

PAUL AND THE CHALLENGE OF DOING GOD'S WILL  
ACTS 21:1-16

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

My father was a high school history teacher early in his career. He did not like to teach about the Civil War because it pitted Americans against each other. I don't have quite the same reaction that he did. Two of my favorite historical visits were seeing Gettysburg in Pennsylvania and Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia, where the war was concluded.

Unfortunately secular histories often overlook the spiritual factors involved in that conflict. There was a revival that was under way in the late 1850s and early 1860s. Ironically this revival was especially evident among soldiers of the losing Confederate Army. But at all levels of society in the North and South there was public discussion of God's view of the great war. The interest in God's point of view was genuine.

In September of 1862, after the Union defeat at the second Battle of Bull Run, President Abraham Lincoln wrote, **"The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God can not be for and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party--- and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true--- that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants. He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds."**

Interest in doing God's will in matters of national concern gets little more than lip service in our day. The Constitution has replaced the Bible as the measure of right and wrong, although the meaning of that document keeps getting changed, to the extent that the Framers would hardly recognize many of its applications today. In public discourse there is more concern about rights than responsibilities, about what the latest opinion polls say than about what God says.

Among the true people of God there is still a concern about doing God's will. Frequently that concern is directed less toward national issues and more toward personal issues. Most of us have had the experience of struggling about God's will for our careers, our educations, our choice of mates, and our handling of conflicts. In these matters it has often been a struggle to both determine and do God's will.

The passage before us this morning describes one such struggle that took place in the Book of Acts. We are going to examine the experience of the Apostle Paul in this incident as a basis for making applications about our own attempts to do the will of God.

I.

We will begin by considering the subject of DETERMINING GOD'S WILL (PROJECTOR ON--- I. DETERMINING GOD'S WILL), which plays a vital role in vv. 1-6 of Acts #21. In our study of the Book of Acts we have seen that the Apostle Paul had a unique opportunity to discover God's plan for his life. On the road to Damascus this Jewish persecutor of the church had a supernatural encounter with the risen Christ. The Lord Jesus told Paul to stop persecuting Him and start serving Him. He told Paul that he was to preach the good news about Jesus to Gentiles.

We have seen Paul doing that in the course of three missionary journeys to Asia Minor and Greece. (THIRD MISSIONARY JOURNEY RETURN) During the third missionary journey the apostle took up a collection for Jewish Christians in Judea who were faced with a famine. Representatives of these churches were accompanying Paul as he headed by ship toward Jerusalem. We have seen them stop in Troas and Miletus. (MILETUS) Last week we looked at his message of encouragement and exhortation to the elders from the church at Ephesus who came to see him in Miletus. We pick up the story as Paul and company leave Miletus.

At the beginning of #21 the historian Luke writes, "**And when we had parted from them** [literally it says, 'we had torn ourselves away,' reflecting the depth of the relationship between these Christians and the elders from Ephesus] **and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos (COS MAP), and the next day to Rhodes and from there to Patara. And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail.**" Most ships involved in the sea trade were coasting vessels. They were smaller ships not intended for long travel in the open seas. They tended to hug the coastline in their travels. Paul was wanting to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost. In order to make sure that they got there before then, they needed to take a more direct route across the Mediterranean. So at Patara they found a larger ship that was headed toward Judea.

Verse 3 says, "**And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. When we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload its cargo.**" This trip of some 400 miles may have taken them about five days. You might remember that Cyprus had been the first stop for Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey.

As a result of finding this bigger, faster ship, Paul and his companions were able to spend a week in Tyre. Paul and the representatives from the western churches may not have known any Christians in Tyre, although it is possible that on the trip from Antioch to Jerusalem described in #15 Paul may have stopped here.

Notice that v. 4 says that they had to look them up, or search for them. What inns there were often had an unsavory reputation. So it was typical for Christians in a situation like this to be taken in by fellow believers. Though they may not have known Paul personally, the Christians at Tyre had no doubt heard about him and would have been honored to host him and his friends.

While they were at Tyre v. 4 tells us that the Tyre Christians “**were telling Paul [through the Spirit] not to go on to Jerusalem.**” (PROJECTOR OFF) The issue that they were dealing with was “What is the will of God?” There are some Bible teachers who argue that such was not really the issue. They contend that this verse makes it clear that God’s will was that Paul not go to Jerusalem. Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, and his job was to keep preaching outside of Jewish territory. He disobeyed God and got in trouble for it. Because of his actions he ended up in prison for about four years when he would have had much better results if he had just stayed in Europe.

I am more inclined to think that Paul was not disobedient in going to Jerusalem. Back in #20 v. 23 we saw Paul tell the Ephesian elders in Miletus that the Holy Spirit was testifying in every city that “bonds and afflictions” await him in Jerusalem. Nothing is said that the Holy Spirit had told him not to go. Here in v. 4 it does not say that the Holy Spirit was saying that Paul should not go to Jerusalem. At other points in Acts Luke notes that God or the Holy Spirit specifically directed Paul to do something or not do something. It does not say that here.

It seems to me more likely that, just as in Caesarea and in the cities of Asia Minor, Christians at Tyre with the gift of prophecy predicted that Paul was going to be bound in Jerusalem. The Christians as a result of that urged Paul not to go. The apostles were not sinless, but I find it unlikely that an apostle would be so blatantly disobedient if the Holy Spirit had specifically told Paul not to go to Jerusalem. A couple of chapters later Paul will declare that he has been living his life with a clean conscience before God. If the Holy Spirit was telling Paul here not to go to Jerusalem, it would have been difficult for Paul to make that claim of having a clear conscience.

It seems more likely that these prophecies served as a warning for Paul to prepare for what was coming in Jerusalem. Perhaps as much as anything they helped the Christian community prepare for the fact that Paul was going to be spending time in jail.

If there was no specific revelation given to Paul telling him not to go to Jerusalem, it also seems to be true that there was no specific revelation given to him either that he should go to Jerusalem. If the prophets had uttered words of revelation that Paul was supposed to go to Jerusalem, there would not have been such opposition from Paul’s friends. At other points Paul did receive specific revelation from the Lord. On the road to Damascus the Lord Jesus gave him a specific set of marching orders. On his second missionary trip Paul had a vision where he was told to go over to Greece. At a low emotional point in Corinth the Lord appeared to him and told him that there was going to be a big harvest in Corinth and that he was going to be there for a while. In regard to

this issue there is no reference in the New Testament to any specific divine revelation that instructed Paul to go to Jerusalem.

So upon what basis did Paul decide to go there? Paul wrote Romans when he was at Corinth, shortly before he left to go back to Jerusalem on this trip. (PROJECTOR ON--- ROMANS 15:22-23) In vv. 22-27 of #15 we get a glimpse of his thinking process. **“This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. 23 But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, (ROMANS 15:24) I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while. (ROMANS 15:25) At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints.”**

Why is Paul planning on going to Rome? Because God told him to go there? It doesn't say anything like that, does it? Paul gives two reasons for his trip. First, he says that there isn't any further place for him in the regions of Greece. By that he means that he has hit all the major cities of Greece with the gospel. It is reasonable that he go elsewhere. Second, he has a longing to visit the Romans.

You see, Paul had a commission to preach to the Gentiles. He was also aware of Christ's command to His disciples to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth. So Paul worked within the context of those parameters. Within that he had freedom. Occasionally the Lord gave him specific directions. Sometimes opportunities opened up. At other times doors closed. But beyond that he seemed to make decisions based on reasonableness and logic and wisdom and even personal desires.

(ROMANS 15:26) Continue on in v. 26, **“For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. (ROMANS 15:27) For they were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. (ROMANS 15:28) When therefore I have completed this and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will leave for Spain by way of you.”**

We don't know of any revelation from God that Paul had to take up a collection for the Christians in Judea. But it seemed to be the right, logical, wise, good thing to do. It seemed to be a practical application of the command to love one's neighbor. The Jews of Judea had a part in sending the gospel out to the Gentile world. The Gentiles had an obligation to help out the Jews of Judea with a practical need. Likewise, it seemed a logical, wise, reasonable thing to do for Paul to take part in this trip to Jerusalem. He was the leader of the effort to bring the gospel to these Gentile areas. He was the one who organized the food drive. It was appropriate for him to go. There was potential danger of a split between the Jewish Christians of the east and the Gentile Christians of the west. Some of the Jewish Christians had doubts about this Gentile Christian thing. To have the Gentile Christians show up with a bountiful gift to help the Jewish believers with a definite need would go far to promote unity between the two groups. Paul was in

the leadership position to help that to come to pass. He made a decision based upon wisdom, wisdom prompted by the working of the Holy Spirit.

When we talk about the will of God, it is helpful to realize that there are at least three ways in which we speak of God's will. (GOD'S WILL 1.) The most common way in which the Bible uses the term "will" is in the sense of the sovereign will of God. Sometimes this is also referred to as God's decreative will. In Ephesians 1 Paul says that God works all things after the counsel of His will. Because God is sovereign, there is a sense in which He is ultimately involved in everything that comes to pass.

(GOD'S WILL 2.) We sometimes also speak about God's will in the sense of his moral will, or preceptive will. The Bible gives us certain commands and rules and principles by which we are responsible to live. The Ten Commandments are a classic example of God's moral will. In 1 Timothy #2 v. 4 Paul says that God desires or wishes or wills that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. If it was God's sovereign will that all people end up in heaven, then it would be certain to come to pass. But we know from the Scriptures that this is not to be. So Paul must here be talking about God's moral, or preceptive, will. This is what God declares to be His moral will. This is what God wishes to happen just as He wishes that we might not lie or steal or disobey Him.

(GOD'S WILL 3.) Then also we sometimes speak of God's permissive will. This is that aspect of God's character whereby He allows His creatures to violate His moral will. He permits people to do bad things, though those bad things violate His moral will.

The thing for which Paul was responsible was God's moral will. He was responsible to obey those things that God had told him to do. But God didn't tell Paul how to do everything or where exactly to go all of the time or exactly how long to stay. He had certain freedom to decide upon the basis of wisdom and reason and even personal longings.

It is likewise helpful to us as Christians to recognize that we are not accountable for following God's sovereign will. We often do not know what that is. We are responsible for obeying God's moral will. That moral will is revealed to us in the commands and laws and principles of the Bible. Within those boundaries we have freedom to make our own decisions. In making those decisions we should act on the basis of wisdom; we should pray; and we should step out in faith, trusting God to sovereignly direct our paths.  
(PROJECTOR OFF)

So in looking for a job, we don't necessarily expect God to give us a vision in which he tells us the name of the company that we are going to work for. In 1986 I found myself unemployed. Suzy and I prayed and in a very short period of time a friend called me up with news that he had a job for me at his company. So I took it. I also began looking for a church to pastor. Again we prayed, but I didn't get any vision or divine impressions about what church I should be at. Some doors opened. Some doors closed. Some opportunities did not fit with what I was looking for.

On the basis of my priorities and needs and theological views about what a church should be, I chose to pursue some opportunities and not to pursue others. When a church in Connecticut came along, it fit what I was looking for, and the congregation was interested in me. My focus was not on figuring out some hidden, secret will of God that He had for me. My focus was upon acting in faith, trusting God to guide me and making decisions within my philosophical convictions in regard to employment. We see those same kinds of principles at work in Paul's decision-making here.

Years later allergies became a problem in my family. Two different doctors told us that we would do better health-wise living in a warmer, drier climate. We prayed and began looking in the Southwest. After a period of time this church came along.

In vv. 5 & 6 we find that Paul and his companions had another warm farewell when they left Tyre. Although they had only been with the Christians of that city for a week, they had established warm friendships. That is typically how it is, or at least should be, when we meet and establish new relationships with fellow believers.

II.

(PROJECTOR ON--- II. MAKING ROOM FOR...) In vv. 7-14 then we come to MAKING ROOM FOR SUFFERING IN GOD'S WILL. Our tendency so often in American Christianity when we encounter problems or difficulties is to conclude that we have missed God's will for our lives. We would do well to notice the challenges which Paul faced.

(PTOLEMAIS) It was 25 miles from Tyre to Ptolemais to the south. The Christian travelers spent one day there, probably while the ship unloaded its cargo. The next day they came to Caesarea.

Caesarea was the capital of the Roman province of Judea. (CAESAREA MARITIMA) It was also the home of Philip the evangelist. He was one of the seven in Acts #6 who was chosen to help distribute aid to the widows of Jerusalem. He was also one of the first to bring the gospel outside of Jerusalem. We read the story in #8 where he introduced the Ethiopian eunuch to Christ. That story ended with the brief mention that Philip then went to Caesarea. Now it is about twenty years later, and Philip is still in Caesarea. He has a family with four unmarried daughters, and each of these young ladies has the gift of prophecy. No reference is made to any of them making prophecies about Paul or his proposed visit to Jerusalem.

In vv. 10 & 11, though, another prophet comes on the scene. Luke writes, "**While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, 'Thus says the Holy Spirit, "This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles."**"" If Paul was making wise decisions, he should have gone out and sold that belt first thing, right?

We came across Agabus once before in Acts. In #11 Luke said that he came down to Antioch in Syria and prophesied to the Christians there that a famine would come over the land of Judea. Now he comes to Caesarea and acts out a prophecy.

Notice the reactions of the Christians in Caesarea to this prophecy from Agabus. Verses 12-14 tell us, **“When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. 13 Then Paul answered, ‘What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.’ 14 And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, ‘Let the will of the Lord be done.”**

Before appealing to the sovereign will of God the Christians try to persuade Paul not to go to Jerusalem. What is their concern? It is for Paul's safety and well being. Is that a legitimate concern? Yes. Is it the most important consideration? Oftentimes, but not always. Suffering plays a role in the Christian life. (PROJECTOR ON--- COLOSSIANS 1:24) In Colossians 1:24 Paul said, **“Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.”**

In 1 Peter #4 vv. 12 & 13 (1 PETER 4:12) the Apostle Peter said, **“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. (1 PETER 4:13) But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”**

Suffering is part of life. But some instances of suffering are uniquely Christian. At times we suffer for simply being Christians. At times we suffer for doing what is right or witnessing for Christ or doing what is best. Paul was convinced that he was doing what was best for the cause of Christ, and he was willing to suffer for it. We Christians, after all, serve one who achieved His greatest victory on a cross. (MARK 8:34) In Mark 8:34 & 35 Jesus told His followers, **“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. (MARK 8:35) For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it..”**

There are striking parallels between Paul's actions in going to Jerusalem and Jesus' actions in going to Jerusalem. (MARK 8:31) Beginning in Mark #8 v. 31 the Bible says, **“And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. (MARK 8:32) And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. (MARK 8:33) But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.’”**

In both cases prophecy was made that the leader was going to suffer in Jerusalem. In both cases the followers objected and tried to get the leader to turn from the proposed course of action. In both cases the leader was resolute. (LUKE 9:51) In Luke #9 v. 51

the same man who wrote Acts said, “**When the days drew near for him [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.**” Both Jesus and Paul were to suffer in Jerusalem as the result of the plotting of the Jews. In both cases the Jews were to hand over the victim to the Romans for punishment. In both cases the followers did not make room for suffering in the will of God.

A couple of weeks ago we looked at the story of Alexander Ogorodnikov (ALEXANDER OGORODNIKOV), the Russian dissident and intellectual who sought to live a consistent Christian life in the face of a hostile government. When he was first arrested by the KGB, he was given a choice to either emigrate from the Soviet Union or go to prison. Alexander was released and given a month to decide. To many people the choice would have been obvious. Why suffer when you could be free and still function as a Christian and as a witness? Many of Alexander’s Christian friends encouraged him to make that choice. Alexei Navalny, the Russian dissident, made a similar choice after he was poisoned and taken to Germany.

Alexander and Alexei became convinced that it was important to serve as a witness within their own country. Alexander told his friends, “**Great deeds start with victims. We have to prove our words are not empty, and we have to prove them with our blood and our flesh. It is a great privilege to suffer for Jesus Christ. ....I cannot refuse this privilege.**” So Alexander spent 8 ½ years in prison. Alexei was murdered in a Siberian prison camp.

The opposition that these leaders faced from fellow believers was partly motivated by concern for the well being of the leaders. But it was also partly motivated by the loss that they would experience personally by seeing the leader taken from them. The highest motive Christians can have is seeking to promote that which is best for the cause of God. That was the motive that was at work in the situation of Alexander Ogorodnikov and Alexei Navalny and Jesus and Paul.

We Christians need to make room for suffering in our understanding of God’s will. Death and cancer and persecution and getting fired are all at times part of God’s sovereign will for us. We have no control over many of these things. We do at times have control over other decisions that might result in suffering for us. To complain about a serious violation of the law by our company might get us fired. To give sacrificially to some great Christian project might cause us to give up something. To speak out about our faith in Christ might lead to rejection by some of our friends.

Then how would we respond if our child or grandchild or brother or sister came and said to us that he was thinking about becoming a missionary to Thailand? Would our primary motivation in responding be concern for the well-being of that person? For the loss that we would experience personally in having them leave us? Or would our primary interest be in that which would be best for the cause of Christ?

III .

We come then to vv. 15 & 16 and PLANNING AND GOD'S WILL. (PROJECTOR ON---III. PLANNING AND GOD'S WILL) Luke writes, "**After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. 16 And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge.**" It was about a 65 mile trip from Caesarea to Jerusalem. (CAESAREA TO JERUSALEM) Counting the representatives from Greece and Asia Minor who were accompanying Paul, there were at least a dozen people in the group. It was probably too expensive for them to travel by horseback. So they probably walked. It took some planning to make sure they arrived in Jerusalem by Pentecost.

It also took some planning to figure out where they would stay. Jerusalem was a Jewish city, and Gentiles were not typically welcomed into Jewish homes. Even many of the Jewish Christians still had some prejudices and doubts about the Gentile Christians. There were a number of Gentiles who needed housing, but they lined up housing with a guy named Mnason from Cyprus. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Being from Cyprus Mnason was a Hellenistic Jew. In our earlier studies in Acts we saw that Hellenistic Jews were those who were born outside of Israel. In the early church it was these Hellenistic Jews who first began to catch the vision for bringing the gospel to Gentiles. It was at the house of one of these Hellenistic Jews, a man of long standing in the Jerusalem church, where these Christians from the West found lodging.

There are some Christians who approach life with the attitude that they don't want to do much planning. They will live their lives as the Spirit leads. The example of Paul teaches that there is value in planning. He was always thinking ahead and making plans. Those plans left room for God's intervention and direction. But he made the plans. On his second missionary trip Paul was planning to go to the province of Asia and the city of Ephesus, but Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit prevented him from doing that. Instead he received a vision in which he was told to go over to Europe.

Now Paul was fulfilling his long held plan to bring a collection to the church in Judea. We have seen that he was planning after that to go to Rome and then to Spain. As we shall see in coming weeks, that plan will be modified. Paul will eventually make it to Rome, but it will be as a prisoner. The point is that the Spirit was, and is, more likely to lead Christians who are making plans that are consistent with His revealed will and making efforts to carry them out.

There is value that comes from giving consideration to what God's will is for our nation, our church and our personal lives. What we need to keep in mind is that the thing for which God holds us accountable is obedience to his revealed will, not to finding out what his hidden, secret, sovereign will might be. If our focus is on obeying God's moral will as revealed in the Bible, we don't need to worry about getting out of the will of God. The Lord is sure to guide us. There is no guarantee of the absence of suffering. But suffering is not a sign, necessarily, of being out of the will of God.

If we are working within the boundaries of God's will, our focus in making decisions needs to be on acting wisely and rationally and faithfully, seeking to do that which is most glorifying to our Lord. Our struggle to do the will of God should not come from trying to figure out the sovereign will of God. It should come from trying to understand His revealed will and seeking the power from God to carry out our responsibilities. May God help us to be faithful to what He has already told us to do in His Word.