill him. God said, no, you won't. He's going to Rome.

It was very important for Paul to get to Rome. He had to bear witness at Rome because out of his witness at Rome was going to come Philippians and Ephesians and Colossians. Paul had to go to Rome and where God does not rule, he overrules.

Now somebody here today may be on a detour. You may say, pastor, I've disobeyed the will of God. My heart was right.

My motives were right. That's the difference between God overruling and God disciplining. If I deliberately rebel against him and say, I'm going to do it my way, I don't care what you say, then he spansks me.

If my heart is right and my motives are right, and I just get on one of these stupid detours, he lovingly comes and says, look, we're going to work it out. Now, most Christians will not forgive you when you go on a detour. They'll never let you forget it.

Most many Christians won't let you forget it. But Jesus says, look, don't be afraid, Paul. I've got a purpose for your life.

I'm going to work out that purpose in spite of mobs and conspiracy and mistakes and detours. You're going to get to Rome. Now that encourages me.

You should know by now that I am the world's worst navigator. I got lost in Evanston yesterday. Hugh Payne, one of our missionaries two years ago, gave me a compass to put in my car.

I said, Hugh, it's not any good because even if I do know the directions, I don't know where to go. Sometimes I get on the wrong road. I was leaving Chicago some years ago, leaving Milwaukee some years ago to drive to Hammond, Indiana, East Chicago, Indiana.

I'm driving along and I see a sign that says Fond du Lac. I've been going north for an hour. I think I've done this spiritually.

I'm afraid sometimes in my in my spiritual walk, I have gotten on detours. I thank God they weren't dead end streets. I thank God they weren't back alleys.

I thank God they weren't leading me far from the will of God. I'm thankful that whenever I have gotten on a detour, the Lord has just come and said, look, we're going to work this out together. I'm going to fulfill my purpose in your life.

Don't let anybody ever tell you you're done for. I don't care what kind of a mess you may have made. Even if your heart was right or wrong, don't let anybody ever tell you you're done for.

Jesus is never done for with anybody. He comes to you and says, all right, there's some things I can't change. I can't give you back the two years you wasted in Caesarea.

I shouldn't say wasted the two years you spent in Caesarea. We have no record that much came out of it. But Paul, we're going to work this thing out.

Now, would you go home today with the assurance that Jesus Christ is not going to forsake you when you're on the detours of life? But let's be careful not to get on the detours. Let's do the will of God. And if we're not sure of the will of God, let's pray with our friends and seek for the Spirit's leading, because God promises that he'll guide us.

Gracious Father, we pray that whatever truth is for our hearts today, you will take it and bless it and use it. We pray for the encouragement of the saints. We ask, Father, for any who are here without the Lord Jesus, who need to trust him, that they will.

Lord, give us a sensitivity to your will. Give us a balance between heart and mind. We pray, Heavenly Father, that we might do your will, whether we feel like it or whether we understand it.

But we do want to know it. Lord, minister to us and through us, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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