Acts: On Knowing God’s Will and Doing God’s Will
Acts 21:1-14

Last week our journey through Acts left us on the beach in Miletus, as Paul tearfully said goodbye to the Ephesian elders and boarded a ship for his journey to Jerusalem. Let’s pick up the story there in Acts 21:1-16. Please stand and let’s read the Word of God together.

Our text this morning begins with some travelogue, so let’s pull out our trusty map and track Paul’s journey (show map http://www.biblestudy.org/maps/large-map-apostle-paul-third-missionary-journey.jpg).

We read in vss. 1-3: And when we had parted from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos, 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. 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.

Note that the first part of their journey consisted of several short day trips from Miletus to Cos, from Cost to Rhodes, then Rhodes to Patara. There Paul and his team would have paid to board a very large merchant ship designed to withstand the open seas. Paul says the ship was bound for Phoenicia, which is the coastal region of Syria. The 400 mile journey from Patara to Tyre, Syria was anywhere between 3-5 days via a route that skimmed the south coast of Cyprus, “leaving it on the left.” In vs. 4 we read, “And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days.”

I think it’s likely that Paul and his companions choose to stay in Tyre for a week for reasons other than waiting for the merchant ship that brought them to Syria. In fact, their short jump down to Ptolemais would likely be on a smaller, local ship, as would their last voyage from Ptolemais to Caesarea. I actually think Paul was probably wiped out from being sea sick over the course of several days! I know I’m reading into that a bit, but I’m pretty confident Paul hated boats. In most cases, when he had the option to walk, Paul walked. If you’ve ever been sea sick for a few days in a row, you know that the very last thing you can possibly fathom doing is getting back on another boat, and I suspect that’s why they spend 7 days in Tyre!

Of course, for Paul and his team, those were not wasted days. We read in vss. 4-6, “And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.”
First, notice how quickly the Christians in the ancient world formed deep, meaningful relationships. To the best of our knowledge, Paul and his team had no known contacts in Tyre. However, after asking around a bit, they found out where the Jesus-followers hung out, and by nightfall they were enjoying table fellowship with warm beds to sleep in. Christian fellowship runs deep all throughout the world. When you look into the eyes of another person who has been transformed by the grace of Jesus Christ, you are looking into the eyes of your brother or sister...there is an instant bond that is almost supernatural in every sense of the word. There is a mutual love and understanding that does not require explanation or even verbal acknowledgement...it’s just there, and it’s awesome! You can experience a similar bond here in Kansas City with other believers, but it’s even more intense when you are meeting Christians from other cultures...it’s one of the great truths that we discover when we go on short term mission trips around the world.

In this case, the relationships grow so deep so fast that after a mere seven days, the entire church...including women and children, accompany Paul and his team down to the seaport to see them off, and once again there is a tearful parting as they kneel on the beach in prayer. Say what you will about Paul...he was clearly a very relational, caring and gifted pastor who formed deep and meaningful relationships with people.

Now, note also that these believers, like others in other cities, have discerned through the Holy Spirit that Paul is heading into trouble should he venture into Jerusalem. Paul mentioned this last week to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:22, “And now, behold I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.” Apparently, on his journey earlier through Macedonia, many Christians were prophesying to Paul that he was heading into a horrible storm in Jerusalem; and now, once again, the believers in Tyre are sensing the same message from the Holy Spirit. Luke writes, “And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go to Jerusalem.” Now, note that the Holy Spirit is not SAYING, “Don’t go to Jerusalem.” The Christians in Tyre are saying, “Don’t go to Jerusalem” because of what they have discerned from the Holy Spirit regarding Paul’s fate should he go there. That’s an important distinction, and one we must assume given what comes later on in Caesarea.

Let’s pick up the story in vs. 7 and we’ll come back to this point in just a minute. Beginning with vs. 7 we read, “When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip, the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him.

(Show map) So Paul and his team leave Tyre for a short, one day trip down to Ptolemais where they once again locate the Christians and enjoy great hospitality, albeit for just a day. Then
they’re back on the ship for a one day journey down to Caesarea, which was one of the main port cities that had a well traveled road leading straight to Jerusalem. There Paul and his team reunite with Philip, one of the seven deacons set apart by the church in Jerusalem back in Acts 6. Remember that Philip was the man who took the gospel to the Samaritans and shared the gospel with the Ethiopian eunuch. We learn in vs. 9 that “He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.” So what are we to make of that bit of information? First, let’s acknowledge that Philip had real issues ever getting to use the bathroom in his house…

Second, Luke just leaves us hanging here, right? Philip has four virgin daughters who prophesy, but we have no idea what they prophesied while Paul was staying in their house! I think we can assume they were hearing the same word from the Holy Spirit regarding Paul’s pending trouble in Jerusalem, but Luke never tell us. Instead, we get to hear once again from our old friend, Agabus. If you recall, way back in Acts 11, Agabus came down from Judea to Antioch and predicted the huge famine that would plague the ancient near east. In fact, such is the reason that Paul has been gathering a love offering for the Jerusalem church throughout his missionary journey. Now, as Paul is resting and enjoying some down time with Philip, Agabus once again shows up with a new message. Look at vss. 10-11, “While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 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 will deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.”’

And Paul said to Luke, “Hey Doc, wanna borrow my belt?”

Once again, the Holy Spirit is revealing in very stark and dramatic ways that Paul is going to experience great hardships in Jerusalem. But this time, Paul’s own team begins to join the others in begging Paul to reconsider his trip to Jerusalem. Look at vs. 12, “When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.”

I hope you can appreciate the incredible tension that Paul is experiencing right now. For weeks the Holy Spirit has been revealing to Paul that he will suffer in Jerusalem; but as of yet, he has not been deterred. His team was behind him, and he has been confidently making his way to Jerusalem, ready to take on whatever happens there. But now…on this day…just 60 miles away from his final destination…following a graphic prophecy presented by a famous prophet…Paul’s team begins to express doubts, even to the point of trying to talk their leader out of going to Jerusalem.

Talk about feeling isolated…Paul is now completely alone in terms of this conviction to go forward with what God had laid upon his heart to do. Not unlike Jesus, Paul must now decide if he will allow the good intentions of his friends to dissuade him. Will he allow the majority opinion of those in the room to change his mind and his destiny?
No…he won’t. Paul responds in vs. 13, “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.”

Dude…that’s what we call courage. Some people would call Paul’s determination bull-headed stubbornness or flat out stupidity…but listen to what Paul actually says. He says, “Your well-intended efforts to save me from suffering are killing me…you are literally breaking my heart. Don’t you understand that imprisonment and even death are part of the deal for me, as long as I am being faithful to do what I have been called by God to do?” Paul is not courageous because he is walking into suffering; Paul is courageous because he is pursuing the unpopular will of God, even though that means staring down his best friends and walking into what appears to be certain suffering.

Paul’s faith has been tested, but Paul has passed the test. He knows the will of God, and he is determined to pursue the will of God. So his team once again gets on board with Paul. We read in vs. 14, “And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, ‘Let the will of the Lord be done.’”

We’re going to see what we can learn from Acts 21 in just a minute, but first, I’m going to pick on one of our new pastors for a minute…Pastor Tami Lundgren, because her call story had a moment that looked quite similar to the story we just read. Several years ago Tami felt a call to pursue the ministry. She sought out counsel from Pastor Bob who immediately encouraged her to pursue God’s call upon her life. She then asked for an interview with Session to see if she could come under care and receive the Session’s blessing to begin seminary. I remember that Session meeting well, because…quite frankly…it was not my finest hour as a Lead Pastor!

I remember Tami coming into the meeting and sharing her sense of call to minister to women, to those struggling in marriages, and I remember her saying something about becoming a speaker for women’s events. She then said that she would begin by entering into seminary. Of course, as soon as she mentioned seminary, I immediately began to imagine how this mom with three small kids at home would be devoured by liberal seminary professors like the ones I had at Princeton. I imagined her crisis of faith like the crisis I endured in Princeton. I imagined her intellectual meltdown like the meltdown that led me to lose my faith all together for a season. And of course, the very first words that came out of my mouth were, “Tami, I don’t think you need to go to seminary to pursue this particular call. I think there are many opportunities to do this kind of ministry without having to go through seminary.” Pastor Drew, who was seated close by and had a very similar experience to mine while he attended the Divinity School at Vanderbilt, chimed in with almost the same exact sentiment. Now please understand, Drew and I loved Tami and we
wanted what was best for our church member her family…which for us meant trying to talk her out of going to seminary!

Tami loves to tell this part of the story with four simple words, “Jim made me cry.” And I did. I’m not proud of it, my intentions were noble, but my words tested Tami’s conviction and her call in a way she had not expected to be tested. She expected resistance from some people in her life, but she didn’t expect this kind of testing and resistance from two of her pastors, and it literally broke her heart. I remember seeing her tears and thinking to myself, “I’m such a jerk.” But that didn’t change my mind…I really wanted to protect Tami and her family from what I perceived as the potentially damaging effect of attending seminary.

I’ll never forget what happened next. Tami pulled herself together, looked squarely at me and politely said, “I don’t think you understand. I’m not asking for your permission. I’m called to go to seminary, so that’s what I’m going to do.” Yep…

Last Sunday, Tami was ordained as a Teaching Pastor in the EPC. She aced seminary with a 4.0. She didn’t have an intellectual meltdown, she didn’t lose her faith, she passed the ordination exams with flying colors, and she absolutely knocked it out of the park last weekend when she preached and was examined by the Presbytery. I would like to officially declare, “I was wrong.”

Discerning and pursuing God’s will can be challenging for all of us. So let me conclude by briefly addressing two big questions that come from Acts 21: how do we discern the will of God; and how do we pursue the will of God?

First, how can we discern God’s will for our lives? That could be a sermon series unto itself, but let me pass on to you something I read some time ago called “The Four Councils” The Four Councils consist of The Council of God’s Word, the Holy Spirit, conscience, and the counsel of others—which taken together, often reveal God’s will.

It stands to reason that you won’t know God’s will if you don’t read the Bible…so start there every time. God has already revealed His perfect will for all of humanity, and whatever you sense God calling you to do, it will never contradict what God has already said.

Next, you won’t know the will of God if you don’t ask Him. God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit, but you won’t hear from the Holy Spirit if you do not spend time in prayer. Pray, and pray often.

The third council is that of your conscience. Your conscience is a bit less reliable than the first two councils, but important nonetheless. Most believers have a conscience that has been formed through the law of God, such that we know the difference between right and wrong. If pursuing
the will of God is a matter of doing what is right, as opposed to what is WRONG and contrary to God’s law, our conscience can certainly serve as our guide. Unfortunately, in our culture of increasing narcissism due to the lack of any objective standard for right and wrong, I fear that many people in our culture lack a conscience, which is incredibly dangerous and disturbing.

Finally, we should take into account the council of elders…the counsel of those who are believers who both love God and know us. Again, the counsel of others is not authoritative, but it is incredibly important. Most of us need help discerning the will of God from others who join us in prayer and can give us meaningful feedback in our discernment process. Even those who disagree with our sense of call can be used by God to test and refine our discernment, so I do think the counsel of others is incredibly important when it comes to discerning God’s will for our lives.

The Four Councils will help us discern the will of God; but how do we muster up the courage to pursue the will of God? How will we know when we are truly pursuing the will of God?

As we look to our text, we can make a few key observations.

1) To pursue the will of God will always mean, to some degree, that our life is looking more like the life of Jesus. Jesus pursued the will of the Father perfectly in his earthly life and ministry, and his obedience led him to Jerusalem…the place of great suffering and even death. When we look at Paul’s determination to go to Jerusalem, it literally reminds us of the life of Christ. In both cases there was the prediction that they would be handed over to the Gentiles, there was a triple prediction of coming suffering, they both demonstrated steadfast determination, and they both…after intense testing…surrendered to the will of God. (Hughes, p 287) Our path may not lead us to the city of Jerusalem, but I suspect many of us have been called to go to that place that scares us the most…a place that people warn us not to go; and yet, we cannot deny God’s call to absolutely go there. For some of us, “Jerusalem” is a confrontational conversation with a loved one who is in denial regarding their addiction. For some of us, “Jerusalem” is going to the CEO and reporting fraudulent activities by our co-workers. Some of us are called to risk sharing the gospel with some difficult people in our “Jerusalem” who may very well mock and reject us, still we know that our calling is to go there regardless of the outcome. Still others of us, like Tami, are called to pursue vocational ministry. Where is your Jerusalem church? Where is God calling you to go…what is He calling you to do…such that if you are obedient to pursue that call, your life will look more and more like the life of Jesus?

2) To pursue the will of God is to NOT be a “man-pleaser.” Paul writes later in Galatians 1:10, “For am I seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.” As a Christian, you have an audience of ONE. You exist to please and serve God. His approval matters more than anyone else’s. His opinion of you matters more than your opinion of you…or anyone else’s opinion for that matter.
The hardest test you will ever face in pursuing God’s will is the test Paul faced here in Acts 21…when everyone, including Paul’s best friends and teammates, literally tried to talk him out of pursuing God’s will. If you recall, when Peter tried to talk Jesus out of going to Jerusalem in Mark 8:33, our Lord literally said “‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.’” That was a bit harsh, but let’s face it: our friends’ best intentions for us do not always reveal the will of God. There are times when we must trust God and obey His call even when we feel completely alone…and those are very difficult times indeed.

Many of you have heard my story about how we ended up in India working with the India Gospel League. Since I leave for India again tomorrow, let me remind you of that story as it applies to our text here in Acts 21. This story took place back in 2013 when several leaders on our Missions Team had attended a conference where we felt very convicted to lead our church to help reach the unreached people groups in the world. We felt convicted that engaging the unreached people-groups was to be a part of our vision casting at our big 60th Anniversary Event planned for Palm Sunday of 2013. However, our plan to do a scripture translation project as a means of pursing that vision crashed and burned just two weeks before our big event. That morning, when our plans fell apart, I was so terribly discouraged. I walked out of my office and cried out to God that I had nothing…no plan…not a clue what we were going to do…but I knew his call was to lead our church into reaching the unreached. As I stumbled into the Terrace Room at our Wornall location to sit in on the City Wide Prayer meeting, I noticed a man from India sitting on the front row. Five minutes later, Dr. Sam Stephens stood up, in my church, at the moment of my great anguish, and cast a vision for KC churches to partner with India Gospel League to reach the unreached villages in Orissa, India! The next morning Sam was in my house, sitting at my kitchen table, walking me through the plan, and I was not in doubt: this was God’s answer to my prayer. It was one of the few times that the Lord placed a crystal clear call upon my life; but unfortunately, the call did not immediately become clear to my team. For the next two weeks, I was pretty much on my own, no matter how hard I tried to convince our staff and leaders that this was the will of God. After trying to get the elders on board just two days before our big event, the vote came down as a resounding “NO!” The elders did not have the clarity that I had because they did not have sufficient time to process the partnership, nor had they met Dr. Sam Stephens like I had. But I was not in doubt…I knew God had supernaturally arranged my meeting with Sam at the exact moment when I was asking for His will to be revealed in regards to reaching the unreached people groups of the world with the Gospel. I knew the elders would love Sam and the Indian Gospel League if only there was more time for them to vet the ministry. I was not in doubt about my call…but everyone around me was begging me to back off and not pursue it. I felt utterly alone. Our Big Event was coming up in two days, and I had been told by my elders to NOT talk about church planting in India. My faith was tested that weekend like never before…I knew I needed to back off to please my team and the elders, but I knew that pleasing God meant pursuing the call he had placed on my heart to lead the church into India.
The next day the local forecast dramatically changed for Palm Sunday. Whereas we had been told all week to expect 2 inches of snow, the forecast suddenly predicted 12 inches of snow! We had to reschedule our event to a couple of weeks later, and during that time the elders did their research into IGL; we sought the Lord in prayer; we met with others who had partnered with IGL, and within two weeks the conviction to partner with IGL became crystal clear for every one of our elders! We cast that vision in April of 2013, and consequently we have helped plant over 350 churches in unreached villages in Orissa by giving over $340,000 in support and constant prayers over the course of four years. During that time I have travelled to India on three separate occasions to teach and encourage the church planters, and who could deny that my preaching, ministry, and entire life have been profoundly influenced as a result of my time in India! Keep in mind that not one of those $340,000 came out of our missions budget…every dollar came from families in our church who caught the vision and chose to pursue and support the vision. That’s some 350 churches in unreached villages, influencing thousands of lives, that would not exist today had we given up on the vision that God had laid upon my heart. When the vision is clear, we must pursue it, no matter the cost… even when it means that we carry the vision alone for a while!

The last piece of pursuing God’s will is to learn, and believe, and to trust in the sovereignty of God. That snow storm on Palm Sunday of 2013 was a physical reminder to me that God is sovereign. He can and will absolutely accomplish His purpose…our job is to be faithful and trust Him. In Paul’s case, that meant trusting God to go to Jerusalem, even if suffering was a guaranteed certainty. Paul trusted that God had a purpose for the suffering, because Paul trusted God’s sovereignty. Nothing would befall the Apostle that would in any way frustrate God’s perfect plan.

My conviction regarding the perfect sovereignty of God has increased dramatically in the past several months! When Pastor Greg Ealey texted me at 9:30 p.m. on August 15th to inquire about our Wornall Campus Pastor position…just hours after our Session had repented over racism in the church…at the very moment that the Chair of the Pastor Search Committee stood up to give his report…could there be any doubt that God was responsible?

Watching Tami Lundgren, Jeff Sparks, Cory Ozbun, and Mark Potter standing on that stage last Sunday, fully ordained and bearing now the title of Teaching Elders in the EPC…could there be any doubt that God led our church out of our former denomination for a moment such as this one? Was there any doubt that God had indeed called Tami…and the boys…to pursue the path of ordination!

Church…trust God more than you trust yourself, anything or anyone else. Obey God even when others think it is in your best interest not to. Discern and pursue the call God has placed on your life…regardless of the cost. Let’s pray.