

Acts 21:1-14

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Preacher: Tim Blaber

[0:00] Okay, please take your seats. We're going to ask Tim, I'm going to ask Tim Blaber to come and speak to us from the Word. Many of you would have met Tim, he was with us in the summer when we appointed Tim Suffield as an elder in the church.

Tim is the team leader at Hope Church Winchester. He's a great friend of our church, but he also serves us now in an apostolic role to our church to help us as we go forward. And it played a very significant part in connecting us with Tim Suffield. So we thought it would be great to have Tim come and preach. Tim, come and share God's Word with us, please. Thank you. Thank you, Andrew.

It's good to be back with you. Somewhat of a contrast, driving over here this morning to when I drove over to be with you in the summer. In the summer, windows down, it was one of those beautiful summer days, wasn't it?

For those of you that were there for your weekend away on the farm. And as I arrived, was greeted by that enormous bull. And I noticed that he's been sacked from the guest team.

[1:05] Wasn't there this morning. But it was wonderful being with you. On that occasion, I spoke out of Acts chapter 20. And we were looking particularly at eldership and what we can learn from that passage when the Apostle Paul gathered the Ephesian elders as he was about to depart from them.

And we drew out a number of things from that passage which are significant for eldership. And today, I want to speak from Acts chapter 21 on the theme of friendship.

I want to speak to you about friendship. Do you know that in the very beginning, as we read the accounts of creation, that before sin enters the world, there was something that was not good in creation.

There was something that was not good before sin entered the world. Do you know what that was? Not good for man to be alone. It's not good for man to be alone.

And so God creates out of the side of Adam woman. And he has this companion alongside him because he's incomplete without her.

[2:14] And it's a picture of the fact that we, as men and women, have been made in the image of God. And we are fundamentally relational beings.

The thing with friendship is it doesn't begin at that point. Friendship is eternally in who God is. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

So as we image God in his creation, community and friendship is so important. And do you know, as I arrived this morning, I was just really impressed by the reality of that.

John and I traveled together. John is a very dear friend of mine. And as we arrived, I was greeted by Charles and Nicky and Anna.

Charles Glass and Nicky Glass and Anna Glass. Give everyone a wave. So many of you might not know who they are. Charles and Nicky have known me longer than I've known myself. So they were in church with me in Sidcup.

[3:14] I've been in three churches. So my first church in Sidcup belongs to three churches, I should say. And Charles and Nicky have been friends of mine ever since.

Charles mentors me. He mentors Tim Suffield. Charles introduced me to Tim. And Tim has become a great friend of mine. Also, I bumped into my friends John and Karen London and Rob, who were

friends of mine in Portsmouth when I was at church in Portsmouth.

And then I had members here just say, oh, hi, Tim, and shake my hand. And it was a picture to me of the very thing that I want to speak about today. That our God, our Creator, has given us friendship as a fundamentally necessary aspect of life.

We can't do this life without it. But we can't do the mission of God without it. Jesus said to his disciples, I no longer call you servants. I call you friends.

So shall we read together? So Acts chapter 21. And we're going to read the first 15 verses. And as I read through it, I want you to observe just how relationally rich this text is.

[4:27] Look for all the relational connections and themes. Acts chapter 21 from verse 1. After we tore ourselves away from them, we set sail straight for Kos, the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara.

Finding a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, we boarded and set sail. After we sighted Cyprus passing to the south of it, we sailed on to Syria and arrived at Tyre, since the ship was to unload its cargo there.

We sought out the disciples and stayed there seven days. Through the Spirit, they told Paul not to go to Jerusalem. When our time had come to an end, we left to continue our journey, while all of them, with their wives and children, accompanied us out of the city.

After kneeling down on the beach to pray, we said farewell to one another and boarded the ship, and they returned home. When we completed our voyage from Tyre, we reached Ptolemy, where we greeted the brothers and sisters and stayed with them for a day.

The next day, we left and came to Caesarea, where we entered the house of Philip the Evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. This man had four virgin daughters who prophesied.

[5:55] After we had been there for several days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. He came to us, took Paul's belt, tied his own feet and hands, and said, This is what the Holy Spirit says.

In this way, the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him over to the Gentiles. When we heard this, both we and the local people pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem.

Then Paul replied, What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.

Since he would not be persuaded, we said no more, except the Lord's will be done. After this, we got ready and went up to Jerusalem.

Let's pray. Father, we, this morning, are privileged. We really are, Lord, to be able to read your word, to hear you speak to us through your word.

[7:04] We thank you that your word reveals who you are to us. We thank you it's a light to our feet. It's a lamp to our path. And Lord, I thank you that this church here is one that you love deeply.

You love Harvest Church Alton. You love it enough to provide it with godly leaders to serve and lead. And there's a great mission that you've planned for this church.

And so, Lord, we ask that you would encourage us through your word. That you would point us in the direction that you're leading. That this would be an occasion this morning where we all know we've met with the living God.

We've encountered the living God. And the living God has spoken to us. Father, we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, it's a fantastic chapter.

It starts, doesn't it, by listing all the places we'd like to go to on our summer holidays. And, again, hard this time of year. Cyprus, roads, cars. Wouldn't mind. Wouldn't mind that.

[8:07] But the themes that come out from here so strongly are just how important relationships and community and friendship is to the Apostle Paul. Chapter 20 ended like this.

He knelt down and prayed with them all. There were many tears shed by everyone. They embraced Paul and kissed him, grieving most of all over his statement that they would never see his face again.

And they accompanied him to the ship. Then it says, after we tore ourselves away from them, we set sail straight for cars.

I wonder what you understand church to be all about. When you think of church, do you think of something that you do on a Sunday morning, primarily? Do you think of a place you go? Do you think of it in terms of time spent in your week? Or when you think of church, do you think of brothers and sisters who you love so dearly? Do you think of the emotional challenge of moving away from a church?

[9:12] As I say, I've been in three churches. This current church is my third. And I can genuinely say, I had to tear myself away. Like from people that I've invested time in and got to know and got to love.

This was the Apostle Paul's experience. This was how they did their lives together. They were in each other's homes. They were breaking bread together.

They were vulnerable and open with one another. It's not a contrived thing. There's a sincere and deep affection and love.

You might be visiting this church today. You might be giving church a go for the first time in a long time. Or wondering about joining a church. Let me tell you, as we read about God's people and the local church in the Bible, we find it's a dynamic and rich experience of community.

And I praise God for that. I can't imagine doing life outside of the church. I'm so hugely grateful to the friends who I get to serve alongside with.

[10:22] I'm so grateful that it doesn't rely upon one person, but that we are a team working together effectively together. And so that's what's modeled to us in this passage.

That's why today is so important and so special, because what we are seeking to do is to continue in this rich vein that starts way back here.

And indeed, of course, it goes much further back than even that. But you and I need each other. We need each other.

God has said that his church is like a body made up of many parts, many different members. And no one member can say to another, I don't need you. The weakest members being the most indispensable, the most precious.

God loves his church. And so let's just look at from verse 3 onwards. So we sighted Cyprus, passing to the south of it.

[11:28] We sailed to Syria and arrived at Tyre since the ship was to unload there. We sought out the disciples and stayed there seven days.

Through the Spirit, they told Paul not to go to Jerusalem. When our time had come to an end, we left to continue our journey, while all of them, their wives and children, accompanied us out of the city.

And after kneeling down on the beach to pray, we said farewell to one another and boarded the ship. I love this picture. I love how it starts. So Paul's traveling, and he arrives in this new place. And what's the first thing he does? He seeks out disciples. He seeks out friends. He knows that he's on a big mission. It's going to be very costly.

The Holy Spirit has already told him he's going to Jerusalem. He's going to be persecuted there. It's going to be tough. He knows this. And so as they're on their journey, they find friends.

[12:28] They seek out disciples. It's essential for them to be in that community. They need it. They need it. When you move to a new area, the first thing we need to do as Christians is seek out a church community that we can belong to, to seek out disciples that we can share our lives with and do our lives with.

The idea of being a solitary Christian, just floating around somewhere, is complete anathema to what we read in the Bible. We are designed to be connected in to one another.

The Apostle Paul sought out disciples. Can you think of anyone else who sought out disciples? Didn't Jesus do just that?

Didn't Jesus go seeking disciples for himself? Didn't Jesus model that beautiful friendship as he found Peter, James, John, and all the others and how he invested and prioritized time with them? We don't know what they did when they were with them. They probably just had fellowship together. But what I love and want you to notice is how they left them.

[13:45] Verse 5. When our time had come to an end, we left to continue our journey, while all of them, with their wives and children,

accompanied us out of the city after kneeling down on the beach to pray. Can you just picture the scene? A Mediterranean beach, lovely white sand, sun shining, and then you've got these families, all together with Paul as the ship is docked and they're getting ready to sail off.

And they all kneel down. And the children are part of it. They kneel down and they pray for Paul. They pray for this group who are on this mission together.

I love the word that came just before about being children. We're called the children of God, but children are so precious to a church community.

It's so important that children get caught up in what we're doing. I'm assuming the children will be in later. Yes, brilliant. The children need to see this and be a part of it. I'm so grateful that I was raised in a church as a child and had that opportunity to worship, to hear teaching, and to realize that it was through the local church that God had determined to reach the world.

[15:07] Genuinely, that was my experience of church growing up. The church I grew up in was not perfect, was it, Charles? But it had a lot of grace on it. And I had that genuine sense of, this is such an exciting thing to be caught up in.

Got to go to Stoneleigh, got to meet lots of other Christians in places like that. Thank God for New Day. We have something like 10,000, 11,000 young people who go to New Day.

Isn't that just awesome and amazing? For our children growing up in a world like this, where they're constantly being bombarded and fed all kinds of wicked ideas, how necessary is it that children get to grow up in an environment where the Word of God is central, where the Word of God is at the foundation?

And this isn't just memory verses. That they're being trained to learn. This is how you're to live a rich life, an abundant life, a happy life, being in an environment where the Word of God is central and where Christ is honored.

So I want you to be a church that loves your children and commends those who teach. I'm sure this is already such a high value. This is a great church because you're multi-generational.

[16:26] And it's a wonderful quality to see. But our children need to be caught up in God's mission. And God will use them. We as a church have recently offered and had an offer accepted to get hold of a building in Winchester out of which we want to base a lot of our community work.

And we went through a bit of a process in terms of praying and seeking God for this. Is this right? And as elders, we prayed. And because we have quite a large eldership team, when we come to make decisions, we have what I'm calling a traffic light system.

So I go around the whole eldership team and I say to them, where are you at on this? After a period of prayer and discussion, are you a green? Are you an amber? Are you a red? And we didn't have all greens.

We had a couple of ambers. We had one red. But overwhelmingly, we reached a decision to go ahead and get hold of this building, sensing that it was in the purposes of God. We kept this very quiet.

And then on Sunday, the Sunday after we'd reached that decision, I had this lovely older lady come up to me, such a lovely, unassuming person. And she starts prophesying.

[17:40] And she starts saying, Bob and I were walking down the road and we saw this building. And I sensed God say to me, I've got purposes for that building. I want you to buy it. She said, how on earth are we going to be able to buy it?

We've not got any money. She says, God said, you're to get hold of that building. I've got purposes for that building. So she came over and she starts sharing this with me. She said, Tim, I feel like God's saying, you know, this about this building.

I feel God saying, you're to get it. And I said, this is unbelievable because it was literally the building that we just agreed to go for. And it was a wonderful prophetic moment.

And the church has raised finance. We've had our offer accepted on it. And we shared this story with the church. Now we, since January, have hit some challenges in terms of certain things which have been difficult for us.

We're hitting some financial challenges. Many churches will go through some of those. And I'm just being honest, I was having a moment where I was asking God, is it right for us to be going ahead with this building?

[18:40] Lord, with some of these financial challenges, should I do it? And I was praying it through. And I picked up my kids from youth. And as soon as they got into the car, they said, Dad, tell us the story of the corner house again.

What happened? Tell us about that prophetic word that came. Because it was so encouraging. Dad, tell me. And I felt, of course, immediately convicted. Why were they able to do it? Because they were caught up in the mission right from the beginning.

They were hearing all about it. You see, the mission of the church isn't just for the few leaders. It isn't. A healthy church has the kids on the beach kneeling down to pray with their mums and dads and everybody else.

Catch that vision for it. It's stunning. And moments like these are so helpful, aren't they? Okay, let's carry on reading.

The next day, we left and came to Caesarea. This is verse 8. Where we entered the house of Philip the Evangelist. I assume they knocked on the door. They entered his house.

[19:42] He was one of the seven and stayed with him. This man had four virgin daughters who prophesied. After we had been there for several days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea.

He came to us, took Paul's belt, tied his own feet in hands and said, this is what the Holy Spirit says. In this way, the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him over to the Gentiles.

This is an incredibly sobering moment. They're in this atmosphere of the Spirit. We're here told that the daughters are prophesying. We don't know what they were prophesying, but the Spirit of God was on them to prophesy.

We believe in these gifts today. We believe that they continue. I'm sure many of you would have the gift of prophecy. Eagerly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you would prophesy, the Apostle Paul says.

Let me encourage you today to be seeking after those gifts. That's so important for the church. But Agabus comes along and he does this very...

[20:47] Prophets often do weird things. We've got one with us today. Who knows what John might do later. Prophets can do weird things. So he takes off his belt, he ties him up, like, what are you doing, Agabus?

He's our guest. Do you know who this is? And he starts prophesying, this is what's going to happen to this man. He's going to be tied up. He's going to be bound. And everyone is listening to this.

And clearly a sense of panic and fear come over them all. They become afraid for the Apostle Paul. They urge him, they plead with him, verse 12, not to go to Jerusalem.

Don't do it, they say. We love you. You're too precious to us. The mission is too precious to lose you. If you go there, you're gone. Don't do it.

How would you handle a friend of yours who comes alongside you and says, God's calling me to go to Iran, to go to Syria?

[21:53] You can name some places right now which are not particularly hospitable for Christians. Could you imagine yourself saying, I'm not sure that's a great idea.

I'm not sure. Of course you would want to sit down and have a conversation. Are you sure this is right for you? I love you. I care for you. I think this is highly risky.

Well, this is what's happening here. Paul, I don't think this makes sense. You could go to all kinds of other places. You know that you're wanted in Jerusalem.

You know that if you go there, bad things could take place. Look at his reply. What are you doing weeping and breaking my heart?

What are you doing weeping and breaking my heart? What a picture that is of Paul's emotional state. he's seeing the earnestness with which they love him and are pleading with him not to go.

[23:00] He's like, you're breaking my heart, guys. And then he says this, I am ready not only to be bound but also to die in Jerusalem for the name

of the Lord Jesus.

It's amazing faith and courage. I'm willing to lose it all. You're breaking my heart. verse 14.

Since he would not be persuaded we said no more except the Lord's will be done. And then verse 15. After this we got ready and went up to Jerusalem.

Did you see the significance of that? Who's the we? Well that includes Luke. That includes the group that he's been traveling with we tried to persuade him not to go.

We said don't do this. It's dangerous. It's risky. Don't do this. And he says I'm going. Like alright well we're coming along too.

[24:05] Like we're coming with you. We're going to do this with you. Why? Because we're friends on a mission together. together. Because God's given us to one another.

Because we're co-workers and we're co-laborers. We're doing this together. That's how God's determined things will go in his church. Reminds me of that scene in the Lord of the Rings.

You've either read it or watched the film. Frodo's given the task isn't he of destroying the ring. And the hobbits we're coming with you.

And Sam Sam journeys doesn't he with Frodo right up Mount Doom. And Frodo won't let him carry the ring.

This is my burden to carry Sam. I must do this. I'm going on my own Sam now. He says I'm going. I'm taking the ring. I'm going. I'm going to do this.

[25:05] You go back Sam. I must carry this burden. He says this is mine to carry. Do you remember what Sam says? He goes I might not be able to carry the ring Master Frodo but I can carry you.

And he grabs hold of Frodo puts him over his shoulder and he carries him. He carries him right to the end. And the ring ultimately gets cast into the fire.

And it's a beautiful picture. Isn't Tolkien trying to show us what friendship looks like? Isn't Sam such a brilliant picture of a friend, of a great friend?

Some of you might be thinking, who is that kind of friend to me? Some of you might be listening to this and getting frustrated and thinking, I'm not sure I have a friend like that.

Well let me just reverse the question. Who are you a friend to like that? Who are you a friend to like that? Whose burdens are you carrying?

[26:15] Who are you praying for? Who are you supporting? What does it mean for you to be a friend like that? And then of course the other thing I would say is of course you have a friend like that.

What a friend we have in Jesus. The reason why the stories of so many of the most enthralling stories are so powerful whether it's Narnia, whether it's Lord of the Rings, whether it's I don't know Harry Potter, whatever the stories may be.

The reason why they're so powerful is because they point us to the ultimate story. They point us to the ultimate picture of friendship. They point us to the one who loved you so much that he was willing like Paul to go to Jerusalem.

Many were saying to Jesus, why would you go there? They're going to kill you there. And Jesus went there. And of course as he stepped closer to the cross his friends all left him.

Luke travels with Paul, Sam goes with Frodo. Jesus went alone as it were. And as Jesus is being crucified, as Jesus is taking my burden and your burden and my shame and your shame, as he's hung there on the cross, as he is dying there, he cries out, doesn't he?

[27:42] My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? That Christ in his suffering, this one who is fully God and fully man, as he steps into the breach on our behalf, he experiences complete abandonment, he experiences total dereliction, he finds himself in a place of total lostness, such that you and I, despite how lonely you may feel at times, you've never experienced what he experienced on the cross, which is a complete forsakenness, as it were, the Father turns away, as he takes upon himself all the suffering and the shame and the guilt of the world, don't say you've not got a friend like that, because you have the best friend imaginable who's already done for you, for you, the most incredible act of kindness, what a friend we have in

Jesus, what a friend you have, if you've come here today seeking out a friend, let me tell you, you have a friend in Jesus, you have a friend who loves you more than you can ever realize or ever know, you have one who took your burden off your shoulder and he's the one that also issues an invitation today, come to me, you who are weary and heavy laden, and find rest, for my yoke is easy, my burden is light, come and be joined to me, come and do the mission with me, and so Jesus empowers his friends on this mission that he's about, to make every nation, tribe, and tongue part of his global family, and so what we do today is an extension of this mission that Jesus starts and hands on to his disciples and which has carried on ever since.

After this we got ready and we went up to Jerusalem. And if they hadn't, we may not be here right now. You see, the gospel goes like that and moves like that and it can be incredibly tough when we see people we love moving on.

You know what that feels like. You know what you might have to face in the future. Dear leaders who you love moving on.

God brings new people in to encourage and to help you. The mission ultimately doesn't depend upon us but upon our Lord Jesus who is building his church and the gates of hell can't prevail against it.

[30:41] And so friendship matters. Gospel friendship which is self-sacrificing which is preferring the other. Outdo one another in showing honour.

It can be so easy, I get it, it can be so easy to come to church and we've got our own agenda. We're feeling a little bit frustrated about certain things. We feel a little bit let down.

That kind of thinking is understandable but it's not the kind of thinking that's being modelled to us here. And it's not the kind of thinking that's modelled to us in Christ and in his mission. We're called to be those that journey together self-sacrificially to promote the advance of the kingdom and the proclamation of the gospel.

So I would encourage you as we pray for Tim in a moment to become the lead pastor here. Be a friend to him. Be a friend to Helen.

Be a friend to this team. Carry one another's burdens. Pray for them. That picture of the families on the beach kneeling down praying.

[31:51] Don't underestimate the power of prayer. Spurgeon said prayer is that slender nerve that moves the muscles of omnipotence.

God will pray. Pray that God would protect and help Tim as he leads.

Sometimes it can feel like quite a lonely task but it shouldn't be. As you look at what we've seen here in Acts chapter 21 it doesn't look lonely.

It looks costly but it looks like friendship together. And that's what God wants from this church and it's what I believe you've got. It's a precious value which we're not to take for granted but we're to thank God for.

So why don't we stand? I'm going to invite the band to come. In a moment we will pray for Tim.

We're going to sing a song together. Let's just like to just take us back as it were to the foot of the cross and just to have in our mind the picture of Jesus our great friend stepping into that place of sacrifice on our behalf.

[33:22] Let's just listen to these words. Mark 15 When it was noon darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon and at three Jesus cried out with a loud voice Eloi Eloi lima sabachthani which is translated my God my God why have you abandoned me?

When some of those standing there heard this they said see he's calling for Elijah. Someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine fixed it on a stick offered him a drink and said let's see if Elijah comes to take him down.

Jesus let out a loud cry and breathed his last. Then the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. When the centurion who was standing opposite him saw the way he breathed his last he said truly this man was the son of God.

Lord Jesus we just take a moment now to again contemplate the enormity of your sacrifice on our behalf.

Lord we thank you that you have been to us the best friend we could ever have. We thank you that you were willing to go to such horrors the depths of your suffering to lift us out of our sin and out of our grave and to give us life and to raise us up in heavenly places with you.

[34:58] We thank you today you have sent your Holy Spirit to be our true friend and helper and I thank you that this wonderful person is here with us today to help us understand again what a wonderful friend you are to us.

And Lord as we recommission again this church and as we lay hands on Tim in a moment we say Lord we want to be a church like this we want to be a people like this who bear one another's burdens who journey together who do life together who recognize how important friendship is to this mission that you've called us on.

Lord help us Lord when we feel aggrieved or upset to quickly confess and to quickly ask forgiveness that roots of bitterness wouldn't develop because this friendship is too precious Lord to mess around with it.

So Lord I pray whatever you're doing right now in the hearts of men and women here would you seal that by your spirit a message of encouragement a message of faith as we continue to press forward into all you've called us to do.

Lord we ask this in your holy name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you.