

“Discerning God’s Will”

Acts 21:1-17

As Luke wraps up Paul’s 3rd ministry journey and relates to us the events surrounding his travel to Jerusalem and ultimately his arrest, we see believers disagreeing with Paul. As we’ll see Paul believed the Holy Spirit was leading him to Jerusalem where he expected suffering will await him. Some of Paul’s Christian supporters will also sense the Spirit’s message of suffering for Paul and think by that, that Paul should not go. They think God’s will for Paul should not be in Jerusalem. Even Luke will try to persuade Paul from not going to Jerusalem.

Some believers believe God’s will for them involves risk and very possible suffering while their friends and family might disagree with them. In this section we’re going to see some guidelines about discerning God’s will for our own lives and why we should be very hesitant to say we know God’s will for our family member or friend. Let’s pray for Holy Spirit wisdom.

Again, ignore the chapter division. Paul had a tearful farewell with the Ephesian elders. Luke continues in 21:1,

After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea and sailed straight to Cos

‘Torn away’ implies a sorrowful ‘We’ll never see you again’ goodbye. Perhaps we’ve had a few of them in our life. They are not fun. They hurt. The Ephesians know Paul is bound to go to Jerusalem and they sense it won’t go well; they anticipate his death. And this will be the experience of all those he encounters in this chapter as Luke gives the travelogue of the places Paul went to. [Show map]

As Paul leaves Miletus he takes little trips hitting coastal towns of Cos, Rhodes and Paterna and finding a ship – a larger seagoing vessel –they sail 400 miles directly to Tyre on Israel’s west coast. They must have made good time because they stay there a week and look for a local body of believers, and they find some. Interesting. How did the church begin in Tyre? Again thanks to Paul’s help. Back in Ch. 11:19

¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.

The persecution in connection with Stephen was all precipitated by Paul (at the time known as Saul) before he was saved. So Paul was indirectly involved in starting churches before he was saved!! So think of that meeting!! While there we read,

Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. ⁵ But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray. ⁶ After saying good-by to each other, we went aboard the ship, and they returned home.

Then we read they travel south to Ptolemais then Caesarea where Philip the evangelist and his daughters the prophetesses are. This also would have been an interesting meeting because Philip and Stephen served together as the first deacons chosen in Acts 6. While there the prophet Agabus shows up and gives a very dramatic prophecy (much like Ezekiel or Jeremiah) that Paul will suffer in

Jerusalem. Agabus declares the Holy Spirit says Paul will be bound in Jerusalem and handed over to the Gentiles, not for dinner but to suffer.

So it sounds like v.4 and v.11 might contradict themselves. Which message of the Spirit is correct? They don't contradict each other as we'll see. But here's a very important point when we're trying to discern God's will:

Hardships and Trials are Not Necessarily Signs We're Out of God's Will (20:22-23; 21:11)

Why did Paul feel God was leading him to Jerusalem and that suffering would accompany him? Many reasons. First when God called Paul in Acts 9 He told Ananias to go to Paul and take the scales off his eyes, saying,

This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. ¹⁶ I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

And back in Rom. 15 [remember when we said a few weeks ago that Paul wrote Romans in his travels during Acts 20:1-6] Paul explained why he was going to Jerusalem; that the money he was collecting from Gentile believers for poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would help bring peace with the Jews who did not want to associate with Gentiles.

^{15:26} For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. ²⁷ They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. . . to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. ³¹ Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there,

As a former Pharisee and legalistic Jew but now Christian, Paul believed he was the best person who could bridge the divide between Jewish and Gentile believers. Paul had been to Jerusalem 3 times before; once God even directly told him to leave Jerusalem when he was first saved as he recounted his testimony in Acts 22:18. But if God didn't want him there why not tell him directly again? And Agabus' prediction was simply what would happen to Paul not don't go because this will happen.

So then v.4 can't contradict what the other verses said. We can take it rather that through the Spirit the believers learned Paul would suffer in Jerusalem and they didn't want him to go. So numerous times the Spirit warned Paul ahead of time that he would suffer when he got to Jerusalem. This was God's will for Paul.

While believers can sometimes suffer the consequences of personal sin showing we are out of the will of God, hardships and trials alone are not a sign that you are out of the will of God. Sometimes they are a sign that you are exactly where God wants you to be. Paul told Timothy in

^{2 Tim. 3:10} You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, ¹¹ persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. ¹² In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³ while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived

Since we live in an evil world, if we are obedient to God we will experience difficulties. Paul was warned by the Spirit and a prophet that he would suffer in Jerusalem. God's will for him. And yet people who genuinely loved Paul and God tried to prevent him from going. Why?

People Who Care the Most About Us Might Actually Hinder Us from Doing God's Will (21:4-5, 12)

Why? Because those who care about us the most don't want to see harm come to us. Even Luke didn't want Paul to go. Peter didn't want Jesus to go to the cross and Jesus said

"Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." (Mark 8:33)

Not wanting our family members to go serve God far away is a human concern because 1) we don't want to be separated from them and 2) we don't anything bad to happen to them. Those are natural concerns that might be interfering with the will of God. Listen to this warning by Jesus in Matt. 18:1

At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"² He called a little child and had him stand among them.³ And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."⁴ Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

⁵ "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me."⁶ But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.⁷ "Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come"

To hinder a loved one from doing God's will because you don't want them to be far away or get hurt is dangerous. Jesus had harsh words for people who do that. Luke and the others meant well because they wanted Paul safe – for their own selfish reasons of not losing him – but Paul knew that was not God's will.

When we are confident God is leading us in life or ministry, our task as Paul's was is to

Trust God to Accomplish His Will in our Lives (21:13-17)

Our life is His' and it is His to do with as He wills. We need to constantly work at trusting God with our lives and our family's lives. What will help us trust God?

Keep on praying (20:36-38; 21:5, 7, 14)

Notice how often prayer is mentioned in his meetings with believers who were wrestling with God's will. When he left the Ephesian elders we read,

^{20:36} When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. ³⁷ They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him

In Tyre when he departed from them we read

21:5 But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray.

And in v.7 and 14 we don't specifically read they prayed but it seems to be the pattern when Paul left they prayed. And at v.14 we read,

12 When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. 13 Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." 14 When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."

Prayer gives us peace about God's will for our lives. It is in prayer God's Spirit brings peace as we rest in Him. Even Jesus modelled this for us in Gethsemane, initially sweating drops of blood but when He was finished He was resolved and at peace and said to his disciples 'Rise, let's go! Here comes my betrayer.' (Matt. 26:46). Prayer keeps us in tune with God. What else helps us discern God's will?

Listen to godly wisdom (21:8-11; Rom. 15:25-33; Prov. 3:5-6)

Paul heard the prophet Agabus affirm what he already believed, that God was leading him to Jerusalem even though he would suffer there. So other godly people affirmed what he believed God was leading in his life. As well, when Paul explains his own thinking in Rom. 15:25-33 about wanting to take this offering to Jerusalem so as to initiate peace between Jewish and Gentile believers, it's godly. Bringing peace is biblical. Helping the poor is biblical. Using his own Jewish background to bring peace to Jews like himself was good counsel. And all the churches that supported this along the way affirmed that this was a biblical thing to do. So what he was doing was wise and God glorifying.

And Prov. 3:5-6 offers great wisdom but let's not separate it from its context. V.1 begins,

My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, ² for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity.

³ *Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart.*

⁴ *Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man.*

⁵ *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;*

⁶ *in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.*

⁷ *Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.*

Trust in the Lord with all your heart is already defined as putting His Word in our heart. Opposite of that is our own understanding. Well-meaning people didn't want Paul to go to Jerusalem. But that was their reasoning. Jerusalem=pain, therefore, don't go there. All through this Paul kept acknowledging God, which is another way of saying,

Have faith that God knows what He is doing (19:21-22; 20:22-24; 23:1)

God affirms His will along the way when we sense He is leading us in a certain direction. We can trace some of that in Paul's life. Back in Acts 19 when the Ephesian riot happened because so many people's lives were radically changed by the gospel, we read this in 19:21-22,

²¹ After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. "After I have been there," he said, "I must visit Rome also." ²² He sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he stayed in the province of Asia a little longer.

Paul had already been planning on going to Jerusalem because he had been collecting money for them. But somehow God prompted him here to start making his way back. Perhaps it was the excitement of what God was doing, we don't know for sure. And then in 20:22-24 to the Ephesian elders he explained,

²² "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. ²³ I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. ²⁴ However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

In every city Paul went the Spirit affirmed to him what was awaiting him in Jerusalem. God affirms his will to us as we believe He is leading. And then in 23:1 he states,

^{23:1} Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, "My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day.

Paul had walked faithfully with God therefore he had no doubts about God's leading. He sensed God was leading him to Jerusalem, he also wanted to get to Rome. But he had to obey the Spirit's leading to Jerusalem for him to get to Rome.

And finally, remember

We do not know God's will for each other (21:12-13)

The well-meaning disciples who pleaded with Paul not to go to Jerusalem were actually interfering with God's will for Paul. They did not know God's will for Paul yet they thought their plan of keeping Paul safe was the right one. But Paul believed God not man.

Remember when the resurrected Jesus reaffirmed Peter's roll as leader of the disciples and told him to feed my lambs? Jesus also told Peter in John 21:18,

¹⁸ I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." ¹⁹ Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!"

²⁰ Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?") ²¹ When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?"

²² Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me."

Don't worry about God's will for others; just yourself. Our responsibility is follow Jesus.

Not knowing God's will for others doesn't mean don't encourage them in a direction based on Spiritual giftedness to suggest that 'Hey, have you ever thought God might want to use your gifts in this?' is fine. But to tell them God told you that they should do such and such is very dangerous.

What if we feel we already hindered someone from following God's will – what should we do? Get on your knees and ask forgiveness from God. Ask that person for forgiveness for interfering with their life because you didn't want them to do something or go somewhere. God can still make miracles from our messes. Trust Him to accomplish whatever His will is now and focus on following Him yourself.

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