

Part 29: God's Leading in Life

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I just read an article warning Missoulians to prepare for road work along I-90. We've reached that dreaded season where we are now seeing those terrible signs popping up: "Road Work Ahead."

Sometimes, we are grateful to know and see the work. My street is notorious for potholes, and it's always a happy inconvenience when I see crews working on them. Other times, we are redirected by signs and cones, and when we look over we see the bridge we would have otherwise been on is being torn apart for repairs—as much as we would like to go straight through—we'd rather be on a bridge that keeps us safe.

But there are other times when we see the road signs, we are directed by cones, diverted into other lanes and yet we cannot for the life of us see where any work seems to be going on at all. For some of us—this is your sign to floor it—no one would notice. For all the firstborns in here, that's the sign of great anxiety—we see the opportunity to drive as if nothing is different—and yet we are in constant fear of a hidden cop or a rough patch of road.

I wonder if your experience as a Christian is more similar to this than you'd think. The book of Acts reminds us that Jesus is an "acting" God. The resurrection was not the end of Jesus' works—but the continuation of all that he is doing. That's why the book of Acts is often called, "The Acts of the Risen Jesus" or "The Acts of the Holy Spirit."

While very few of us will have to stand in a court and make a defense for how we followed the road work signs—everyone will have to stand before God and give an account for how we followed him and his plans.

Sometimes we have the privilege of seeing with great clarity the way in which Jesus is leading us and we are encouraged and eager to follow. But other times we are frustrated. We might encounter road blocks that we didn't expect and say, "Are you even working at all?" Or maybe, others of us are so crippled by making the wrong decision that you just pull off to the side of the road and wait for some miraculous moment of clarity to occur.

At a surface level, our passage today might just seem like a travel narrative with a few odd roadblocks along the way. But if we look closely we will see how God guided his church forward in mission. God is at work—and he's at work guiding the church. This passage today shows us how God led the early church in mission—and while we are not in 1st Century Asia—we might encounter some principles of how God leads us today as well.

The intersection between God's will and our daily decisions is frequently either neglected or mysticized. But our passage today helps us see with confident clarity how God moves even when things might seem unclear. When we see how Jesus is working through the church—our work seems to find clarity even when things seem confusing.

Our main point this morning is this: **Discerning the will of God means following the work of God.** And we will see that in two points today: first we will see **How God leads the church** and second we will see **Where God leads the church.**

The context leading up to our text today is important. If you have your Bible open, you'll notice that in Acts 15 the two major churches in the area gathered together to clarify on the gospel. The gospel is the wonderful good news of salvation by grace through faith. Faith in Jesus and that alone saves.

And the result of this good news being defended is that the messengers of the gospel spread like wildfire. The leaders in Antioch and Jerusalem defended the gospel. Then the delegates delivered the letter with the clear statement on the gospel to local towns. Last week we saw that Paul and Barnabas split up—and yet this unfortunate break up led to two mission parties who both went to encourage more and more churches. And as these men went to work—churches were strengthened everywhere they went. Jesus blessed their labors.

If we just read this passage from a human level, it seems like this work of church growth is dependent largely on the consensus and cooperation of human men, and human ministers. It's true that God is doing work through these things, these are good things, and necessary things. But Paul's travels and ministry in Philippi remind us that God's work is not reliant upon us. Our work is reliant upon God.

God reminds us of this in what might be the strangest passage in the whole book of Acts. Up till this point, Paul and Silas have been moving freely to whichever area and church they desired but here is where things get interesting: **Acts 16:6-10**, "And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them."

One of the most confusing experiences I've ever had in life was buying a wedding ring to propose to Sarah. First, I shopped online and realized that there were words, categories, and stones that I didn't know existed. Because of this, I went into a few jewelry stores. There I was informed of more options, sizes, layouts, cuts and kinds than I could imagine, let alone pay for.

I wish I had an experience like Paul in this text. I went to Sarah and asked her what she wanted in a ring or what she wanted me to look for. She gave me nothing. And despite how hard I prayed, no section of the store was blocked off to me, and no vision appeared telling me what ring to purchase. But don't I too have the Holy Spirit?

Is that what you expect God's guidance to look like? And is that actually what is happening in this text? Well, here's where we can examine our first point this morning: **How God leads the church.**

There's a lot we don't know about the experience of the men in this text. But we will best be helped focusing on what we do know.

Luke tells us that the men wanted to preach the word of God in Asia (to the south). But they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to do so. Then when they attempted to go into Bithynia (to the north), the Holy Spirit again (here called the Spirit of Christ) did not allow them.

We also know that Paul had a vision. We've seen visions before in the book of Acts—but those visions were typically introduced as direct visions or dreams from God. While it's clear God worked through this vision—it isn't introduced with the same sort of emphasis. It just says he had a vision in the night. The content of the vision was a man from Macedonia, a region further west in Greece, who said, "Come over and help us."

What did this prohibition look like? What did it mean that the Spirit didn't allow them to enter Bithynia? We don't know!

This redirecting could have been miraculous. Paul was no stranger to such things. We've seen the resurrected Jesus speak to him. We've also seen times where the Holy Spirit "spoke" to Philip in Acts 8. But we don't see any verbs like, "appear," "spoke," or "showed," we only know that he prevented.

Given this lack of evidence, it's my opinion that what we are seeing here is the supernaturally ordinary way in which God generally guides the Christian. Was it God who closed the door to those areas? Yes! Was it God who opened the door to Macedonia? Yes! But we don't know how he revealed it to these guys, only that they knew God was leading them.

We see in Acts 17 that Paul is barred from entering the city again by the human officials there, but in 1 Thessalonians he says that it was Satan who prevented him. So was it supernatural, or natural? Both! Later on we read of Paul being given a by God what he called, "a thorn in his flesh," that hindered him. He prayed three times to the Lord to remove it—but at some point he discerned that it was God's will that he should learn to live with it.

When we believe in a sovereign God—we are right to say that he's behind everything we encounter in life. He is not only transcendent and distinct from us—but immanent, he's near to us. He guides our lives, he knows our days, not a sparrow falls from the sky without his permission.

And it appears here that what is happening with these men is that they are encountering something in life that they came to understand was the will of God—and they did their best to obey it.

How might you discern the experience of God's leading in life? Do you expect to attend some school of prophecy where we learn how to read mysterious signs and smells? We certainly don't see that in scripture. But instead of a school of prophecy—we've been given a clearer word of prophecy. God's word. This is the primary way God leads us: ***Supremely Through Scripture***

Scripture is the clearest statement on God's will for us—it is the only source of definitive revelation. Peter himself, who witnessed miracles and supernatural signs, said this: **2 Peter 1:19-21**, "And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your heart, knowing this first of all that no prophecy of scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."

Where do we know most concretely God's will for us in life? In his word! We just witnessed this in the Jerusalem council, they heard human witness, and they considered it, but the ultimate judge for what was fitting was how it accorded with God's word.

This prevents us from falling prey to what I call "open or closed door theology." Sometimes we can say, "If God didn't want me to do this, then why would he give me this opportunity?" But consider the story of Jonah. Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh. And it just so happened, that one day he went down to the docks, and it just so happened that there was a boat willing to take him on, and it just so happened that their boat was heading to a port as far away from Nineveh as he could get. He probably did what we often do, "If God really wanted me to go to Nineveh, then why would he lead me to this dock, to this boat, going to this city! This must be the will of God!"

But the problem was he already had the will of God revealed more clearly to him in his word. God told him to go to Nineveh.

So too, you might say, "I tried to share the gospel and I just wasn't good at it. God must be telling me that's not for me." Or maybe, "I'm just so tired, this must be God's sign that I need to pull back from Christian fellowship and discipleship." It could be you need to pull back from lots of things! It could be that you're not cut out to be a world famous evangelist—but all Christians are told to submit themselves to the disciplines of grace and duty of fellowship. God word gives us clarity on life's diverse data points.

Sometimes, God's word brings us the clarity we need to make wise decisions. But sometimes God's word doesn't seem to speak with immediate clarity on an issue. But if we look this passage we can see three helpful principles for discerning God's will in our own life.

First, notice how we best discern God's work and will when we are already *in action*.

These men weren't waiting around for God to tell them what to do. They were already out doing what they knew God wanted them to do! Sometimes we disguise in wisdom and waiting what the Bible would reveal to us as slothful and lazy. God's providence isn't meant to paralyze us—it's meant to propel us! As Paul says, "Whatever you do, work heartily as for the Lord and not for men."

There was a period of waiting for the Christian. Jesus said, "Wait for the Holy Spirit to come upon you." But once we are filled with the Holy Spirit, for the Christian this is as soon as you believe, you are no longer to wait but to go and be his witnesses to the end of the earth. We have many college students here, many young adults who have yet to find the career they hope to be in, and we have a growing number of folks entering the 4th quarter of life. You might wonder at times: "What am I supposed to be doing? What does God want me to do?"

God has already told you what to do! Jesus already said, "Don't worry about what you will wear, or what you will eat, or where you will live. He says this in **Luke 12:30-31**, "For all the nations of the world seek after these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things will be added to you."

Don't be paralyzed about what God might want for you tomorrow while neglecting what God has called you to today. If you dedicate yourself to following Jesus in the context of a local church, pursuing growth in holiness in your private life, laboring for evangelism at work, and service in the body of Christ—I

promise you will lack no identity crisis. God rebukes the static—but guides those who actively follow him.

These men weren't sitting on their hands hoping for clarity—they were on the move and when they thought they reached the end—God opened up new doors. I love this quote by Kevin DeYoung: "So go marry someone, provided you're equally yoked and you actually like being with each other. Go get a job, provided it's not wicked. Go live somewhere in something with somebody or nobody. But put aside the passivity and the quest for complete fulfillment and the perfectionism and the preoccupation with the future, and for God's sake start making some decisions in your life. Don't wait for the liver-shiver. If you are seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, you will be in God's will, so just go out and do something."

These men were busy following God already, and that helped them discern God's will.

Second, we discern best the work of God in our lives *in community*.

Who saw the vision of the Macedonian man? Paul did, right? But notice how Paul submitted this vision to the counsel of the whole group: **Acts 16:10**, "And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them."

This is one of the few places where Luke inserts himself into the narrative. He was not only the historian of the early church, but at times he joined Paul's travels with him. And though Paul received the vision it is the plurality of the group together who sought to go, and who concluded that God was calling them to preach the gospel in Macedonia.

It doesn't tell us that Paul had a dream, and that he was so certain on his own this was a divine revelation that he said, "This is what the Lord says we should do." Instead the verb is that they "assuredly gathered," and "put together in one's mind" all the information collectively.

It's as if Paul came to these guys and said, "Hey, I had a vision last night, and I could be wrong, but I think God would have us go to Macedonia." And they guys got together and recollected about their goals of sharing the gospel, they looked at the places that God had kept them out of, and they said, "Yeah, I think you're right."

The Bible doesn't teach us to be interpreter of dreams—but it does give us a community of dreamers who want to help one another submit to God's clear goals in life. We should have sanctified dreams! We should dream of the person we want to marry, we should dream of the gospel being preached. But our dreams, our hopes and everything else need to be submitted not only to Scripture but also to the wise counsel of others.

Thirds, we best discern the work of God not only in community but *in light of what is already clear*. What did they discern God wanted them to do? To preach the gospel! What had they already been doing? Preaching the gospel.

Remember, Paul had already been told that he was going to carry the gospel message to the far away reaches of the world. So what they discerned here wasn't a hard left turn from what was already known. Instead it was a clarifying next step in light of what they already knew!

What Paul wasn't doing something different—he was doing the same thing in a different place. So far, this second missionary journey was focused on encouraging the churches that were already established with the gospel--and as the team began to turn to areas which didn't yet have churches--God directed them to a new place in specific.

When we know what God wants us to do--to preach Christ and to help others follow him--we rarely suffer identity crises. You could put Paul in a McDonalds drive-through, and he'd know what he's supposed to be doing. The same should be true for you. Where you live and who cuts your paycheck doesn't dictate what you are called to do. What we do for a living financially is not what we do for a living! The finances we make, the plans we make are meant to serve our life in Christ, not the other way around.

We are all called to ministry in the church, as the church, and God will lead us into fruitful ministry--never away from it. When the circumstances of life rear their head, we assess them through this lens: how does this help me do what God has called me to do as a Christian?

God's will in our lives is markedly evangelistic and church centric.

We can see this again if we **hold up a map**. By this point the guys had come out from Syria and moved into central (Modern day) Turkey. Then they moved south and desired to into the region called, Asia. From there they would have had access to the costal valleys and cities and large population in the south. Being prohibited from entering there, they went north. But when they north, there they were stopped again from entering Bithynia. If there were able to enter there, the whole northern half of Turkey would be available to them.

Their goals were clear—they wanted to preach Christ on the entire peninsula. But God had other plans. Being prohibited from moving south and moving north, their option was go back. But they knew they were called to advance the gospel. The only geographic option then was what? Crossing over into Macedonia. They wanted to evangelize the remaining areas in Turkey—but God wanted to bring the gospel to Europe.

This is our second point this morning. The ***Where God Leads the Church***.

God leads us through his Spirit, among his people, and according to his will--but he also does so to accomplish his greatest work. God is the greatest missionary. He's the best evangelist. And he's leading us just as he pleases. God leads the church into mission.

So from Troas we read this: **Acts 16:11-12**, "So setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days.

What's interesting to note is that Troas, the port they left from Turkey to sail to Greece, is only 25 miles from what is called, "The Hellespont." A few hundred years earlier, Xerxes and the Persian army attempted the unfathomable. They bridged the sea that connected Asia and Europe.

Coming largely the same way Paul and his companions did, Xerxes massive army came to the same stretch of shore. Their goal was simple--conquer Greece, and from there all of Europe.

His army was huge. While likely overstated, the historian Herodotus wrote that all his men with their horses would drink entire rivers dry. Xerxes was undeterred, he strung together boats to create a floating bridge to cross the sea. The first bridge failed, the second one succeeded. He connected a six hundred of his boats to each other and to each shore, he covered them with wood and dirt so that the horses couldn't see the water below and panic. And all his men crossed over and began their conquest.

It was short lived, the greatest army of the day, capable of inventing one of the marvels of the world, made it just past Athens before they were turned back.

And in the same spot man attempted to take Europe for his own name with hundreds of thousands of soldiers and weapons, God sent a handful of men with nothing more than a zeal for the lost and the message of the gospel.

The rest, as they say, is history. As we will see, once in Europe, without swords, without human power, the gospel took root. It takes them through Greece, it takes Paul to Rome, which became the first Christian Empire, and until recently Europe was the leading bastion of Christianity and Christian missionaries--a status held for nearly two thousand years.

When we entrust ourselves, when we defer our own dreams and plans to God--he does far more than we could ever think. You might never see how God is going to work through your faithful obedience to love him and preach his message--but God is always working. We work, and we work with clarity, because we have seen the clear plan of Jesus to bring salvation to the lost and to care for his people through his local churches.

Paul didn't live to see the day that Christianity swept the whole continent. But he did live to see the day where God began to work in small ways in the Macedonian town of Philippi—a work we will look at next week.

If we expect God to lead us into greater worldly comfort, greater worldly clarity, greater worldly wealth and community—we will often find ourselves frustrated and wondering if God is working at all. But God has not promised to lead us into those things—but he has promised to lead us into holiness. He has promised to lead us into greater fellowship with him. He has promised to lead us to the nations where he will redeem the lost by the labors of the found. And he has promised to lead us faithfully through the veil of death and into the Kingdom of God for all eternity.

And because he leads us, we find ample work to do. So may we have gospel dreams! May God so organize our affections with his actions so that we might say: “God has called us to preach the gospel to them.” And might God, as he will do in Philippi—saved the lost and sustain the Christian.