

23. Following the will of God

January 12, 2014

Right here in this room, there are many different types of music being played. You are thinking, "OK, the preacher is really losing it now as he is getting older." No, I am not losing my mind, yet. In addition to that, there are even photos and stories passing right by you all over and you don't even know about it.

Why can you not hear the music and see the photos and hear the stories? Because you don't have the right receiver. If you have a AM and FM radio, you can hear the music. If you have a TV or a WIFI smart phone or an iP ad or other web browsing device, you can hear the stories and see the photos.

The will of God is broadcast to you and you need to have the right receiver to hear and know His will. Some Christians call it being sensitive to the Holy Spirit.

This morning we are going to learn how to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit so that we may know how to be guided by His leading to do His will obediently .

A. THE BEGINNING OF PAUL'S SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Acts 16:1-5 Then he came to Derbe and Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father was Greek. 2 He was well spoken of by the brethren who were at Lystra and Iconium. 3 Paul wanted to have him go on with him. And he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek. 4 And as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. 5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily.

According to the estimate of some of the Bible commentators, the first missionary journey finished about five years before the second missionary journey started. Paul wanted to see for himself how the work of the Lord continued among these churches he founded five years before.

Paul was impressed enough with Timothy to ask him to join their missionary team. This shows God's provision, because John Mark and Barnabas were not with Paul. No single worker in God's kingdom is irreplaceable. I don't know when the Lord will take me home, but the work He started here in Calvary Chapel of Sahuarita will continue. That's why I am doing everything I can to make that transition smoothly .

Let's meet this young man Timothy briefly. I wouldn't be surprised if Timothy was converted to Christianity from Judaism through the ministry of Paul and Barnabas in Lystra because Paul called Timothy "my beloved son" in 1 Corinthians chapter 4 and "my own son in the faith" in 1 Timothy chapter 1. I am sure that Timothy's Jewish mom and grandma prepared the young man's heart long before Paul brought the truth of God through the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the years that followed, as Paul's protege, Timothy played an important part in the expansion and strengthening of the churches. He traveled with Paul and was often his special ambassador to the "trouble spots" in the work, such as Corinth. He became pastor of the church in Ephesus and probably joined Paul in Rome shortly before the apostle was martyred.

V3 is, in my opinion, one of the most controversial verses in the Book of Acts. Why did apostle Paul who fought tooth and nail against those legalists from the Jerusalem church circumcise Timothy before they went on their missionary journey? There are two schools of thoughts in this:

1) To appease the Jewish people to whom they were going to minister

Many Bible scholars believe that Paul did not contradict his belief or the decrees of the Jerusalem church council when he had Timothy circumcised. Paul did not do this for Timothy's salvation or right standing with God, but so that Timothy's status as a non-circumcised man from a Jewish mother would not hinder their work among the Jews and in synagogues. As Paul saw it, being a good Christian did not mean being a bad Jew.

In other words, Paul did things for the sake of love for his Jewish unbelievers, not for the sake of trying to please God through legalism. However, Paul insisted that Titus, a Gentile co-worker, did not have to be circumcised in Galatians chapter 2.

2) Paul made a mistake by compromising the grace of God with a legalistic approach.

But some Bible students believe that Paul was giving the Jews and the Gentiles two confusing messages – the first one that declares that we are saved by the grace of God alone without human effort; the second one that brings forth the idea that you need to be circumcised to be saved.

Though the story of the true intention of Paul may start as he intended, but by the time it passed from one ear to next, the story would be changed and some details would be left out. The only thing people would get is, "Paul circumcised Timothy before they went on their journey to meet the Jews in the regions."

What would I do if I was Paul? I would not have Timothy circumcised.

Is this a big event we should take notice and follow? No, whether it was done with a pure non-legalistic mindset of Paul or one-time compromise by Paul, it really does not make the difference in the core doctrines of Christianity. God knows Paul's heart, but we don't. The Bible records everything – good things of Paul as well as bad.

B. GOD'S GUIDANCE TO MACEDONIA

Acts 16:6-10 Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. 7 After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. 8 So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. 9 And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them.

After visiting the churches he had founded, Paul tried to enter the new territory for the Lord by traveling east into Asia Minor which is the modern day Turkey and Bithynia, but the Lord closed the door.

The word 'forbidden' in Greek is derived from "kolos", and older word that means "to cut short." In a sense, the missionaries forged ahead in one direction, and the Holy Spirit cut them off. They went another way; they were cut off again.

Was it because there were not enough people in those regions to evangelize? No, because it was not the right time according to God's timetable.

Like wise, in our lives, God will sometimes shut down an exciting ministry or allow obstacles in our paths like sickness, financial difficulties, job failure, or a relationship breakup. At times like these, it's easy to become frustrated and disheartened. We can't imagine why God would shut some of the doors. So we try to explain it, saying, "Maybe we just made a mistake..." or "Maybe we need to try harder." But when Christ closes a door, He already has His sights on something better – something around the corner we cannot see yet. For Paul, that something was Europe.

Let me ask you this question: How many of you are waiting upon the Lord for His will for a particular situation? Please raise your hand. A good number of you. Me, too. If you've been a Christian for sometime and you've learned that the best thing for us to do is follow His will every step of the way. But sometimes knowing His will can be quite a challenge.

We follow the will of God by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But how does He guide us? Does He speak to us with the booming bass voice from heaven with soft angelic background music or loud thunders and flashing lightning all around? Or does He open up heaven and write His instruction on the sky? Or does He text to your cell phone?

Today we have the Bible as 'a lamp' and 'light' to guide our way. We do not need to search our dreams or wait for visions to confirm God's direction for us. The principles in His Word direct us or the Lord uses godly people's biblical counsels to our open doors.

Billy Graham once said, "The will of God will not take us where the grace of God cannot sustain us." Whatever situation you are in by His will, He is with you and will guide you with His grace. Just to put your mind at ease, let me say this: the Lord is more willing to guide you than you want to be guided by Him.

So, was Paul being disobedient by trying to go to Phrygia or Bithynia? No, I don't believe so. I believe that he and his missionary team were anxious to go to the new territory to evangelize to new people. Whether it was done in their assumption or not, the Lord guided them by stopping them.

Don't think that either the Lord is being cruel and mean to you because He stops you from doing something godly or He is not answering your prayer requests. Stopping us is as important as allowing us to do His will.

I like what Gerhart Tersteegen, a German Reformer from 17th Century said, "As long as we want to be different from what God wants us to be at the time, we are only tormenting ourselves to no purpose.

Paul wisely didn't choose to insist on getting his way to continue to Galatia or Bithynia. That would be disobedience in his part. Sometimes the Lord will lead us differently than we would like to go. But what we must come to recognize is that the will of God is perfect, and we should never be afraid of it.

Once Paul's team got the green light from the Lord to go to Macedonia through Troas, they were busy preparing themselves to go into the new continent – across the Aegean Sea to Europe.

But before we jump on the ship with the team, please notice that there is a new team member. Have you noticed that the pronoun up to this point from the beginning of the Book was "they," "their," and "them"? But in v10, the pronoun has changed to "we". Possibly a citizen of Troas, Doctor Luke joins the mission as Paul's physician and the author of this very important Book.

C. WELCOME TO PHILIPPI

Acts 16:11-15 Therefore, sailing from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and the next day came to Neapolis, 12 and from there to Philippi, which is the foremost city of that part of Macedonia, a colony. And we were staying in that city for some days. 13 And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there. 14 Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. 15 And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." So she persuaded us.

From Troas to Neapolis, the port of Philippi was a distance of about 150 miles, and it took them two days to make the journey by ship. Philippi was located ten miles inland from Neapolis.

Philippi was a Roman colony, which meant that it was a "Rome away from Rome." The emperor organized "colonies" by ordering Roman citizens, especially retired military people, to live in selected places so there would be strong pro-Roman cities in these important areas. Though living on foreign soil, the citizens were expected to be loyal to Rome, to obey the laws of Rome, and to give honor to the Roman emperor. In return, they were given certain political privileges as well as exemption from taxes. This was their reward for leaving their homes in Italy and relocating elsewhere.

The Jewish population in Philippi must have been very small since there was no synagogue there. It required a minimum of ten men for the founding of a synagogue.

Anyone who was a seller of purple dye handles a valuable and luxurious product. The dyes used for making purple garments were expensive and highly regarded. This woman was the first convert in Europe, and a successful business woman from Thyatira, a city renowned for its purple dye.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) Regarding the will and timing of God, He always has answers for us. If our request is wrong, God says, "No"; if our timing is wrong, God says, "Slow"; if we are wrong, God says, "Grow"; but if our request is right and the timing is right, God says, "Go."

2) Sometimes the Lord will lead us differently than we would like to go. But what we must come to recognize is that the will of God is perfect, and we should never be afraid of it.