

Sermon for Sunday, March 16, 1980, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D. Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, MO 63105

"WHEN BEING A CHRISTIAN TIES YOU IN KNOTS"

Acts 21:8-15

Text: "...for I am ready not only to be imprisoned, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." Acts 21:13

St. Paul was going home! As the ancient Phoenician coast rose over the horizon, he must have stood in the bow of the ship with his eyes straining to see his beloved country again. His heart must have beat with excitement over the thrilling prospect of seeing old friends, visiting old haunts, seeing the familiar sights and places that mean home.

If you have ever been away from home for a long time, you can appreciate how Paul must have felt that day. As the miles speed by and you get closer and closer to home, the excitement begins to rise. As familiar landmarks and well-remembered scenes begin to come into view, your heart beats faster and you smile with pure happiness. Such must have been the case with Paul. For many years--weary, strenuous, trying years--he had wandered over the face of Asia Minor and parts of Europe sharing Jesus with the world. When he was tired and hungry, when he lay exhausted on his bed at night, when he walked weary, lonely miles between strange cities, Paul's thoughts must have turned back often to Jerusalem and the happy days he had known there. Now--after all those years of travel--he was going home.

That must have meant a lot to Paul. As a youth he had left Tarsus, his home, to come and study in Jerusalem. There he had become, as he once put it, a Jew among the Jews. He had loved the country of his fathers and the Holy City of Jerusalem. There he had risen to leadership and prominence, a zealous follower of the ancient laws of his people. But one day a journey had changed all of that. On his way to Damascus he had encountered Jesus on the road. Nothing was ever the same again. He turned his back on all that he had loved. He left behind friends who no longer understood him. He put aside a bright future for now his career meant nothing to him. As he was to put it later, he counted everything loss for the sake of Jesus.

As the years went by they took their toll. They had been hard, demanding years and now his youthful vigor had waned. Many of the old friends of yester-year were dead and surely things had changed in Jerusalem. Yet, excitement must have bubbled in his breast--Paul was going home!

The ship bearing Paul made its first landfall at Tyre on the Syrian coast. There Paul began to get the first indication of trouble ahead. For several days they tarried there with disciples they found. Through the Holy Spirit these fellow Christians warned Paul that he should not go up to Jerusalem. When it was time to catch the tides and sail on, those disciples, along with their wives and children, went to the shore with Paul and the Bible tells us they knelt there and prayed. Surely their hearts must have been heavy with concern for Paul.

Briefly the ship touched port at Ptolomais and at last they landed at Cesarea. From there they would make their way inland to Jerusalem. But in Cesarea they met an old friend--Phillip the evangelist--and the Bible tells us they tarried there many days. A man named Agabus came down from Judea. He had the gift of prophecy and he took Paul's belt and wrapped it around his own hands and feet as he made a prophecy. "Thus says the Holy Spirit," he said, "So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this girdle and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles." (Acts 21:11)

Now those first inklings of trouble ahead were being confirmed by God. It was not to be a joyous homecoming after all. In Jerusalem were men with hate in their eyes and murder in their hearts. St. Luke tells it this way, "When we heard this, we and the people there begged him not to go up to Jerusalem." The next verse is a character sketch of St. Paul. If we want to know what kind of man he was--what stuff he was made of--that verse tells us. There we read, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." The King James version translates it, "I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die..." Yes, St. Paul was willing to be tied in knots for Jesus. Paul could not know it then but once he reached Jerusalem he was indeed to be tied in knots. For the remainder of his life he would be bound. Yet, that commitment to Jesus was never to waiver and his determination would never falter. He would indeed be tied in knots for Jesus.

When you get right down to it, the world is never changed except by people like Paul--people who may be tied in knots, but who are willing to endure anything for Jesus. I think of men like Calvin who would not be threatened and men like Luther who would not be intimidated.

Notice in the first place that Paul was totally surrendered to the will of God. Paul had burned himself out for Jesus. Surely he deserved some happy reward after so many years of faithful service. Yet, what personal hopes and dreams he might have had for himself, Paul had surrendered everything to the will of God--even life itself.

If, in the final analysis, the world is changed by people like Paul, doesn't our world today need some world-changers who are surrendered to the will of God? Do you remember what Luke wrote in our Scripture this morning? He said, "And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, 'the will of the Lord be done.'" Because Paul was surrendered to God's will he changed the world. Or look at Jesus himself. The Bible records how one bitter night he knelt in inner anguish and poured out his heart to God. Yet, even though he knew what lay ahead of him, he whispered, "Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done." And because he was surrendered to the will of God, he went on to Calvary to change the whole history of the world.

Are you a world-changer? That's a question I keep asking myself. I must keep asking, "am I surrendered to the will of God so that my life is counting for him." Do you discover--as I do--that too often your life is directed by what you want and not what God wants? Are you a world-changer in your family, trying to be God's man or God's woman in the family, trying to do his will? Or how about among your friends--are you a world-changer? Are you any different as a Christian than you used to be? Are you surrendered to God's will among your friends? Or, again, how about your business life? Are you a world-changer there who is doing God's will?

You know, being a Christian can tie you in knots a couple of ways. If in your home, or among your friends, or in your business, you are embarrassed about Jesus, embarrassed about God, it will tie you in knots. It will tie you in knots emotionally so that your stomach hurts, and your palms sweat because you don't want to be different or laughed at. But being a Christian who is a world-changer doing the will of God can tie you in knots another way. It can tie you in knots so you can't do some things you used to do, or say things or act in old ways. Which way is it with you? Are you tied in knots because you are afraid of being different or because doing God's will won't let you act in the old ways?

The second thing I would have us notice is this: Paul's surrender led to service. Is that true in your life? Has your surrender to the will of God led you into special Christian service of any sort? That fateful day on the Damascus Road when Jesus met Paul, Paul cried out, "Lord, who are you?" Jesus replied, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." And there--down on his knees in the dust of the road--St. Paul had cried out, "Lord, what would you have me to do?" Are you asking God that question?

Do you remember the story of Isaiah in the Old Testament? The king has just died and Isaiah was deeply troubled, wondering what would happen to his nation. He went to the temple and as he entered he had a vision of God, high and lifted up. Isaiah heard the voice of God, "Whom shall we send and who will go for us?" Yes, who will do service for the Lord? Back came the reply of Isaiah, "here am I--send me." What sort of unique and special service is God calling you to this morning? I noticed in the bulletin a need for Sunday School teachers, for Summer Bible Camp teachers, for volunteer cooks for the Businessmen's Luncheon, and that hardly scratches the surface of need for people serving the Lord in special ways. There is the prayer ministry, the evangelism ministry, and many others. What is God asking you to do in terms of service? All of us are called to live God-surrendered lives, but we are also called to special service. Suppose St. Paul had responded like this: "Lord, I've got a pressing business deal in Damascus and then I'm due back in Jerusalem for a committee meeting. I've got tickets to the Jerusalem little theatre Tuesday night and then we have a dinner engagement the next night. Thursday night we always play racquetball at the Jewish Athletic Center, but without fail, Friday night I'll see you at the synagogue if nothing comes up." But God didn't want a Friday night Jew any more than he wants a Sunday morning Christian. That day on the Damascus Road Jesus said to Paul, "you will be told what you are to do." Paul put himself at the disposal of God to serve. Well, what is God telling you to do? Are you doing it?

The third thing I want us to notice about Paul is this: he was willing to get hurt for God. Most of us don't want to hurt. I don't. The other day when I pulled a muscle in my back the first thing I did was call the doctor. Since we don't want to hurt, we grab our pain pills and our tranquilizers! The fact is, we don't want our religion to cost us anything. We just are not a people given to suffering! Is that true for you? I suspect it is for most of us.

But isn't it a fact that real surrender to God's will and real commitment to service often leads to some form of suffering? What was Paul's reward for years of service? It was to be executed in Rome. What was the reward of John Huss for faithful witness to Jesus? It was to be burned at the stake. And for that matter, what was the reward to Jesus for being obedient to the Father? Why, to be crucified. So, the man who backs off from surrender and service that leads to suffering will never change the world.

Once King David sinned against God. He went to make a burnt offering to God for his sins. He had to buy some wood for the fire and the man he was buying it from--when he saw that it was the king--wanted to give the wood to David. But David replied, "I will not offer unto the Lord my God that which costs me nothing." Has our surrender and our service to Jesus cost us anything? Take our tithe--the Bible teaches our giving should be at least ten percent. Are you doing that? If not, is it because it hurts?

I suppose the bottom line is this: are you doing anything for God that hurts? Is there anything that causes you sacrifice and self-depravation--anything that costs in terms of time and effort and self-denial? If not, could it mean that you are not doing all God wants you to do?

Back when St. Paul got converted on the Damascus Road, God called a man named Ananias to go minister to Paul. Ananias didn't want to go because he was afraid of Paul's reputation for persecuting Christians. But God told him to anyway and then God said to Ananias, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." (Acts 9:15,16)

Well, God was as good as his word! Paul suffered--he hurt--for the sake of God's name. He was beaten, stoned, left for dead, shipwrecked, and tied in knots. Yet at the end, he could still say, "I am ready not only to be tied in knots, but to die for the name of Jesus."

How about you? Are you ready to surrender to God's will for your life? Are you ready to serve God with your life--even if it hurts? Paul was a world-changer for God. That's what God wants for you, too. The only question is: do you want it for yourself? Are you willing to be bound--to be tied in knots--for Jesus?