

EXPOSITION OF ACTS

Message #47

Acts 21:1-16

How do you determine God's will for your life? 1) Search the Scriptures; 2) Pray and ask God's Spirit to lead you and guide you; 3) Seek wise counsel from those who know God and love you; 4) Examine your own heart and conscience. But having said this, at times knowing God's will is not easy.

It is a difficult thing to try and determine God's will sometimes. It is not difficult if you have verses in Scripture that tell you what God's will is, but when there aren't those verses, the process of determining God's will can be a bit complicated. As Dr. Swindoll once said, sometime it is very difficult to know "where God's voice stops and man's advice starts" (*Acts*, Vol. 2, p. 67).

Doing the will of God ultimately leads to great fulfillment and blessing. However, doing the will of God most of the time is not initially easy. Usually doing the will of God puts one on a course filled with some setbacks and hardships. That was certainly true for Paul.

Paul had said goodbye to the Ephesian elders and set sail from Miletus. We may recall that Paul's plan was to go to Jerusalem (20:16) and that is exactly what he told the Ephesian elders that he was going to do (20:22). **Now according to Acts 19:21 and Acts 20:23, this trip to Jerusalem appears to all be led by the Holy Spirit so this was not just some whim of the Apostle Paul.** God's Spirit was truly leading him to Jerusalem because God was going to send Paul to Rome. This was the will of God. Unfortunately, Paul kept running into an entourage of people who didn't seem to grasp that point.

AS PAUL TRAVELED TO JERUSALEM HE KEPT RUNNING INTO PEOPLE WHO WARNED HIM NOT TO GO THERE, BUT PAUL DEMONSTRATED THAT SOMETIMES DOING GOD'S WILL MEANS YOU MUST GO AGAINST THE COUNSEL OF THOSE WHO TRULY LOVE YOU AND CARE ABOUT YOU.

Now there is a debate here as to whether or not Paul did do God's will in going to Jerusalem. Some argue that God was in fact revealing to him that he should not go to Jerusalem and others argue it was the will of God to go and he was the only one who knew it. I think we are wise if we stick with Paul. If we conclude that Paul should have listened to the people advising him not to go to Jerusalem, then we have to conclude that Paul is disobedient to the Holy Spirit's leading in his life and I am not willing to go there. If it were me, I might say yes, but this is the Apostle Paul who just a few days before this raised a young man from the dead. Furthermore, when it is time for Paul to leave Jerusalem, God will reveal that to Paul too (Acts 22:18).

So my conclusion is Paul does know the will of God and lots of other people don't. It does not make them bad or unspiritual, it just means that **knowing and doing God's will is a very private and personal decision that every believer at times must decide on their own.**

Now in these verses Luke gives us a travelogue itinerary of Paul's travels, which really show us the difficulty Paul faced in actually getting to Jerusalem. There are three travel legs to this trip:

TRAVEL LEG #1 – Paul travels from Miletus to Tyre . **21:1-6**

When Paul got on the boat from Miletus to Tyre, his main missionary church planting trips were over. There was one more spot in the world, however, that he wanted to reach—he wanted to go to Rome. These text chapters tell that story. As always, Luke gives a careful historical travelogue of how they actually got to Tyre. There are four travel facts he reveals here:

(Travel Fact #1) - They ran a straight course to Cos on Day 1. **21:1a**

All travel in **verse 1** takes place on the same ship, but travel starting at **verse 2** takes place on a different ship. Cos was a small island twenty-three miles in length located about 40-50 miles almost directly south from Miletus. It was famous for its vineyards, its wine, silk and cotton. The boat ride from Miletus to Cos would take about six hours. Cos was a health resort area known for its hot springs. There was a medical school there and the Emperor Claudius, whose own physician Xenophon was from Cos, made the city a place free from any taxation.

(Travel Fact #2) - They traveled from Cos to Rhodes on Day 2. **21:1b**

Rhodes was an island at the entrance of the Aegean Sea and Mediterranean Sea about 40-50 miles to the southeast of Cos. At one time it had been an important city, but Cassius plundered it in forty-three B.C. and it was a city that once was beautiful and once had a glorious past. There was a gigantic statue of Apollo, which was regarded as one of the great wonders of the world. Ships would actually pass through the legs of this statue made of brass into and from the harbor.

(Travel Fact #3) - They traveled from Rhodes to Patara . **21:1c**

Patara was about fifty miles straight east of Rhodes. It was a major port for large vessels that would travel across the open waters of the Mediterranean. Patara was the headquarters of the Roman governor of Lycia.

(Travel Fact #4) - They traveled from Patara to Phoenicia . **21:2-3**

Travel from Patara to Phoenicia (verse 2) takes place on a different ship. To this point they had been on a ship that could sail in coastal waters of the Aegean, but now that they were about to cross the Mediterranean, they needed to get on a different ship. Just as we have to catch different size planes to travel to many places, so Paul and his team had to catch different size ships to get to where they wanted to go.

The distance from Patara to Tyre is about 400 miles. If there were favorable winds, the trip could be made in about forty-eight hours. The travel route took them within eyesight of Cyprus on the port side, but they sailed past it and landed at Tyre. Tyre was a major port of central Syria and one of the most famous cities of the ancient world.

Now according to **verse 3**, the ship had to unload a lot of cargo so Paul and his team looked up some of the believers in Tyre and stayed there seven days (**verse 4**). The logistics of unloading and loading a ship were different than today. Modern ships are unloaded by using huge cranes, but all of this was done by hand and it took several days and specifically in this case it took a week.

So Paul found some believers and he hooked up with them for a week. These believers loved Paul and cared about Paul. It is a wonderful thing to be in the family of God because in a pinch it is the family of God that will take good care of you. William Barclay said “The man who is in the family of the Church has friends all over the world” (*The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 154).

For seven days Paul taught the Scriptures and he told them of his plans to travel to Jerusalem. Paul was being led by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem and he knew it wasn't going to be an easy time there (Acts 20:23). **Notice the believers of Tyre warned him not to go to Jerusalem. This is warning number one against going to Jerusalem. They are trying to talk Paul out of doing God's will.** The Greek text of **verse 4** indicates that the Holy Spirit had revealed to them that he would get into trouble in Jerusalem and they warned him not to go. Their warning to not go was by their own inference, not by the Spirit's leading. **God's Spirit never told Paul not to go, it was their mistaken emotions that told him not to go.**

Paul now is faced with a conflict. On the one hand he is focused on going to Jerusalem, believing it is God's will for his life and on the other hand believers who love him and care about him, who also have God's Spirit in them, are warning him not to go.

We may carefully observe from Scripture that the Holy Spirit did inform Paul that he would get into trouble in Jerusalem (20:23), but it does not seem that the Holy Spirit told Paul that he should not go to Jerusalem. The fact is the trouble in Jerusalem would actually be used by God to get Paul to Rome, so this was all part of the will of God.

According to **verse 5**, when it was time for them to move on and all of the men, including their wives and children, escorted them out of the city of Tyre and they all knelt down and prayed and Paul and his team got on the ship at Tyre and headed to Caesarea (**verse 6**) and the people went back home. I wish more parents and grandparents would teach their children and grandchildren to kneel down and pray. Fact is, not too many even teach them to pray.

Now these believers loved Paul and Paul knew it. As Paul sailed toward Tyre, he could not help but have some emotional confusion. However, ultimately they did not know God's will in this matter and, as well meaning as they were, they tried to talk Paul out of doing the will of God. Even though this must have tugged on Paul's heart, because these people truly did love him, they did not want him to go to Jerusalem and it was God's will that he go and Paul knew it.

TRAVEL LEG #2 – Paul travels from Tyre to Caesarea . 21:7-14

Now to get to Caesarea, the ship stopped first in Ptolemais which was about thirty miles south of Tyre. Ptolemais was a city named after the first king of Egypt whose name was Ptolemy. Ptolemais was a prosperous city and was known to be the best place to anchor a ship on the central Syrian coast. Paul and his team greeted the believers there and stayed with them for one day (**verse 7**).

From Ptolemais they had two options. They could travel by road to Caesarea or they could travel by ship. It seems, the following day, they got back on the ship and sailed about forty miles south to Caesarea. Caesarea was a city built by Herod the Great to serve as the port city for travel coming into Jerusalem. If one were traveling to Jerusalem by ship they would make a stop there.

When they got to Caesarea, they stayed with Phillip the evangelist, who had been one of the seven selected in the early days of the church (Acts 6). Phillip had four virgin daughters and they were all prophetesses (**20:9**). Apparently this was one of the prerequisites for being a prophetess because married women were not to give public prophetic utterance in a church service (I Cor. 14:29, 34).

Philip had been blessed by God with four daughters who loved God and His Word. Not only that, but these girls were very gifted with a revelatory gift that was operative until the Scriptures were completed. They were prophetesses who could reveal the Word of God. **There is no evidence that any of Philip's daughters received any prophetic revelation from God that Paul should not go to Jerusalem, which would have seemed logical if this had truly been God's will.**

Philip is a gifted evangelist and his daughters are gifted prophetesses and one would think if God's will was that Paul not go to Jerusalem, this would have been the proper context to reveal it.

According to **verse 10**, however, another prophet showed up on the scene. His name was Agabus and he came down in elevation from Judea and informed Paul that the Holy Spirit had revealed that if Paul went to Jerusalem, he would be arrested and bound and turned over to the Gentiles (**verse 11**).

Agabus had been a prophet for years. We first met him in Acts 11:28 where he predicted that there would be a great famine that would hit the area. He was a prophet who had established that he was a true prophet of God via the predictions he made that did come true.

Now Agabus came and took Paul's belt and literally bound his own feet and hands, showing Paul exactly what would happen to him when he got to Jerusalem. Not only that but carefully notice **verse 11**; Agabus predicted that he would be handed over to the Gentiles. Now if we carefully examine **verse 11**, Agabus does not try to talk Paul out of going to Jerusalem; he simply shows him what will happen when he gets there. What no one knew is that this would be the way that Paul would get to go to Rome.

According to **verse 12**, Luke says we (the entire Pauline team) started begging Paul not to go to Jerusalem. **This is warning number two.** Everyone around Paul, including Luke, advises him not to go to Jerusalem. This certainly would have put tremendous pressure on Paul not to go. As Kent Hughes said “The pressure upon Paul must have been unbearable...” (*Acts*, p. 287).

So now we have the prophet Agabus revealing what would happen and all of Paul’s people begging him not to go to Jerusalem. **If Paul is going to make the decision to go because it is God’s will, it is going to be a very lonely decision.**

Now none of these people are revealing anything to Paul that he does not already know. We may remember that he is the one who told the elders of Ephesus that he knew he would be arrested in Jerusalem (**20:23**).

According to **verse 13**, they were weeping for Paul the way the women were weeping for Jesus while on the way to the cross. Jesus knew the will of God, Paul knew the will of God, but no one else seemed to get it. Paul said why are you all weeping and “breaking my heart.”

The thing that was breaking his heart was he knew the will of God and they were trying to stop him from doing it. Things were so emotional and intense that finally Paul said look, I am not only willing to go to Jerusalem to suffer, I would be willing to die there “for the name of the Lord Jesus” (**verse 13**). This is what Paul was preaching, that by believing on the name of Jesus Christ one could be saved. This is what was causing all of the trouble.

Now notice **verse 14**, the entire group said “the will of the Lord be done.” They all came to realize that this was God’s will that Paul go to Jerusalem.

TRAVEL LEG #3 – Paul travels from Caesarea to Jerusalem. 21:15-16

The words “got ready” indicate they packed up their bags and headed to Jerusalem by foot, some sixty-four miles away. They came to Mnason of Cyprus who was a man who was known to be a solid believer for many years. Some suggest he had been one of the 120 disciples of Acts 1:15 and others suggest he came to faith on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. But regardless, he was a very faithful man who had a place in Jerusalem and that is where Paul and his team stayed.

There are several things to think about in this text:

- 1) Doing the will of God will often be a very lonely decision and will require an unwavering determination. If you truly know God’s will, you cannot compromise it.
- 2) Some people who love God and love you may advise you just the opposite of God’s will.
- 3) We must not be too quick to determine God’s will for someone else. We must be very careful not to make quick decisions or “snap judgments” for someone else.
- 4) God’s will for someone else may not conform to our idea of what God’s will actually is.
- 5) It is possible to advise people to do just the opposite of what God’s will actually is and be well meaning in the advice.
- 6) In the end, we must always pray “thy will be done.”