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TROUBLE AHEAD

SERIES: THE GREAT ADVENTURE

By Steve Zeisler

“What is God’s will for my life?” “Where should I go?” “What are the steps that God has prepared for me to walk in?” “How may I serve the Lord in a way that is a blessing to him and fulfilling to me?” These are some of the enduring questions that believers ask pastors and Christian leaders in every time and place.

When our daughter Sarah was eighteen, I remember her sitting with a group of her friends around our dining room table, filling out applications in the middle of their senior year in high school, wondering, “Where will I go to college? What does the future hold? How can I possibly decide?” They were facing a major life decision, and they were all unsure of themselves.

Sometime toward the end of college, a lot of young folks face the question: “What next? Should I go on to graduate school, or begin a job? Which fork in the road am I to take?”

Most of us will at some point choose one person to whom we commit ourselves, with whom we will make a life and raise a family. And parents pray often for their own children and for their role as parents: “Lord, how can I serve you in the life of this little one? What is your direction?”

You may relocate to a new city or have to look for a new church, or have some other change unexpectedly come into your life. There are questions that come at midlife, when many people reassess where they are and how they’ve gotten there. And those in the final years of their life want to have them count. “What is your desire for me in retirement, Lord?”

Christians want to hear direction from the Lord, and that is the subject we’ll consider in this message. The book of Acts is our text. We’ll be covering the last eight chapters of Acts in the next few messages. These chapters are different from the earlier chapters, which told the story of the beginning of the church and the unfolding story of Christians’ faithfully answering the call to take the gospel to new places. The church expanded from Jerusalem to all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, as the risen Jesus had directed (Acts 1:8). But the last chapters of the book are about only one man: the apostle Paul. They are the account of his trust in God amidst lonely and difficult circumstances.

The themes of these last chapters are somewhat repetitive, so I’m going to condense my discussion of them and go through them much more quickly than I did previous texts. As the last eight chapters begin, Paul and his friends are giving attention to discerning the will of God in his life: What should he do? Where should he go? How will they decide? We’ll look at some selected verses, consider the issues that are at stake here, and then apply to our own lives the insights and principles that we gain.

Back in Acts 19:21, we read, “Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia.

‘After I have been there,’ he said, ‘I must visit Rome also.’” We don’t know how he made that decision, but it was a choice that he was clear about. Paul was a Jew, and we know that one of the great burdens of his life was his longing, even if it cost him everything, for the Jews to come to Jesus as their Messiah (Romans 9:3). He never gave up his passion for the Jews, but he also knew that he was called as an apostle to the Gentiles, and that his ministry would be mostly among them. You can detect in his references to Jerusalem and Rome, a desire for the Christian faith that had deep roots in Judaism, in the heart and passion of the Jews and in their Scriptures, to be connected to the Christian faith represented by Rome as the capital, if you will, of the Gentile world. You can almost hear him say, “I want to go to Jerusalem, and I want to go to Rome—I want the walls between Jerusalem and Rome, between Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles, to be broken down.”

Paul became more determined as time went on. In 20:22-24, meeting in Miletus with his friends from Ephesus, Paul said, “And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.” His conviction was that the wind of the Spirit was at his back. He was being compelled to go to Jerusalem by God himself; this was God’s call for his life.

He admitted that there was a great deal he didn’t know. “I know that on the way, and in Jerusalem, I’m going to suffer. But I don’t know the nature of the ministry God will give me, or why I’m being sent there.”

Then he gave us a description of his heart out of which he drew these conclusions. “I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me.” In the process of determining where he should go and how he should be and what service he might offer, he had a conviction that underlay it all: he wanted to please the Lord more than he wanted what benefited him. Whatever it cost him, he wanted to live the life that God had placed before him, to complete the task given to him. The particulars of the decision were all much less important than the conviction underlying them.

But now things get challenging for those of us reading this text. I want us to look at the tension that proceeds from asking, “What is God’s will?” Is Paul doing what he ought to be doing? Is he targeting the right thing?

Godly disagreement

Paul continues on his journey toward Jerusalem. He leaves Miletus and eventually comes to the city of Tyre. Acts 21:4:

Finding the disciples there, we stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.

Then we come to a longer account of what happens at a subsequent stop. It has a similar tone. Verses 7-14:

We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for a day. Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of

Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'"

When we [Luke, the other friends who were traveling with Paul, and the believers in Caesarea] heard this, we pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."

Agabus is a prophet, recognized as an authentic spokesman for God. In a dramatic display, he takes Paul's belt and ties his own hands and feet, perhaps lies on the floor bound, looks up at Paul, and says, "This is what the Jews in Jerusalem will do to you." The believers in Caesarea, along with Luke and Paul's other friends, who heard the same warning in Tyre, plead with him not to go. But Paul remains resolute; he is convinced God wants him to go. Luke uses very strong language here. On the one hand there is pleading, insistent calling on Paul. They aren't merely saying, "You might want to rethink this." They're begging him with tears not to go. And on the other hand he talks about his broken heart that his dear friends are being so difficult.

We don't know why Paul is so certain he should go. Back in Acts 20:22 it was very clear to him that he was being called. He wasn't just being bullheaded about it. But those who oppose Paul's plans are equally convinced that they are speaking what the Spirit has called on them to say. The only thing everybody agrees on is that Paul is going to pay a price when he gets to Jerusalem.

(The expected suffering comes to pass. A bit farther on in chapter 21, Paul is almost stomped to death. A spontaneously enraged mob is on the verge of killing him when the Romans save him, but clap him in irons with the intention of scourging him themselves, because they think he's an Egyptian terrorist. So Paul and his friends expect bad things to happen, and they do happen, in spades.)

Luke does not solve the dilemma of these opposing views of God's will. In fact, he has written this text in such a way as to create a dilemma. On the one hand, the Holy Spirit, as far as Paul knows, is giving him direction. On the other hand, as far as his friends know, the Holy Spirit is giving them direction. Luke doesn't say who is right. He leaves us with the tension and the ambiguity.

So the question before us is, how does God get us where he wants us to go? What can we learn from this process of decision-making about what we could do with our lives that would please God? Let's step back a little bit from this text and make some observations.

"The Lord's will be done"

First, notice that none of the people in this decision-making process, whether Paul, his companions, or his new friends in other places, has a selfish agenda. After thirty years of pastoral service, I have considerable experience with disagreement among Christians. I don't remember more than a handful of these discussions, if any, in which everybody was selfless in their approach to a difficult, unresolved question. Usually, we want to hear what God has to say, but underneath we have an agenda that we're

pursuing. One of the hard processes is that of self-discovery, coming to the realization that what we're bringing to the table is the attitude "I want what I want when I want it."

However, as far as we can tell, Paul never once has in mind his own benefit or standing. The people who love him not only want to save him from struggle, but they believe in his ministry, and they want him to be able to carry on the work of church-planting and leadership development in other places. Their hearts are breaking for the regions of the world that he won't get to if he is arrested. This difference of opinion is not driven by ego, defensiveness, or the hope of personal advantage. We should learn from their example: they are disagreeing over what is best for the kingdom's sake, not over what is best for them.

Second, the way this discussion in Caesarea ends up is very important. These people can't agree. Neither side can persuade the other. Finally, in verse 14: "When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, 'The Lord's will be done.'" Many of us use that phrase somewhat casually. But what these people are saying is, "Ultimately, we're going to trust God. Somebody's got to make some decision. We can't stop Paul from acting on his plans. We're his friends, and we're not going to abandon him. But if the Lord wants him to stop, then his will be done." So this is not a throw-away phrase; it's a word of confidence. "The Lord will accomplish what he intends. We can be certain that he won't allow anything to happen that is not his choice."

Third, we should note that as far as Paul is concerned, suffering doesn't mean that an idea is bad. Very few of us share his perspective. "That would hurt too much." "That would demand too much of me." "I'm willing to invest a bit, but don't ask me to overdo it." "I've got a couple of weeks in the summer when I might be able to do some kind of missions thing, but not now." We have limits on what we want God to call us to do. But Paul says he is willing to die! He certainly knows he is going to suffer. He doesn't know what the outcome will be. He has no control over what's going to happen to him. I think many of us assume that God's plan is going to involve our being fairly happy and getting most of what we want, along with the Lord's being glorified. But God has the right to call for other kinds of outcomes for us.

Let me offer a few general observations about God's will.

Making choices that please God

First, the process of trying to discover God's best for us is a dynamic one. Just because something is true at a certain point in your life, that doesn't mean it's always going to be true. God brings about surprises, challenges, blessings, new possibilities. We ought to expect a dynamic engagement with God, not just maintaining a status quo with an occasional God-sighting along the way.

Second, we can be sure that God is much more interested in who we become than the particulars of our circumstances. Is our heart devoted to him? That's the important question. Remember the song lyrics made famous by George Beverly Shea: "I'd rather have Jesus than men's applause...I'd rather have Jesus than worldwide fame...I'd rather have Jesus than anything." (1) So whatever choices we're making, God is actively developing our character, faith, depth of prayer, honesty, and other things that will last forever. The circumstances—Jerusalem, Rome or any other place—aren't going to last forever. His primary concern is to make us like Christ.

Finally, I want to step even farther back from all this and ask us to take note of how extraordinary this whole discussion is. How can it be that the God who spun the universe into existence, the God without limits—omniscient, omnipotent, and holy—cares about my life? We ask, "What is God's will for my life?" but it is extraordinary that such a thing exists, isn't it? Which of us deserve his attention, so that it

even matters to him what becomes of us?

I was reading one commentator about the recent red-state/blue-state brouhaha following the election. He had quite a secularist point of view, and he was commenting on the evangelical churchgoers who had supported the president's agenda. Underneath, the point he was making was that they are unbelievably arrogant—they think God really cares about their life! He seemed to think that you could respect a religion made up of myths, perhaps ethics, comforting words, and so on. But these people talk as if God hears and answers their prayers, and even cares about whom they have sex with. How can they claim that God cares about such things?

I realized this commentator was absolutely right; it is completely arrogant—if it is not true. But the staggering truth is that although we don't deserve it, God does care about us! He calls for righteous behavior, has places he wants us to go, and service he wants us to offer that will glorify him. He has stooped to letting *us* glorify *him*. That is a condescension of enormous proportion! We can hear his voice, and make choices he delights in. God has numbered the hairs on our heads. Doesn't he have better things to do? It turns out he doesn't have anything he'd rather do than pay that sort of attention to people like us. Remember the tender words of the spiritual: "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me." (2)

Years before the end of his life, Paul said to the Ephesian elders, "I long to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me." At the end of his life he used very similar language. The last letter Paul wrote, as far as we know, is the book of 2 Timothy. He was once again a prisoner. At the end of his life, when he was about to be executed, probably within weeks or months, he wrote to Timothy to encourage him in his faith, and he said this: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing." (2 Timothy 4:7.) Paul wanted to finish the race, and at the end he said, "It's over for me, my life is being poured out. But I finished the race and I kept the faith, and the day is coming when my Lord will raise me up. I *have* pleased him." Again, it would be unbelievable to speak in such language, except that God has committed to us this truth that he does indeed care what our lives become.

Notes

(1) Rhea F. Miller, text of *I'd Rather Have Jesus*, © 1922, 1950.

(2) Civilla D. Martin, text of *His Eye Is on the Sparrow*.

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