

It was 1983... October 31... the day after Halloween. We had just moved to our little apartment in Portland Oregon from Fresno – four months prior. ... I was a new student in seminary... Patti and I did not have any children yet. ... An intriguing news story broke over the radio. (FOX News was not on the air yet and I got my “news-junkie fix” primarily from the radio.) The story captivated me... and I knew I’d have to remember it... because it would make a great illustration one day.

On that day in 1983... Korean Airlines... flight 007 departed from Anchorage Alaska... for a direct flight to Seoul Korea. ... Unknown to the crew... however... the computer engaging the flight navigation system contained a one-and-a-half-degree routing error. ... At the point of departure... the mistake was unnoticeable. ... One hundred miles out... the deviation was still small enough as to be undetected. ... But the further the giant 747 flew... the more than one-degree-error made a difference. ... Increasingly it strayed off course and eventually flew into Soviet air space.

Soviet radar picked it up and fighter jets scrambled into the air to intercept the airbus. ... Over mainland Russia... the jets shot flight 007 out of the sky and everyone on board lost their lives.

Only a one-degree error made all the difference as they flew on
... - ONE and a half DEGREE!!!

Sometime the poor choices you and I make in life... will only hurt us minimally at first. ... We may not even notice... but the longer we go . . . the more harm they bring.

Understanding and following the will of God in our lives is **SO CRUCIAL**. If you are aware that you may be off by one or two degrees in following God's will for your life – and think that it is O.K. because it is only one or two degrees (not that much) please re-think your position ... before you go much further!

Or perhaps you are here this morning asking yourself right about now. ... *"I don 't know if I am off by one degree or 180 degrees ... because I first need to know how to discern God's will for my life"*. If you are wondering **that** – or ever **have** ever wondered how to know God's will for your life ... then today's passage in ACTS is another one of those passages... that I think offer us a lot of help.

Many of you know that I wrote my doctoral dissertation on a subject that is closely related to discovering God's will. (It was more focused on how a pastor understands that they are called by God to ministry.) ... But even after hundreds of hours of study on the subject of God's will... I realize how little I still know. However... with all the study that I did on the subject... one of the things that stands out ... comes out strong in our passage in Acts this morning.

"How can I know the will of God for me? How will He guide me so that I can know and do what He wants?" ... This often appears to be the most baffling questions for Believers. ... Nearly every Christian... at one time or another... finds themselves concluding that it is vitally important to figure out **WHAT** God wants them to do and/or **WHERE** He would have them do it. ... Now here is the stand out truth that I learned... which comes out in our passage today. "What" and "Where" – as they pertain to God's will... are NOT the most important issues.

When it comes to discovering God's will for our lives... the entire matter always seems to revolve around "What?" (What do You want me to do, Lord?) ... and "Where would You have me do it?" But this is the wrong focus.

Let me tell you up-front that today's passage demonstrates that the important thing to God is **not our making the right discovery**. Knowing the destination or the activity where He wants to place us... may be important to us . . . but it is not that important to God. ... I am convinced that what is more important to God... is **the process** of our discovering it. (What are you depending on... while you are trying to determine God's will?) ... Seeking God's will is all a part of learning to depend on Him.

You see once we have learned to depend on Him in every activity – you can hardly avoid God's leading you to the "WHAT" and the "WHERE". When we have learned to lean on God completely – it is not at all difficult for God to direct you in what He wants you to do. The rest is really very simple.

Today we open the 16th chapter of ACTS. But before we actually turn there, I would like to take another brief look at the passage we dealt with last week. Not only will we get a running start into today's passage ... but we also find one of our principles there.

ACTS 15:36-41

Here we read the sad account of the sharp contention between Paul and Barnabas. Many have said, "Which of these men was right?" There have been a lot of disagreements over that, so that many people have had "sharp contention" between them over whether Paul or Barnabas was right. But that is really not the point.

As I indicated last week ... I believe both of these men were right. ... One was looking at the **work** (task) and the other at the **person** (the hurting John Mark). As Paul looked at the work he was perfectly right to say, *"We don't want somebody who is apt to cop out on us."* ... And he might have quoted the words of Jesus in Luke 9:62 - *"If any man puts his hand to the plow and turns back, he is not worthy of the kingdom of God."*

On the other hand... Barnabas... I am sure he would have agreed as to the importance of the work... but he was primarily looking at the young man. He knew Mark was gifted. Sure, he had failed; but who doesn't? Who of us does not need a second chance, does not need to have a forgiving spirit exercised toward us, and the opportunity to try again? So Barnabas was willing to give Mark a second chance.

There are times when there are differences of viewpoint which require a separation. The will of God was that Barnabas should take Mark and go to Cyprus, because Cyprus, his birthplace, had not been visited since the churches there had been founded. And it was the will of God for Paul to take Silas and go into Syria and Cilicia, because the churches there needed his particular ministry.

But it was not the will of God that they should be sharp in their contention. Their quarreling was not right. It **was** the will of God to separate... it was not the will of God to quarrel.

There are times when the Spirit of God does lead Christians to go separate ways. But they should do so with joy and with an agreeable understanding that the mind of the Spirit has been expressed in their divergent viewpoints.

The first principle that I would like to present to you this morning in understanding the way God guides is: **WHENEVER THERE APPEARS TO BE IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCE OF OPINIONS – GOD EXPECTS A CORDIAL SEPARATION, SO THAT THERE REMAINS A UNITY OF SPIRIT.**

Have you ever wondered what the will of God was for you... because you faced irreconcilable differences with another Christian... or perhaps a church... and you ended up going separate ways...? “OK... *Now what... Lord...?*” ... Unfortunatly this happens a lot among Believers. ... After the struggle... both sides are left wondering what is God’s will now... “*Where do we go from here?*”

LISTEN – If you have ever experienced such a separation... do all that you can to keep it pleasant. Don’t bad-mouth the other party... no matter how badly they hurt you. The first principle about the process of discovering God’s will... is that if there has been a separation... keep things cordial.

Whatever you lost during the breaking away... (your sense of respectability... position... wealth...) – can you depend on God to restore whatever you painfully lost... and need...? Depend on God for whatever has been taken. Bad-mouthing... and vengeful actions will not accomplish nearly as much... as a faithful dependence on God.

Just before we get to today's passage of study, I have one more thing to call to your attention. ... Sometimes God purposely withholds His will from us – BECAUSE WE ARE TOO INFLEXIBLE. We are not ready to move. We saw in the passage above how Silas was able to drop everything and respond to the call to go with Paul. .. and in the opening verses of today's passage... the same will be true for a young man named Timothy. Both Silas and Timothy were flexible enough to respond to God's call.

If you truly want to know God's will for your life... you must first make your heart flexible. ... Part of the important process of finding God's will... is to go to God in prayer and ask Him to show you any area of your life where you are not as flexible as He wants you to be.

And let's be honest... They could be open to changes of plan, because their purpose in life was clear. Listen Folks –DAILY GUIDANCE IS GIVEN TO THOSE WHO ARE SET IN THE ULTIMATE WILL OF GOD.

How dare we think that God owes us a view of His will before we are ready to stop playing games with Him. ... If our greatest aim in life is to have a good (and easier) time... we should not expect Him to reveal His will.

To know God's will:

- ✓ Become as flexible as you can to respond in willingness to it, when He reveals His will.
- ✓ Know and live by the truth that God has you here to serve Him – and not the other way around.

ACTS 16:1-5

Coming back to this area certainly called for a lot of courage on the part of Paul. ... Do you remember what happened the last time he visited Lystra...? ... Lystra was where Paul had earlier been brutally beaten... and left for dead. ... And now... it was where Paul found and received Timothy.

How had Timothy become a disciple of Christ? ... Probably in the same way Paul had been influenced toward the gospel by the stoning of Stephen. ... At Lystra Paul had gone through Stephen's experience—though not to death... and Timothy more than likely saw it (all the Believers of that small town did)... He would have been drawn to the Christ for whom Paul was willing to suffer.

Undoubtedly during this time the apostle reflected much on the misery of his being beaten and pelted by rocks in Lystra. He also had the separation from his beloved Barnabas... for which he must have been asked over and over... *“Where’s Barnabas...? You two - separated...? Why...?”* Both experiences would have had constant reminders... and bring Paul to revisit his disappointment and pain.

How difficult this must have been!

But Paul was not about to turn away from his commitment to the Lord to look after these new believers... because of his hurts. Not going back there for the sake of their development in the faith... because the task would be too painful... or difficult... simply was not an option.

LISTEN... if you want to be on course with God's will in your life... part of that process is to be actively engaged in following through with prior commitments that He has led you to. Paul had unfinished business to his calling... and difficulty was not an automatic closed door.

As you seek God's will – the process of discovery is most important:

- ✓ Become as flexible as you can to respond in willingness to it, when He reveals His will.
- ✓ Know and live by the truth that God has you here to serve Him – and not the other way around.
- ✓ Actively engage in following through with your prior commitments – even though pain and hardship may be involved

But God loves to bring joy and hope during times of such difficulty. In the midst of all the painful reminders... Paul found Timothy!

Two things would prompt the calling of Timothy. Paul would need much help in his traveling. Without the modern conveniences of our day, many matters would need attending by an attendant if Paul was to concentrate on proclaiming the Gospel. ... But more than that... being half Gentile and half Jew... Timothy could bridge both cultures. Perhaps if John Mark had been along, they could not have taken on another young trainee. The sovereign God makes excellent use of even the most trying circumstances.

You see... God has a regular habit... of bringing honey from the carcass of a lion. (We saw that when we studied Judg. 14:5-18... and now we see it again - figuratively). God likes to bring honey from the carcass of a lion... in order to... demonstrate His easy sovereignty. We can depend on Him!

God blessed Paul with Timothy. ... But why did Timothy need the excruciating procedure of circumcision...? (Ouch! It is painful enough to do this on a baby... but Timothy had it done when he was an adult...)

When Paul wrote to the Galatians, he wrote: "*Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing.*" ... And Paul would not give in to those who wanted to circumcise Titus (That happened earlier... and is found in Galatians 2:5.) Furthermore Paul and Silas had just scored a HUGE victory at the Jerusalem council that determined once and for all – that circumcision was not necessary. ... Paul wrote to the Galatians circumcision was nothing... He would not allow Titus to be circumcised... and the Council of Jerusalem had ruled it unnecessary. ... So why did he do this to Timothy...?

In the case of Titus... it would have been devastating to have circumcised him. ... It would have meant yielding to the whole concept of legalism... and baptizing it as a Christian teaching to have allowed this young man... wholly a Greek... a Gentile... to be circumcised.

But the case of Timothy is different. ... Timothy was a Jew. ... In order not to offend the Jews (to whom they were first taking the Gospel)... in every city... they had to keep the door open for a hearing. He did not want unnecessary fights on nonessentials...

Again, it was not a matter of Timothy's salvation or personal character, but rather of avoiding serious problems that would surely become stumbling blocks. It is a wise spiritual leader who knows how and when to apply the principles of the Word of God... when to stand firm and when to yield.

The existence of need does not constitute God's will for you to address it. (We are going to see this again in the next paragraph.) The Jews needed to be taught that circumcision was nothing. Maybe it would have been good for Paul to defy the Jews wrongful expectation... and NOT have Timothy circumcised... in order to point to a truth that they needed. ... But the presence of need alone... is not proof that God's will is for us to address it.

ACTS 16:6-8

In His sovereign grace... God led Paul WEST into what we find out in verse 9 and 10 will be Europe. (Macedonia is on the continent of Europe.) And Paul visits other places on that continent. ... But would not allow them to go further NORTH or to the EAST - into Asia. Why...? Because they had less need of the Gospel in these areas...? ... Of course not! They had just as great of need.

The mere existence of need is not proof of God's leading.

(It is interesting to speculate how world history might have been changed had Paul been sent to Asia instead of to Europe.)

Specifically how did the Holy Spirit restrain them? Through the bestowing or removing of a subjective sense of peace? Possibly. That is often how he directs us in our day-to-day lives. Or possibly it was through difficult circumstances, such as transportation problems or illness.

I'd like for you to notice something that is interesting here. In Verse 8, Luke says, "*They went down to Troas.* But jump down, for just a moment to Verse 10. It says "*And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach...*"

This is where Luke joins the party. By that change in pronouns, from "they" to "we," Luke indicates that he has now joined the expedition. We do not know where he came from, or how he got there, or what contact he had with Paul.

But Luke was a physician. It could be that Paul, Silas, and now Timothy met up with Luke because of an illness. It is not improbable that maybe illness closed some of these doors and helped direct them. It is not unlike God to sometimes lead us by closing doors through such things as physical illness.

We simply don't know for sure, although this may be a clue about God's leading of the expedition. ... Personally I think, although I will not be dogmatic, that it was illness.

We don't know for sure HOW God led them... and neither do we know the why. ... Only God knew the reason why Paul was not yet to undertake the mission into Asia. There may have been laymen witnessing in the area and God was using their witness to mellow (prepare) the people, or perhaps the people were just not ready for the gospel, or perhaps some potential opposition had to be removed first. The reasons could go on and on. The point to see is that God knew best. He knew the whole situation.

The believer must always trust God's leadership, the closing of doors as well as the opening of doors. The most important part about discovering God's will is the process... and part of that process must include trusting God's leadership.

As you seek God's will:

- ✓ Become as flexible as you can to respond in willingness to it, when He reveals His will.
- ✓ Know and live by the truth that God has you here to serve Him – and not the other way around.
- ✓ Actively engage in following through with your prior commitments – even though pain and hardship may be involved.
- ✓ Trust God's leadership.

What kept Paul going despite estrangement, sickness, disappointment, and closed doors? His simple faith that God was in control of his life. Later while in a Roman jail, as his detractors took advantage of his imprisonment to build up their own following, he said, "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel" (Phil. 1:12). God rules! To the Corinthians he wrote, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair" (2 Cor. 4:8). He kept trusting in God!

Paul refused to indulge himself with "what ifs." "If only we had never taken John Mark along in the first place... if only John Mark had not asked to go again... if I did not always get sick... if I were smarter... if I had stayed home." It would have been so easy to pity himself, but instead he kept trusting and following Christ.

Paul kept moving and changing direction at every closed door (without knowing why.) And please notice that Paul, Silas, and Timothy were not just sitting around, waiting for undeniable signs. They were moving.

In seeking God's will for your life... go where there appears to be an open door... and trust that He will close doors that He does not want you to go through.

Finally Paul was stopped by the Aegean Sea. His 400 mile journey came to a boundary limit. ... At this juncture, he needed some positive directing and God gave it to him.

Acts 16:9-10

God directs step by step. When we need to know, God will inform us.

Paul was informed in due time where to go and whether it included committing himself to making the trip across the Aegean Sea. Knowing this is part of trusting God's leadership.

You and I really don't need to have a perfect road map. We can trust that God will do for us just what He did for Paul and his companions here. ... He gives us guidance step-by-step when we need to know it.

As you seek God's will:

- ✓ Become as flexible as you can to respond in willingness to it, when He reveals His will.
- ✓ Know and live by the truth that God has you here to serve Him – and not the other way around.
- ✓ Actively engage in following through with your prior commitments – even though pain and hardship may be involved.
- ✓ Trust God's leadership. He will give us what we need (step-by-step) when we need it.
- ✓ Go where there appears to be an open door, and trust God to close it if it isn't from Him.

A believer should never be discouraged by closed doors. God is the One who closes the door, and if He does, it is for one of two reasons.

- 1) To protect His dear follower.
- 2) To open a greater door for His servant. God alone sees the future and knows everything that is happening around the world. Therefore, God alone knows when His dear follower needs to be protected and when he is needed someplace else.

God will lead us according to his own perfect plan for our lives and ministries. ... It is important throughout the process though... to keep the right attitude. ... Why God directs us west... when we want or expect to go north... we do not know. ... Why He did not give Paul a vision at the beginning instead of the end... we cannot fully explain.

But this we do know: God directs us through every situation, the apparently good and the apparently bad. We need to yield to his caring hand. – Become dependent on Him... as you seek His will for every matter of your life.