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"God is Leading Me..."
Proverbs 3:5-6; Acts 20:17-38; 21:7-14

Introduction
Have you ever had someone tell you that the motive behind their decision(s) was that "God was leading them?" Did you ever wonder how it was that they knew God was leading them? What if He is not leading you and you make that claim? On some level, does that make you guilty of breaking the 9th Commandment? In case you have forgotten what that commandment states, here it is: "**You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor**" (Exod. 20:16). Is it also possible that by using God's name as an excuse for your choices in life, that you are also guilty of violating the 3rd commandment, which states: "**You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain**" (Exod. 20:7). You need to understand that God is holy, and He is serious about how we treat His name and how we approach Him.

So, how do you know what the will of God is and when is it okay to make the bold declaration that "God is leading you..."? Get some clue how to know God's will from Proverbs 3:5-6, "**Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight**" (Prov. 3:5–6). But what do you do with all the factors that affect how we humans make decisions such as:

- **Cognitive biases:** What happens when our decisions are shaped by our biases and affirmed by information and media that confirms our existing beliefs.

- **Emotional state:** How we are feeling can have a tremendous effect on our ability to reason and make decisions.

- **Cultural factors:** The culture you grew up in or the one that surrounds you today can affect your perception of truth and how you make decisions.

- **Situational factors**: Your physical atmosphere, social environment, time constraints, and circumstances that have brought you to your decision all shape the decision-making process.

We have so many things competing for our hearts and it can be very difficult to discern what part of the decision-making process is God's will and leading, and what part is our feelings and wants. So, how can you decern what the will of God is for your life and choices? I believe Acts 20:17-38 is helpful in that it shows us five things Paul practiced that helped him understand what God's will was for his life regardless of his feelings and the circumstances that surrounded him.

Paul was Concerned About What God's Word Said About Everything (vv. 20-21, 27).
The reason why Paul spent over two years in Ephesus was for the same reason he completed three missionary journeys, and that was to declare, "**...the whole purpose of God**." Paul declared

the full counsel of God's Word while in Ephesus. Jesus commanded His followers: "**Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations... teaching them to follow all that I commanded you...**" (Matt. 28:19-20), and Paul took that command very seriously. All that Paul had to offer and give to the Ephesians was the Jesus of the Holy Scriptures.

Listen, Paul did not just teach and preach the Bible, his life and choices were governed by the Word of God. How does one get to the place where he or she is able to declare all that is beneficial from the Word of God without first being in the Word of God privately? What is the goal of being in God's word? Paul answered that question in his epistle to the Philippians: "**That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; if somehow I may attain to the resurrection from the dead**" (Phil. 3:10-11). You will not get to know Jesus if you are not listening to His voice through His word, and if you are not listening to His voice, you will not know His will.

Step #1 for knowing the will of God: *What does the word of God say about it?*

Paul Made Sure His Choices Lined Up with the Mission of God (vv. 17-19, 24)

What is the mission of God? "**For from the rising of the sun even to its setting, My name shall be great among the nations, and in every place frankincense is going to be offered to My name, and a grain offering that is pure; for My name shall be great among the nations***,"* Declares the LORD (Mal. 1:11)! John piper wrote in his book, *Let the Nations be Glad*: "Missions exist because worship doesn't" and he was right! Paul came to Ephesus because the Ephesians worshiped all kinds of idols, but they did not worship God because they did not know Jesus. Paul entered Ephesus with a desire to serve the Lord "**with all humility and with tears and trials**" because his purpose in life was to make Jesus known first and foremost!

Paul did not think he was better than the Ephesians, but because he had a great and accurate view of who God is, he was willing to die to self for the purpose of living for Jesus. This is what he said in verse 24, "**But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of God's grace.**" For Paul, his mission would include bringing the gospel to the gentiles (see Acts 9:1-19). For you, God's mission may look different, but the one thing that it does have in common with Paul's mission is to make Jesus known where He is not known.

If you are a Christian, you have been called into the mission of God. That does not mean that you must become a missionary, although it may. What the mission of God means for you is simply this: God has called you to your world, which includes your family, neighborhood, work, and church to use your talents and gifts to reach the lost and partner with your local church to accomplish the mission Jesus gave His Church. Wherever you find yourself, Jesus said of your redeemed life: "**You are the salt of the earth.... you are the light of the world**" (Matt. 5:13-14). You are Jesus' ambassador in your home, in your neighborhood, among your friends, where you work, and as a part of a community of Jesus followers within His Church.

Step #2 for knowing the will of God: Will my decision allow me to continue to participate in God's mission?

Paul Was Sensitive to the Holy Spirit's Leading (vv. 22-23)

Paul was sensitive to the Holy Spirit for two primary reasons: His head and heart were affected by the time he spent in the Word of God, and he strived to walk in a manner worthy of his calling (Eph. 4:1). The fruit of listening to God's word and obedience to it, is the filling of the Holy Spirit. From the moment you are born again, you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-24; 16:7), you are sealed by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13-14), and you are baptized by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). But with the filling of the Holy Spirit comes power and a sensitivity to His leading; this is what Paul wrote to the Ephesian Church and practiced:

> "**Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption**." (Eph. 4:30)
>
> "**And do not get drunk with wine, in which there is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit...**" (Eph. 5:18)

Jesus promised that to every true Christian who sets their hearts to follow Jesus in faith and trust will receive the Holy Spirit Whom He called, "The Helper" (John 14:16-17). Jesus promised that the ministry of the Holy Spirit will be to, "**guide you into all the truth...**" (John 16:13). This is exactly what Paul experienced throughout his lifetime even when others had a hard time understanding it (as we will see in Acts 21:7-14). This is why he called the elders together before he left Ephesus to tell them how the Holy Spirit was leading him: "**And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that chains and afflictions await me**" (Acts 20:22–23).

For Paul, the compulsion he had from the Holy Spirit did not mean that he understood or was aware what the total outcome would be for choosing to leave Ephesus, but the call was clear, and he had to go. Paul also understood that he would not be able to come back: "**And now behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face**" (v. 25).

Sometimes the will of God is a call to leave what is stable and comfortable to a place of uncertainty and danger. Tony Merida, in his commentary on Acts, made the following observation: "The goal of life is not to have a long life but a full life, one lived to the glory of Jesus Christ. For some Christians such faithfulness will involve hardship, persecution, and even martyrdom. Paul's example here shows how one can endure such experiences: We must value Jesus above everything, and we must rely on the Spirit."[1]

Step #3 for knowing the will of God: *Am I walking in step with the Holy Spirit and is He leading me in the decision-making process?*

Paul Understood God Was Greater than His Mission (vv. 32-34)

Paul understood two critically important things that are worth considering regarding the will of God: First, God loved the Ephesian Christians infinitely more than Paul ever could. Second, God didn't need Paul but chose to use him and would use others in his place after he left. What

[1] Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Acts* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2017), 315.

was required of Paul and the elders of the Ephesian Church was to trust the God, "**Who does great and unsearchable things, wonders without number**" (Job 5:8-9).

With Paul's departure there would be dangers for the Ephesian Christians, so he warned the elders; he warned them that savage wolves would creep in among them with the intent to destroy them (see vv. 28-31). Just because God was leading Paul into another season of life and ministry, did not mean that the ministry God used him to establish was safe. However, for three years, Paul was preparing the elders and the church for the day when God would lead him elsewhere. Paul also understood that God would provide the church what was needed in the wake of his departure, so he was confidently able to assure them: "**And now I entrust you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified**" (v. 32). What they needed most, Paul gave them... and that was God and His Word.

Step #4 for knowing the will of God: *Understand and trust that God is infinitely bigger than you are and is capable of doing "great and unsearchable things..." without your involvement.*

Paul Was Committed to Prayer (vv. 36-38)

Paul and the elders did not end with hugs and handshakes, but fervent prayer together as brothers committed to the same mission! It is critically important to note that before there were any goodbyes, before the decision was official, before Paul got on the boat, he and the leaders of the church prayed. Verses 36-38 are such a touching conclusion to Acts 20 as it is a reminder that there is no point in going anywhere if God is not leading you and although He may be leading you, it does not mean that it will be easy; consider these verses again: "**When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And they all began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they were accompanying him to the ship.**"

This was not the first time Paul, and the elders, prayed about where God was leading, based on what we know of Paul's life, prayer was the culture of his life. Because it was the culture of his life, he was not getting on any boat before they prayed together! Ephesians 6:18-19 gives us a glimpse into the prayer life of the apostle: "**With every prayer and request, pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be alert with all perseverance and every request for all the saints...**" (Eph. 6:18). Regarding his departure, Paul prayed all the time, with all persistence, for the glory of God and the good of Christ's Church! It is important to also understand that Paul did not pray alone but prayed with those his decision affected most.

Step #5 for knowing the will of God: *Bathe your life and choices with prayer with a willingness to die to what you want for the purpose of living for God and His mission for your life.*

Conclusion

You should know that when you follow the will of God for your life, it may not always be easy, comfortable, or agreeable for those in your life and world. It will be hard on both those who love you and agitating for those who do not share your love for God and Christ-centered world view.

The safest and most secure pathway forward is to follow Jesus. When Paul arrived at Ptolemais, he stayed with Philip and while with him, a prophet by the name Agabus took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and said, "**This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this ways the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and hand him over to the Gentiles'**" (Acts 21:7-11).

When everyone in the house heard what Agabus said to Paul, they begged him not to go up to Jerusalem because they loved him. Agabus did not say anything Paul did not already know, but it was painful for those who loved Paul to hear and accept. Paul's response was both tender and firm: *"***What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus**" (Acts 21:13). At this point Paul's decision was affirmed by the Word of God, the mission of God for his life, the prompting and leading of the Holy Spirit, a confidence in God's sovereignty and power, and a decision bathed in prayer, so he was sure of what God's will was for his life and he could not be persuaded. Those who loved Paul saw this: "**And since he would not be persuaded, we became quiet, remarking, 'The will of the Lord be done!'**" (v. 14).

So, before you declare that "God is leading you" to take that new job, enter into a relationship or marriage, or to move from anywhere to anywhere be sure to check what you are considering against the same five checkpoints we see in Paul's life:

1. What does the Word of God say about your decision? If God's word speaks against it, then it is not God's will for your life.

2. Will my decision allow me to continue to participate in God's mission? If your decision will further remove you from God's mission and His people, then it may not be the will of God for your life.

3. Are you sure the Holy Spirit is leading you? If you are not living in obedience to God, your perspective of what God's will for your life may be severely perverted.

4. Do you really believe that God can do *"***great and unsearchable things...***"* without your involvement but wants to use you anyway and that He is about His glory for your good?

5. Did you pray with open hands before God almighty concerning His will for your life related to whatever is before you?

Paul's decision to leave Ephesus ultimately resulted in his martyrdom in Rome, but if he did not leave, he would not have written Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, Philippians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus... and those glorious epistles would not have been included in our Bibles as holy Scripture.