

Philip and His Four Virgin Daughters (Acts 21:1-16)

Expository Lessons from the Book of Acts

I. Background and Introduction

- a. At the conclusion of Paul's third missionary journey, he is returning to Syria and Jerusalem. He has just bid farewell to the Ephesian elders, who had gathered in Mitylene to hear Paul.

II. Paul Continues on His Journey to Jerusalem

- a. Read **Acts 21:1-16**.

- b. Storyline:

- i. Paul continues his voyage by sea from Mitylene, on the coast of Turkey (where he gave his farewell address to the Ephesian elders), continuing eastward toward Syria and Jerusalem.
- ii. At Tyre, some disciples tell Paul "through the Spirit, not to go up to Jerusalem". (**Acts 21:4**)
- iii. Arriving in Caesarea, they stay at the home of "Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven". (**Acts 21:8**)
 1. Philip had been one of the seven men selected by the apostles to distribute bread to the widows in Jerusalem, in **Acts 6:5-6**.
 - a. These seven are often considered the first example of "deacons", men selected for roles of service in the church.
 - i. Although the term "deacon" is not applied to these men in Scripture, early Christian writer Irenaeus (who was one human link removed from the apostle John, through Polycarp) wrote, c. 180 AD:
 1. "Stephen was the first deacon chosen by the apostles."
 2. (Source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 3, chapter 12; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 434)

- ii. See also a similar statement regarding the seven being referred to as “deacons” in *Apostolic Constitutions*, book 8, section 5; in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 7, p. 500.
 - b. Recall that Stephen (who preached boldly to the Sanhedrin and was stoned in **Acts 7**) also was one of the seven.
 - c. Philip had been involved in spreading the gospel to Samaria and was the man who converted the Ethiopian eunuch, in **Acts 8**.
- 2. Philip had “four virgin daughters, who prophesied”. (**Acts 21:9**)
- iv. Agabus, a Christian prophet, dramatically portrays with Paul’s belt that in Jerusalem the Jews will have him bound and delivered to the Gentiles. (**Acts 21:11**)
 - 1. The people plead with Paul, weeping and appealing to him to abandon his plans to go to Jerusalem.
 - 2. Paul responds with a stirring reply that he is willing not only to be bound, but to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.
 - a. The people who had tried to plead with Paul responded, “May the will of the Lord be done”.
- v. Paul and his companions then proceed to Jerusalem, despite all these warnings of what will follow.

III. A Few Thoughts Regarding Deacons

- a. If Irenaeus’ statement that the seven were the first deacons is appropriate, it appears that the service that would be done by a deacon was not limited to just serving the poor and taking care of material needs.
- b. While the elders had the oversight authority over the church, the deacons were servants who carried out special responsibilities within the church. That could include preaching the word, as we see from the example of Stephen (the first recorded martyr after Jesus’ ascension, see **Acts 7**) and Philip (who converted the Ethiopian Eunuch in **Acts 8** and is referred to here in **Acts 21** as “Philip the evangelist”).
 - i. These examples might encourage some of us to expand our view on the roles of the deacon in the church!

- c. As our church fellowship grows and we strive to meet the needs of the flock, let us also consider the important role that deacons should play in the church
- d. Scriptures that refer to deacons include:
 - i. “Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:”
(Philippians 1:1, NKJV)
 - ii. Read **1 Timothy 3:8-13**.
 - iii. The term “deacon” means “servant”.
 - 1. The Greek word rendered ‘deacon’ in the New Testament (diakonos / διάκονος) is a rather common word that generally means “servant” or “attendant”. That word takes on a special meaning when it is used in the context of describing those in the church appointed to a special role of spiritual service (deacons).
- e. From chapter 15 of the *Didache* (likely the earliest extant Christian writing outside of the New Testament), a practical guide for church life, written c. 80-140 AD:
 - i. “Appoint for yourselves bishops *and deacons* who are worthy of the Lord.
 - 1. “They are to be meek.
 - 2. “They are not to be greedy.
 - 3. “They are to be truthful and proven because they are also carrying out for all of you the ministry of the prophets and teachers.
 - 4. “Do not despise them because they are to be honored among you along with the prophets and teachers.”
- f. We see that from the very beginning, churches had both elders and deacons serving the body of Christ.

IV. Regarding the Virgins

- a. While there are several passages in the New Testament that address the subject of Christians voluntarily choosing a life of celibacy and virginity, this passage in **Acts 21** is one of the few where specific individuals are mentioned. In this case, it speaks of the four virgin daughters of Philip.

b. New Testament passages that hold up voluntary virginity as a noble lifestyle choice include:

i. Read **Matthew 19:3-12**.

1. “His disciples said to Him, ‘If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry.’ But He said to them, ‘All cannot accept this saying, but only those to whom it has been given: For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother’s womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake. He who is able to accept it, let him accept it.’” (**Matthew 19:10–12**, NKJV)
2. The apostles conclude that given the strictness of Jesus’ teaching about divorce and remarriage, perhaps it might be better to never marry!
3. Here Jesus commends those who would voluntarily make themselves eunuchs “for the kingdom of heaven’s sake” (by voluntarily committing themselves to a life of celibacy).

ii. Read **1 Corinthians 7:7-9**.

1. The most literal translations render this, “it is better to marry *than to burn*”. The words “with passion” are italicized in most Bibles, since those words are not in the Greek text. They have been added by the translators in an attempt to clarify the intended meaning Paul’s statement, for readers.
2. Paul indicates here that he is living a celibate life. He also encourages those who are able (and are free from a spouse) to do likewise.
3. “But each one has his own gift from God....”
 - a. We all have different gifts from God, which is a wonderful thing!
 - b. Some have the gift of celibacy, the gift of being content in life without having a husband or wife.

iii. Read **1 Corinthians 7:25-35**.

1. A married man has divided interests (he must live to please both his spouse and the Lord). However, a single person is free to give undivided attention to *servicing the Lord*.

2. While there are many people who want to pursue a single life for self-centered reasons, this advice is directed to people *who want to live to serve God whole-heartedly*.
3. Paul is saying that *if you are content with being single*, this is a better way to live.

iv. Read **1 Corinthians 7:38-40**.

1. It is good to give a daughter in marriage, but even better to not give her, in Paul's judgment.
2. This "better" alternative was the one apparently chosen by (or for) Philip's four daughters.

3. **Challenges, Especially for Single Brothers:**

- a. (Since men generally take the initiative to get married, the men have much more control over whether they remain single or get married.)

b. **Questions:**

- i. Do you have the gift that Paul had, to be content and not burn as a single person?
- ii. Do you want to devote your life to celibacy so that you can focus undivided service to the Lord and His kingdom?

c. **Personal Answers and Consequences:**

- i. Be honest with yourself. If the answer is "no", then:
 1. Focus on what it takes to prepare for marriage to a serious Christian wife.
- ii. **Reminder:** Christians can only marry *other Christians!*
 1. Paul says to the widow that she can seek a new husband, but "only in the Lord" (**1 Corinthians 7:39**)
 2. Obviously, this teaching disqualifies most of the men or women who otherwise might be considered for potential

spouses! There are not as many single people who are “in the Lord”!

3. Read **2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1**.
 4. “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?” (**2 Corinthians 6:14-15**)
 5. Reserve yourself for only a Christian spouse. You have NO BUSINESS pursuing relationships with members of the opposite sex who are not yet serious Christians.
- iii. You need to have the spiritual maturity to lead a wife (and future children) and the capacity to financially support them.
 - iv. Consider the problems that have arisen from worldly attraction to women.
 1. A man as wise and spiritual as Solomon was destroyed by his attraction to worldly women (**1 Kings 11**).
 2. A spiritual man like David had his life and family torn apart by his uncontrolled lust for Bathsheba (**2 Samuel 11**). It started with him seeing her bathing.
 - a. During the summer here, it is common for people to go to the ocean beaches and ‘sunbathe’ in public, wearing almost no clothing.
 - b. Learn from the example of David, and avoid situations where you will be tempted to look at unclothed (or almost unclothed) people, whether in person (such as going to the beach) or via pictures or online images, leading to serious sin.

3. The Israelites (many of who were likely young single men) were seduced by attractive Moabite women, resulting in over 20,000 dead bodies in the Wilderness...to teach US a lesson! These Israelites did not make it into the Promised Land – with obvious implications for us.
 4. Why are you praying daily, “Lead us not into temptation” (from the Lord’s prayer in **Matthew 6:13** and **Luke 11:4**), if you are *placing yourself* in a situation of dangerous spiritual temptation?
- v. Warnings and advice regarding self-control in this area:
1. “Do not give your soul to a woman to let her trample on your strength. Do not meet with a woman who is a courtesan, lest you fall into her snares. Do not associate with a dancing-girl, lest you be caught in her schemes. Do not gaze at a virgin, lest you stumble and pay damages for her. Do not give your soul to prostitutes, lest you destroy your inheritance. Do not look around in the streets of a city, and do not wander about in its deserted sections. Turn your eye away from a woman with a shapely figure, and do not gaze at beauty belonging to another. Many have been led astray by the beauty of a woman, and erotic love is like a burning fire.” (**Sirach 9:2-9**, LXX, OSB).
 - a. Note that **Wisdom of Sirach**, sometimes called the book of **Ecclesiasticus**, is in Orthodox and Catholic Bibles. It also was included in the original King James Version.
 2. “Flee from sin as from a snake.” (**Sirach 21:2**, LXX, OSB).

- a. Even the little snakes I encounter when on walks in the woods are disturbing for me to see. I don't want to be anywhere near a snake!
 - 3. The book of **Proverbs** is filled with warnings regarding the dangers of lust and fornication.
- v. Read **Revelation 14:1-5**.
 - 1. The virgin state, those who choose to live celibate lives for the sake of the kingdom of God, is highly exalted in the Lord's sight.
- c. **Question:** Why isn't celibacy held up as a commendable spiritual lifestyle choice in most Christian circles today?
 - i. Perhaps it is the same reason why fasting is unpopular in so many Christian circles today: most Christians *do not want to deny their flesh!*
 - ii. Perhaps this is in some part due to the influence of various forms of the so-called 'prosperity gospel': "God wants you to be happy, married, with a nice family, filled with the blessings and pleasures of this life".
 - 1. This is NOT the message Jesus lived and proclaimed!
 - 2. Suffering for the sake of righteousness is a central element of the Christian gospel.
 - iii. In some cases, this might be as an over-reaction against Roman Catholic abuses and corruption associated with a celibacy of clergy. (Problems include clergy living a double life, homosexuality, pedophilia, and hiding a generally self-indulgent lifestyle).
 - iv. For some, perhaps it is the idea that the *ultimate* Christian life is being married and having a large family.
 - 1. This idea may have its origin in a few Old Testament examples and passages.
 - 2. In some cases, this may be a reaction in response to the materialism that motivates many couples to have very few children, or even to remain childless by choice.
 - a. However, there are plenty of *selfish married people* with big families, as well as with small families!

- b. Some families that have few or no children for reasons that have *nothing to do* with selfishness!
 - i. We all need to be careful about judging the motives of others.
 - ii. As Paul said, “Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls....”
(Romans 14:4, NKJV)
3. A large family certainly is an excellent way to live out the Christian faith. However, let us not forget that Paul upheld the celibate life Paul, and desired for many Christians to choose that, in order to serve the Lord single-mindedly!
- v. Perhaps another reason why Christians today hold up family life over celibate life, as the Christian ideal, is based on their understanding of the qualifications of elders, from **1 Timothy 3** and **Titus 1**.
 1. Many Christians today have assumed, based on those two passages, that in order to be an elder a man *must be married* and *must have children* (who either believe the faith or are obedient to their parents, depending on how one translates and understands the text).
 2. However, in the early days of the church, Christians understood these passages to mean that an elder *could not have been married more than once* (or perhaps not more than once after having become a Christian).
 3. They also understood that this did not preclude celibate single men and men who were married but childless from serving as elders.
 4. Implications: while Christians, in general, are free to remarry after their spouse dies, elders and those who enter the order of widows (**1 Timothy 5:9-14**) could not.
 - a. The widows and virgins dedicated to the Lord and a celibate life were the origin of what later became religious orders of celibate sisters (nuns), brothers (monks), etc. that we still see today in some of the older churches.
 - b. For more on the early Christian understanding of “husband of one wife” and “the wife of one husband”, see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, article on ‘Twice Married’.

- d. Early Christian writings reflect a different attitude from that of many modern churches regarding virginity and family life.
- i. From Eusebius, writing c. 320 AD in *Proof of the Gospel*, book 1, chapter 9:
 1. “And this explanation of the ancient men of God begetting children cannot be said to apply to the Christians to-day, when by God's help through our Savior's Gospel teaching we can see with our own eyes many peoples and nations in city and country and field all hastening together, and united in running to learn the godly course of the teaching of the Gospel, for whom I am glad to say we are able to provide teachers and preachers of the word of holiness, *free from all ties of life and anxious thoughts*.”
 2. “And in our day these men are necessarily devoted to celibacy that they may have leisure for higher things; they have undertaken to bring up not one or two children but a prodigious number, and to educate them in godliness, and to care for their life generally. On the top of all this, if we carefully examine the lives of the ancient men of whom I am speaking, we shall find that they had children in early life, but later on abstained and ceased from having them....”
 - a. According to Eusebius, the primary concern of serious Christians was to have *spiritual descendants* (those they converted and raised up in the faith), rather than simply to have physical offspring.
 3. The question is not whether you have large or small families. The key question is: “*Why* are you doing what you’re doing?”
 - a. Is it because you just want to have an easier life? (Raising children takes time, and is not easy!)
 - b. Is it because you want to devote yourself to having more “spiritual offspring” that are not necessarily your biological descendants? (Converting and raising up disciples who are not your physical children takes time and is difficult, too!)
 - ii. Several early Christian writers attest to the fact that there were many in the church who had voluntarily devoted themselves to a single, celibate life.
 1. From Tertullian:

- a. “How many voluntary eunuchs are there! How many virgins espoused to Christ! “
 - i. (Source: Tertullian, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, chapter 61; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, p. 593)
 - b. “...so many male virgins, so many voluntary eunuchs, should carry their glory in secret, carrying no token to make them, too, illustrious.”
 - i. (Source: Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, chapter 10; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 4, p. 33)
2. From Novatian, writing c. 235 AD:
- a. “What else is virginity than the freedom of liberty? It has no husband for a master. Virginity is freed from all affections: it is not given up to marriage, nor to the world, nor to children.”
 - i. (Source: Novatian [formerly attributed to Cyprian], *Of the Discipline and Advantage of Chastity*, section 7; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, p. 589)
3. From Methodius, writing c. 290 AD:
- a. “For he [*the virgin*] who has repelled from himself charity, mercy, and humanity, is much inferior to those who honorably exercise chastity [*within marriage*].
 - b. “...But all the members are to be preserved intact and free from corruption; not only those which are sexual, but those members also which minister to the service of lusts. for it would be ridiculous to preserve the organs of generation pure, but not the tongue; or to preserve the tongue, but neither the eyesight, the ears, nor the hands; or lastly, to preserve these pure, but not the mind, defiling it with pride and anger.”
 - i. (Source: Methodius, *The Banquet of the Ten Virgins*, discourse 11, chapter 1; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 6, p. 351)

- ii. Note the point Methodius is making here. The idea behind virginity is to set aside one aspect of our flesh for a higher, godly purpose. How foolish it would be to set that one part aside yet allow *the other members of our body* (tongue, eyes, ears, hands, etc.) to indulge in all kinds of sin!
 - iii. This is a lesson that all of us, whether married or single Christians, can take to heart: *the spirit behind* what should motivate a Christian to a life of chastity.
4. For more on this subject, see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, article on 'Virgins'.
- e. **Conclusion:** Regardless of our marital state, all Christians are called to live a chaste life. Whether married or single, may our focus be purity: being set apart for God with *all the parts of our body* - not merely our sexual organs.