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The Way God Guides: Compromise, Confusion & Conclusion

SERIES: *Acts: The Rest of the Story*

We're coming to some of the most exciting and helpful passages in all the book of Acts. It's so important to remember as we read this book that this is a description of the normal Christian life. This isn't the "glory days" of the church that we long for but can never attain. This is normal Christianity. Remember that this is what Jesus continued to do and teach by the Holy Spirit and through his people, and that work continues today. As soon as we lose sight of that, the Christian life becomes dull and institutionalized.

We've already seen how practical this book is. This morning we come upon an extremely helpful passage as it relates to our everyday lives. One of the most common problems we face in the Christian life is understanding the will of God. "How do I know what God wants me to do? How will God guide and direct me to do His will? Do I go this way or that way?" Every believer asks these questions. But even more important is the attitude and spirit behind those questions. They assume a desire to follow Christ; to do his will. Sometimes we ask these questions but deep down we plan to do our will. We would love some guidance from God but we place limits on what we're willing to do.

But for those who are sincere in wanting to follow him, he'll be their guide. Even when you don't know it, he'll direct your steps. You see, God is infinitely creative when it comes to leading us. It's not at all as we think it should be. We'd like God to just say, "Go there. Do that." We want a navigation system; one that talks to us. But it rarely works that way. Instead, God uses a variety of methods. He's much more interested in developing our faith and our character than in just telling us where to go. He takes the stuff of our lives (events, people, problems, perplexities) and he uses all these things to guide us. It's like he merges them together into a mosaic where over time a pattern of God's overruling guidance appears.

That's what happened to Paul and his friends in Acts 16. Remember this is the start of the second missionary journey. This will be a journey of epic proportions. The Gospel will penetrate the continent of Europe for the first time. Churches like the ones at Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth and Ephesus will be planted. But none of that was on the Apostle Paul's radar screen when they started out.

I. The ways God guided Paul.

A. Paul's idea to revisit the churches: We saw

last week that it all started as Paul said to Barnabas, "**Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are**" (15:36). Compare this with how the first journey got started. At the start of ch. 13 the Spirit said, "**Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.**" And off they went. That's pretty clear guidance, isn't it? But here it's different. There is no special word from the Spirit. There is simply the responsible concern of Paul for the people they had led to Christ. They recalled all those baby Christians and they said to one another, "We need to help them grow in grace." A big part of this was to deliver the letter which came out of the council of Jerusalem telling them they were free from the law of Moses.

Some people think Paul was wrong to move out without the clear leading of the Spirit. But the fact is he didn't need any. He'd already been called to be a missionary to these folks. God had already made that clear to him. He didn't need to be called again. God doesn't need to give orders about everything we do. Some things we already know to do.

God calls you to help children grow in their faith. God leads you to teach fourth grade Sunday School. You do that for one school year and then you get a break for the summer. Are you done? Does God have to speak to you again and say, "Go do that again"? I don't think so. You keep doing what God calls you to do until he redirects.

B. Paul and Barnabas go separate ways: But then as we saw two weeks ago Paul and Barnabas get into this battle over whether or not to take John Mark with them. They can't work it out so Barnabas grabs John Mark and they go off to Cyprus to encourage the new believers there. Paul grabs Silas and they head off into Syria and Cilicia. We can say, "Well, it's not God's will for these two men to disagree. God wants us to get along. He wants us to love one another and be unified." Certainly God cares about how we treat each other. He wants us to be unified around the things that really matter. But does that mean that we'll never have disagreements with other believers? Does that mean there aren't times to agree to disagree and even go our separate ways? Apparently not because God actually used this disagreement to further his work. Now there are two teams instead of one. Now there are four missionaries instead of two. Is God still guiding these men? I believe he is, but not in the way anyone would

expect.

C. Paul recruits and circumcises Timothy: So Paul and Silas head West to Derbe and Lystra. These are two of the cities they had been at before. In Lystra they met up with a young man named Timothy. **“Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily”** (vv. 1–5). Paul loved to find young men and take them with him. He loved to mentor these young guys and then turn them loose in ministry. Timothy has a proven track record and so Paul wants to take him with them. But there’s a problem. Timothy is from a mixed marriage. His mother is Jewish but his father was a Gentile and so he’d never been circumcised. Now we might think, “We’ve already dealt with that issue. The apostles decided you don’t have to be circumcised to be saved. There’s no way Paul should circumcise Timothy!” But that’s exactly what he does. Paul has to be out of the will of God here, right? Wrong! Luke makes that clear when he stays right on the heels of this in v.5, **“The churches were being strengthened in the faith and increasing in numbers daily.”** The result was blessing. God was in this.

Why then did Paul do it? In v.3 it says he did this **“because of the Jews in those parts.”** You see, the issue here wasn’t Timothy’s salvation. Paul didn’t do this for Timothy; he did this for the Jews they would be evangelizing. If someone had said, “Timothy has to get circumcised to be saved,” Paul would have never done it. But if his not being circumcised would somehow become a hurdle for Jews they were trying to reach, by all means do it. Later Paul would say, **“I became all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some”** (1 Cor.9:22).

Sometimes the will of God involves compromise. Different situations can call for different actions. Sometimes we have to be willing to flex. Too many believers have a wooden view of the will of God. There’s no room for gray. Everything is black and white. There ARE some things that are black and white, but maybe not as many things as we think.

D. The Spirit closes doors: From there Paul decides to go south into the province of what was called Asia at the time. But look what happens. **“They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia;**

and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas” (vv. 6–8). On two different occasions the Spirit of God didn’t allow them to do something they planned to do. First, they planned to go southwest into Asia, probably to the port city of Ephesus. Paul was called to bring the gospel to the Gentiles and this would have fit that purpose. But he was “forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.” What an amazing statement that is! The Spirit wouldn’t allow them to do the very thing they were called to do! And he doesn’t even give them an explanation! We don’t know how the Holy Spirit shut this door, but somehow he forbade it. Some think it had something to do with an illness that Paul had but we don’t know. What a puzzling thing this must have been for Paul and his friends.

But it gets even worse. As they’re heading north, passing through the Phrygian and Galatian regions, they were trying to go north into Bythynia but “the Spirit of Jesus wouldn’t permit it.” Once again, we aren’t told how he shut the door. It could have been circumstances; maybe Paul couldn’t get his visa. It could have been a strong impression; perhaps they just didn’t have a sense of peace about it. Some scholars think that his use of the phrase “the Spirit of Jesus” indicates a prophecy was given in the name of Jesus, which wouldn’t have been that unusual for the early church. But, once again, what a puzzling thing this must have been. They must have been discouraged. They couldn’t go south; they couldn’t go north. They couldn’t do the things they felt called to do. All they got were “No’s” from God.

1. The Spirit’s “no”: Have you ever been there? You’re trying to be faithful; to do what’s right, but every thing you try ends up being a “No.” I talked to a man in our body a few weeks ago who felt called to become a policeman. For five years he’s gone to school, got the proper training, applied for jobs, but each time the answer has been “no.” It’s been tough. Did he get it wrong in the first place?

That’s what Paul must have felt like. They couldn’t go north; they couldn’t go south; where do they go? So they went to Troas—confused, bewildered, frustrated, not knowing what to do next. Let me ask you, have you ever been to Troas? A place of confusion and bewilderment?

2. The Spirit’s “yes”: But sometimes we need to hear and live with God’s “No” before we can hear his “Yes.” Sometimes God closes one door only to open another. Look what happened in Troas. **“A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. So putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day**

following to Neapolis; and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days” (vv. 9–12).

Paul has a vision. Paul wasn't the first or last person in the book of Acts to have a vision. Ananias had a vision in Acts 9. Peter had a vision in Acts 10. Paul has another vision in Acts 18. God didn't just hand these out like cheap candy. In each case, a major turning point in the direction of God's work was about to take place. This was no different. Paul sees a man from Macedonia saying come and help. He was standing; he was pleading; he was desperate.

With a vision like that you would think that Paul would announce to the group exactly what they were to do next. But v.10 says something very fascinating. They did make plans to go to Macedonia, but only after being together they “concluded” that this is what they were supposed to do. The word “concluded” means to bring together. It seems that Paul submitted his vision to the group, and they took that together with everything else that had happened up to that point, they brought all the facts together, and they concluded that this was the direction the Lord wanted them to go.

By the way, there is one small detail you don't want to miss. It was at this point that Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, joined Paul and his associates. Notice in v.10 he uses the first person plural “we” for the first time; a very subtle change. What's interesting about this is that it's likely that Luke was from Macedonia. Later, Paul would leave him there for ministry. It seems that Paul met Luke in Troas. Some even say that Luke was the Macedonian man in Paul's vision. I don't know about that, but I believe somehow God used Luke in the whole process. Sometimes God uses “chance” meetings with people like Luke.

Next thing you know they're on a boat to Macedonia. They make “a straight course to Neapolis,” which is on the coast of Macedonia in northern Greece. What's amazing is that they arrived there in just two days. That's 125 miles. That means the wind was at their back! The elements cooperated. The same trip took five days on other occasions. Sometimes the wind is at our back; sometimes it's in our face.

Two significant things happened in Macedonia. First, they planted a beachhead for the gospel in what we know as Europe. It all started with a woman named Lydia coming to Christ and a little church that met at her house in the city of Philippi. Second, Paul and his friends encountered significant opposition. In verse 23 of the same chapter, Paul and Silas are beaten and thrown into prison.

II. The ways God guides us.

Now let's step back from all this for a minute and

make a few observations about how it is that God guides us.

A. First of all, I learn from this that the Spirit of God has assumed responsibility to lead us. Whatever we say about HOW the Spirit leads, we CAN say from all this that he DOES lead. The responsibility for direction lies on him rather than on us. His job is to lead; our job is to follow. His job is to open doors or close doors, our job is to remain sensitive, open, flexible to his direction. This doesn't mean that we sit back and do nothing until he leads us. We should be active in the process. We can make plans. We can dream dreams. We can make good choices based on what we know. Paul wasn't wrong in planning to go to Asia or trying to get into Bythina. God didn't rebuke him; he just shut the door. But the point is that the burden isn't on us to find God's will; we don't have to fret about missing his will. It's God's responsibility to lead us; ours is to follow.

B. Second, I learn from this that the Spirit of God often leads us through times of darkness, confusion, perplexity and frustration. We don't understand why he shuts a door when it seemed like the perfect opportunity. We read this passage and we think that God's involvement was all so clear to Paul, but it wasn't. All he could see were the human obstacles, and he was left as perplexed and in the dark as we often are.

Dr. Gardner Taylor was a young, African American pastor preaching in Louisiana during the Depression. He was out in a rural, black church that had just one little light bulb hanging down from the ceiling to light up the whole sanctuary. He was preaching away, and in the middle of his sermon, all of a sudden, the electricity went out. The building went pitch black and Dr. Taylor didn't know what to say, being new at this. He stumbled around until one of the elderly deacons sitting in the back of the church cried out, “Preach on, preacher! We can still see Jesus in the dark!” The good news is that whether we can see him in the dark or not, he can see us in the dark.

We have to learn to trust God in the dark when we don't understand what he's doing. In the midst of the “No's” God is preparing us for a “Yes” that might be right around the corner. Meanwhile, we may have to trust God in a season of perplexity—to wait in Troas, not knowing what God is up to. And that waiting time is so important, not for what God does through us, but for what God does in us. Do you know what happens in those waiting times? Do you know what happens in Troas? We let go of our own plans, and our own agendas, and I think our own pride as well. Things are handed over to God where they belong.

We can make our plans, we can have our dreams, but we have to hold them very loosely. Wouldn't you rather be in Troas with God than anywhere else without him?

C. Third, I learn from this that the Spirit of God will guide us through a variety of methods. We see the Spirit

of God leading in a variety of ways in this story. He uses sheer faithfulness to the calling we've already received. He uses disagreement between two dear believers. He uses compromise. He uses circumstances like an illness that prevent us from doing something. He uses feelings and impressions that we have. He uses other people; chance meetings with a person like Luke. Sometimes he allows us to have an experience akin to a vision or dream where we sense God speaking to us in a very direct way. But, even then, we submit what we think God is saying to other wise and godly believers God has placed in our lives, such as Paul did. Even then we have to "bring things together" in our own minds; we have to use our head and think to discern the Spirit's leading.

I think of this as it relates to how our board of elders operate. Most often the process we go through in trying to determine where God is leading looks very unspiritual. Sure, we pray about it, and we try to see if the Scripture has anything to say about it, but we spend a lot of time trying to bring all the facts together and discern what "seems" to be the right thing to do. And we only act if there is unanimous agreement. We try to never move any faster than our slowest person. We've learned that sometimes it's the one dissenting vote that has the mind of the Spirit. The last observation has to do with where the Spirit leads.

D. Finally, the Spirit leads us to meet real needs amidst significant opposition. The man from Macedonia said, "Come on over; we need help." They went on over and shared the love of Christ and people came to faith; needs were met. The work the Spirit leads us into will always be to meet the needs of people. We should set out to meet the real needs of real people for God's sake! People are dying without Christ. Believers are starving without the Word of God. Families are splitting without the love of God. Jesus said, "Open your eyes, the fields are white for harvest." So whatever our plans are, that's what we're to be about.

And we can be sure of one thing as we do that—it won't be easy. Whatever we do, there will be challenges. There will be opposition. There will be hardship. There will be times when the wind's in our face and we wonder if it is all worth it. There will be times when we feel that the Lord or even the church is asking too much from us. Doing God's will always requires faith on our part. As a matter of fact, it usually brings us into a crisis of faith. Listen to the words of G. Campbell Morgan: "Oh, to go, not where I may choose, even by my love of the Lord, but where I am driven by the Lord's command. Circumstances of difficulty are opportunities for faith, and the measure of our perplexity in service and in Christian life is the measure of our opportunity. Let us follow the gleam, though the

darkness threaten to envelop. Let us be true to the inward monitor, and if in being true, suddenly illness prevent, and we cannot follow, then rest in the Lord in the darkness, and know that God's shortest way to Troas may be athwart our inclinations and purposes. It is better to go to Troas with God, than anywhere else without Him."

CONCLUSION

So that's how God leads. That's how he guides. It's as if God is on the roller coaster and he stops along the way and says, "I'm going that way. Buckle your seatbelt and hop on." It takes faith to hop on because we don't know what lies ahead. Although we may know the destination, we can be sure that along the way he'll take us through dark tunnels—times of perplexity. He'll take us through some very sharp turns—unexpected changes of direction. And he'll take us on those wonderful straightaways where we can see for miles ahead and the wind is at our backs. But one thing we know, he IS our guide; he will lead us.