



DEVOTIONAL

The issue of guidance is a major one for the Christian, and understandably so. After all, Christians believe that God is sovereign. Christians desire to please God. We want His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. And so we are concerned to live obediently to the Lord. We want to know His will and to walk in it. The apostle Paul no doubt desired this. And the book of Acts reveals this desire. It is interesting that as soon as Paul was converted he had a pretty good idea concerning what his life was to look like (Acts 9:15-16). Specifically, he was to be God's missionary to the Gentiles. He was to be God's voice of warning to his kinsmen, the Jews. And he was to suffer by doing all the above to the glory of Jesus Christ.

There are occasions in the book of Acts where the Lord gave some specific word of direction to Paul, but in most cases he simply went forth seeking to obey what the Lord had generally revealed to him. He knew that his calling was to proclaim the gospel to the Jew first and also to the Greek, and so he quietly went about his business without depending on constant direct revelation from the Lord. He went from town to town preaching the gospel and trusting the Lord for the results along the way. Sometimes the doors were more open than at other times and places, but he did not seem to fret too much. He just kept obeying. And while in some places (Corinth, for example) he received special communication from the Lord, which empowered him to stay in a difficult place, for the most part his ministry consisted of trusting and obeying.

For Paul, the issue of guidance was probably not as big a deal as it is for many in our day. That is, he simply believed in God's *decreed* will, acted upon God's *desired* or *revealed* will, and gave little thought to what we might call God's *directive* will. That is, he did not seem to concern himself too much with waiting upon the Lord for directions about where to go or what to do next. To borrow the title of Kevin de Young's excellent book of guidance, Paul's ministry approach was to "just do something."

It is probably true that there are some people who are overly active and the best counsel to them would be, "Just *don't* do something!" But for far too many the opposite is the problem. Too many Christians sit on their hands just waiting for a word from the Lord before they do *anything*. Such Christians seem intent on waiting for the proverbial opened door as a sign to do anything rather than paying heed to the words of Proverbs, which implores us to get a heart of wisdom and then wisely step out.

Then there are others who are sometimes discouraged from doing something because well-meaning Christians warn them that difficulties are signs of closed doors. I say all of this because our passage before us has some lessons for us with reference to this matter of guidance. If someone in our day had a similar experience as Paul did in our present text, they may well discern that it is *not* the will of the Lord to make such a journey. As a result, they would, unlike Paul, avoid the discomfort of being jailed and might even live a lot longer. But they would also miss out on a lot of blessings both in time and for eternity.

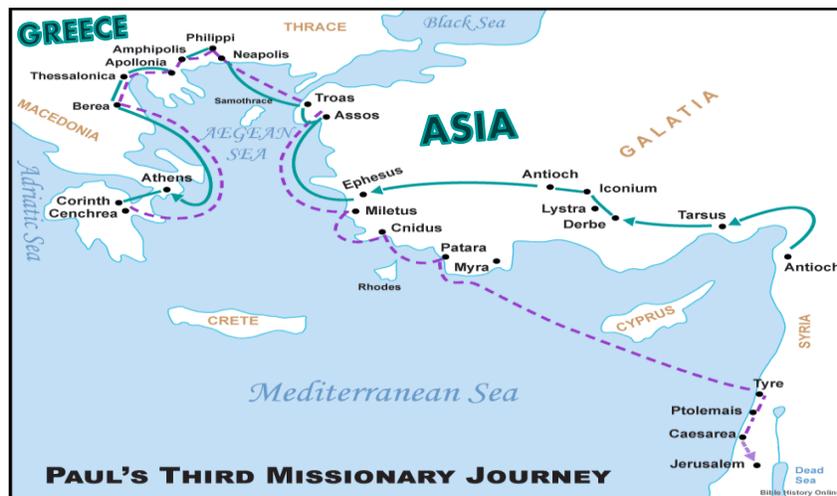
Erdman notes, "This brief story fixes the thought upon two great facts which prepare us for the closing scenes of The Acts: first, the deep affection in which Paul is held by his friends, and second, the matchless courage with which Paul faces the trials which are so certain and so near." Coupled with this is the fundamental principle undergirding the issue of guidance: We are to simply trust and obey.¹

OPEN IT

1. When have you involved yourself in something that you knew ahead of time would bring great difficulty and maybe even pain, but decided that no matter the difficulty you would still do it? Was it worth the trouble in the end?

READ IT

Acts 21:1-16 (Use the map² to follow along with Paul and his associates.)



EXPLORE IT

2. Who had Paul parted from in verse 1?
3. What caused the people to dissuade Paul from heading to Jerusalem?

¹ Sermon by Doug Van Meter found @ <http://brackenhurstbaptist.co.za/trust-and-obey/>

² <https://www.bible-history.com/new-testament/pauls-third-missionary-journey.html>

4. How did the disciples show their love to Paul's team as they departed Tyre?
5. What did Agabus do to warn Paul about Jerusalem?
6. What was Paul's response to the concerns and warnings of his fellow disciples?

APPLY IT

TRAVELIN' BAND

We pick up the story with Paul saying good-bye to the Ephesian elders. Farewells tend to be memorable and special, and this one certainly was. After studying Paul's ministry in Ephesus, and in light of everything Paul said in his farewell speech, we can understand that Paul loved these men. And these elders loved Paul. So they displayed understandable affection and emotion. They knelt on the beach and prayed together. Then the group escorted Paul to the ship, perhaps comforting one another with the reality that they would see Paul again in glory. It's a moving picture of Christ-centered community. The heart-wrenching farewell is memorialized once again in the following verse before Luke lists ports and lengths of stay along the journey to Jerusalem.

In the midst of all these names and places, Luke provides some vivid illustrations of genuine Christian fellowship and friendship at work. (I'll mainly use "friendship" as opposed to "fellowship" in the following discussion because it may be more challenging and practical for us.) The important thing to remember about chapter 21 is that we must not get overwhelmed by all the names and places it records. Rather, we need to look at the strength of Christian friendship expressed there. The team first took a small vessel around the southwest tip of Asia Minor. They briefly stopped at the islands of Cos and Rhodes before reaching the port of Patara on the mainland. Then they booked a trip on a larger cargo ship as they headed toward the major port in Tyre. There Paul and his companions "sought out the disciples" (21:4) and stayed with them for a week. The Tyre group deeply loved Paul and urged him not to go to Jerusalem. Yet when the week ended, the Christians in Tyre accompanied the missionaries to the beach (v. 5), and as was done in the Ephesus scene, the believers knelt down to pray before saying farewell (v. 6).

Paul then traveled south to Ptolemais and enjoyed a day of fellowship with the "brothers and sisters" (v. 7) there before proceeding down to Caesarea (v. 8), the seaside capital of the province of Judea and the location of Peter's meeting with Cornelius (10:1-11:18). Paul stayed with Philip, one of the "Magnificent Seven" who distributed food to widows (6:1-7). This same Philip evangelized Samaria, the Ethiopian eunuch, and the coastal towns of Philistia (8:4-13). Philip rightly earned the title evangelist (21:8), a term rarely used in the New Testament (cf. Eph 4:11; 2 Tim 4:5). Even more unusual are Philip's daughters. They were unmarried and they "prophesied" (v. 9). This means they were living proof of the Spirit's coming at Pentecost (see 2:17). Luke, however, doesn't draw attention to their prophecies. He focuses on the prophecy of Agabus of Judea (21:10-11), which we will look at in a moment.

After Paul's resolute commitment to go to Jerusalem (vv. 11-14), the final scene of Christian fellowship is found in verses 15-16. Some of the believers accompanied Paul and his crew to Jerusalem. As they journeyed, they stayed with Mnason, a Cypriot and early disciple (cf. 11:19-20).³

7. Luke shares much seemingly needless information about times and towns in this passage that we might be tempted to just skim over. What can we learn about the first-century church and Christians from Luke's mention of these visits, and what application can we draw upon when it comes to our own Christianity?

³ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 7078-7081). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

Luke's use of the term parted (*apospaō*), which means "to tear away" (cf. 20:30; Luke 22:41), shows the trauma of that parting. So great was the Ephesian elders' love for him that Paul literally had to tear himself away from his sorrowing friends.⁴

8. **When have you experienced deep and close community with believers? What things were present to make you feel this way?**

9. **How can these types of deep relationships cause some to avoid Christian fellowship? What advice would you give to someone who desires casual fellowship instead of what is seen here in our text?**

10. **Paul models for us a pattern where we seek to get to know the "believing strangers" around us. While this may happen in the comings and goings of everyday life, many of us worship side by side with strangers each Sunday. How might our Sunday experience be different if we were on a "finding" expedition each Sunday at church?**

11. **Even extroverts can struggle at times with meeting new people and engaging in deeper conversation surrounding spiritual things. How can we help each other step out of our comfort zone to experience the joys of Christian fellowship and friendship?**

REUNITED: AN OLD FOE OR A NEW FRIEND?

The team's host in Caesarea was Philip, one of the seven appointed twenty years earlier to feed Jerusalem's poor (Acts 6:1-6). What a reunion this was! The last time Paul and Philip were mentioned in the same paragraph, Philip was running for his life with Paul (then called Saul), the Christian-hater, in hot pursuit! After preaching around the country, Philip settled in Caesarea and raised four daughters who were "prophetesses." Philip's preacher-daughters later moved with their father to the Ephesus area where they lived to old age and were valued by the second-century church as sources of information about early Judean Christianity.⁵

⁴ MacArthur, John. *Acts 13-28 MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series) (Kindle Locations 4420-4422). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

⁵ Girard, Robert C.. *The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series)* (Kindle Locations 4637-4643). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

12. It is easy to forget as we get deeper into the book of Acts that Paul was ministering and fellowshiping with people who experienced his terror just a few short years prior. How does someone like Philip, who experienced great pain from Paul, welcome him as a friend later on?

13. What things did Paul need to do to cause people who once fled from him to not only welcome him but learn from him?

ALL IN THE FAMILY

14. The mention of Philip's daughters shows us that you can be active in church ministry and still have time for family life. How does one find the proper balance between the needs of doing ministry with the needs of raising a family?

Ajith Fernando says:

Luke's mention of Philip's daughters highlights the fact that people not regarded as being of high status did have positions of prominence in the church. The breaking of human barriers is one of the main sub-themes of Acts. Luke has given prominence to women in different ways.... The present passage records single women exercising what the New Testament regards as a key gift for the church (Acts 21:9).... Acts teaches us that women, especially women marginalized by society, have a prominent role in fulfilling the agenda of the kingdom.⁶

15. Philip's daughters were all unmarried and still in their father's home, which points to them probably still being young, and yet they played a part in the church and its ministry. Why is it important for church leadership to give its young people opportunities to use their gifts and abilities in the church?

What caution should be taken when doing this?

⁶ Ibid.

WHO'S RIGHT AND WHO'S WRONG

Let's consider four views on Paul's resolution to go to Jerusalem.

The Perspective of Paul (21:1-3). Paul is in a hurry. Luke uses phrases like "the next day," "another boat," and "we boarded another ship" to tell us about this stage of the journey. The apostle is moving quickly because he wants to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost (20:16), even though he knows it will involve suffering (20:22-24). He is determined to give a love offering from the Gentile churches to the Jerusalem churches and to testify there about the gospel of the grace of God (20:24). Paul doesn't care about the danger; he cares about obeying God's will, regardless of the cost.

The Perspective of the Christians in Tyre (21:4-6). "They told Paul not to go to Jerusalem" (v. 4). However, Paul didn't heed their counsel (vv. 5-6). How do we reconcile this text with the previous texts about the Spirit leading Paul to Jerusalem (19:21; 20:22-23)? Let's read on before handling this matter.

The Perspective of the Christians in Caesarea (21:7-13). As Paul stays with Philip, he meets the prophet Agabus (v. 10; cf. 11:28-30), who gives Paul an object lesson in the tradition of Old Testament prophets (e.g., 1 Kgs 11:29-32; Isa 20:2-6; Jer 13:1-11). Agabus took Paul's long belt, normally wrapped several times around the waist, and tied up his [own] hands and feet with it. Then the prophet predicted that the Jews would tie Paul up and deliver him over to the Gentiles (v. 11). Though Agabus didn't forbid him from going to Jerusalem, he did warn Paul of the events to come. Following this dire prediction, the concerned saints in Caesarea (like the saints in Tyre) urged Paul not to go to the city (v. 12). But their counsel also proved fruitless (v. 13). Paul wouldn't be deterred.

The Perspective of Luke (21:12,14). Luke even included himself in the dissenting number. His presence is denoted by the "we" references at work throughout this passage. Apparently, Luke also pleaded with Paul to change his plans. But after Paul rejected these pleas, too, the disciples surrendered (v. 14). The Christians respected their beloved leader's firm conviction. Commentators have pointed out how the apostle's submission to God's will sounds a lot like Jesus's prayer in Gethsemane. Jesus didn't look forward to the suffering on the cross, but he submitted to the Father's plan for it by saying, "Not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42). Paul's deep anguish expressed in verse 13 has caused some to say that this moment was "Paul's Gethsemane."⁷

16. Looking at the passage and the explanation that is given above, what do you think your advice to Paul might have been? Why?

But what exactly was God's will for Paul? And how exactly did he come to discern it? The account that follows gives us a fascinating glimpse into how complicated this can sometimes prove to be. There are, in fact, four attempts to uncover God's will: by the disciples in Tyre, a similar one by disciples in Caesarea, a graphic prophecy by a man called Agabus, as well as Paul's own discernment of what lay ahead and what he should do as a consequence. Finding God's will proved especially difficult in Paul's case because several voices suggested different actions.⁸

17. What role should having inner peace play in determining God's will?

⁷ Merida, Tony. *Exalting Jesus in Acts (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary)* (Kindle Locations 7204-7231). Holman Reference. Kindle Edition.

⁸ Thomas, Derek W. H.. *Acts (Reformed Expository Commentaries)* (p. 591). P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.

18. For what types of decisions should we be actively seeking God's will in our lives? What about the myriad of seemingly minute details of what we wear and what we eat or drink?

Luke reports the arrival in Caesarea of the Christian prophet Agabus with a message for Paul. Agabus, fresh from Jerusalem, knew the atmosphere in the Holy City. In the style of Old Testament prophets, he pantomimed his prophecy, tying his own hands and feet with Paul's belt and forecasting that in Jerusalem the owner of the belt would be tied up and turned over to godless people.⁹

19. Agabus was quite clear about the message he was giving Paul about the future. What things must we take into consideration as we advise others about their futures?

20. Is it ever right to go against the recommendations of other Christians as Paul did, and if so, when?

21. What is your common pattern for making decisions in your life? Do you feel this process has served you well in the past?

In what area of life could you use God's leading right now? Share this with your group and take a moment to pray for God's direction and your submission to that leading.

⁹ Girard, Robert C.. *The Book of Acts (The Smart Guide to the Bible Series)* (Kindle Locations 4653-4657). Thomas Nelson. Kindle Edition.

Note: This study was compiled and questions were written by Pastor Tim Badal, Village Bible Church. www.villagebible.church/smallgroups