

ESF, Lord's Day message
8/23/2015

Finding and Following God's Will (Part I)

Acts 16: 6-10

⁶ Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

All of us want to know God's will in our lives and may ask these questions: *What does God want me to do in life? Where does He want me to live? Whom does He want me to marry? What kind of job does God want me to get? What does God want me to do with my financial situation?* The questions go on and on.

How can we find and follow God's will? God reveals His will through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit guides us to find God's will through our plans, prayers, circumstances, inner fruit, the words, supernatural means, and agreement among believers. Today we will learn how to find and follow God's will with the guidance of the Spirit through our plans, prayers, circumstances and inner fruit.

Through our plans and prayers

The word in Proverb 16:9 says, *"In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps."*

When Paul and his mission companions sought God's will, they did not just sit and prayed without doing anything. They had a clear goal for

their mission. It was to bring the gospel of Christ to the Gentile world and eventually to the ends of the earth. To accomplish the goal they made plans -who would belong to the mission team, where to go, when to go, what to do, how to do it etc. And they did everything they could to follow their plans.

This was Paul's second missionary journey. For his first mission Paul traveled to the region of Galatia, which was in southeast and central Turkey by today's map. In his 2nd missionary journey Paul planned to go to the regions very close to the regions of his first mission trip. The regions were west and northwest of Turkey.

And the Holy Spirit worked through their plans and through what they did according to their plans.

To find God's will, we need to set a goal for our lives and make plans to accomplish that goal. We must make specific plans to achieve the goal. Jesus says in Luke 14:28-29, *"Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you..."*

We must not only pray but also study, do research and consider carefully. Don't think that God will do everything for you. God has given you the ability to think, study and make good plans for your life.

Also the word means that while we make plans and follow up with the plans we must depend on and seek God's help through prayer. While Paul and his companions were following their plans they kept praying. How do we know?

The text keeps telling us that "the Holy Spirit" did not allow them to go to certain regions and they obeyed what the Holy Spirit told them to do. It is proof that they kept praying to hear the voice of the Spirit.

Without constant prayer they would not have been able to hear the voice of the Spirit. Through prayers, they were able to hear the voice of the Spirit and obey. *Prov. 3:5-6 says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight."*

Do you have a goal in your life? Do you have plans to achieve the goal? Are you doing everything you can do to follow up with the plans? Are you praying to seek God's help? You need to do these to find God's will and follow God's will in your life.

Through circumstances

The Spirit guides us through all circumstances. When the Spirit guides us to find and follow God's will, He may use circumstances to open doors for our goals and plans.

If all doors are closed against the direction we want to go, even if we work hard, do our best, and do everything we can to go in that direction, we may consider that the Holy Spirit is not guiding us in that direction.

When Paul and his mission companions tried to go to Asia, all the doors leading to the region were closed. Then, they changed their plan and tried to go to another region, Bithynia. But again all the doors were closed. So they took it as a sign that the Holy Spirit was not guiding them to the regions. How were the doors closed? What could have been the circumstances which convinced them that the Holy Spirit had closed all doors?

There could have been many different circumstances. Someone among the mission team could have been very sick so that they missed the right time to go there. They might not have been able to get legal permission

to enter these places at that time. The financial needs might not have been met as they needed.

Anyway the circumstance did not allow them to follow their plans several times. Along the way, they had to struggle to figure out the guidance of the Spirit. They had to change their plans several times.

But, after closing all doors against their plans, the Holy Spirit guided them toward a different direction through a vision. It was an invitation from Macedonia which was not in their plans. So although many doors were closed, a new door was opened.

When the Spirit guides you, you may face both closed doors and opened doors. The doors for your plan may be closed. But a new door may be opened for you.

Wallace Johnson, a builder of numerous Holiday Inn Motels and convalescent hospitals, said, "When I was forty years old, I worked in a sawmill. One morning the boss told me, 'You're fired!' Depressed and discouraged, I felt like the world had caved in on me. It was during the depression and my wife and I greatly needed the small wages I had been earning."

"When I went home, I told my wife what happened. She asked, 'What are you going to do now?' I replied, 'I'm going to mortgage our little home, and go into the building business.'

"My first venture was the construction of two small buildings. And within five years I was a multi-millionaire!"

"Today, if I could find the man who fired me, I would sincerely thank him for what he did. At the time it happened, I didn't understand why I was fired. Later, I saw that it was God's unerring and wondrous plan."

The Spirit may guide us through ways different from our original plans. While we are trying to serve the Lord with our plans, the Holy Spirit

may close all doors for those plans. To do so, the Holy Spirit may use different situations such as sickness, people's opposition, legal matters, natural disasters, and insufficient financial provision etc. But He may open a new door toward a new direction. So, God's "no" to our plan is ultimately His "yes" for a new blessing.

So even if things do not go according to our plan, we should not think that failure of our plan is God's final will. If we are ready to follow the guidance of God's Spirit, the Spirit will provide another open door for us. So we must be patient until we see a new door opened by the Holy Spirit. When things do not go according to your plan while you are serving the Lord, be patient with the Holy Spirit who has a different plan. Do not give up on serving the Lord. Wait on the new guidance of the Spirit.

Also to follow the guidance of the Spirit, whose ways of guidance are unlimited, we have to be flexible to give up our plan and follow the plan of the Spirit at any time.

Although Paul and his mission companions made good and reasonable plans for their missionary journey, when all doors were closed against their plans, they did not stubbornly stick to their plans. They were flexible to change their plans and turned their direction to wherever the Spirit was leading, no matter how inconvenient for them it was to change, or no matter how much cost they had to pay to change.

Flexibility to change is key to following the guidance of God's Spirit. On the contrary, stubbornness is the most dangerous enemy against listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Some people may think while they are making a decision in their ministry this way: "*I am not going to change my way of serving the Lord no matter what.*" Some people stick to their tradition or way of ministry stubbornly and never change.

Jesus said that new wine should be always poured into a new wineskin (Mark 2:19-22). What Jesus means by the “new wine” is the new way and movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives. And what He means by the “new wineskin” is the humble and flexible mindset of a person who is willing to accept and follow the new ways and movement of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit has fresh moving power every day, like the wind. Always be humble, flexible and open-minded to follow a new way of the Spirit and to change your way. While you try to be flexible to change, you may feel very awkward for a while, you may be very uncomfortable for a while, or you may even feel some pain for a while. But if you keep humbling yourself and surrender to the new movement of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit will guide you. Soon you can enjoy the movement of the Spirit in your life.

Through inner fruit

When the Spirit guides us there is fruit in our hearts-such as joy, peace, self-control etc. Especially the fruit of peace is the common evidence of whether we are following the Spirit or not. It may not be easy for us to be sure what is really the fruit of the Spirit among the many things in our lives. But we can easily know whether our hearts are at peace or not, and whether the peace is just superficial peace or deep inner peace from the Spirit.

In Philippians 4:6-7, Paul says, “*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*”

So while Paul and his companions were seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they must have prayed always until they were confident of the way of the Spirit by peace in their hearts.

Of course, even if we are following the guidance of the Spirit, sometimes there may be uneasiness, struggles or even fears in our hearts. But if we keep trying to follow the guidance of the Spirit, eventually the uneasiness, struggles and fears will be gone and peace will fill our hearts. Because, when we follow the Spirit's guidance, He certainly gives us inner peace.

Jesus struggled mightily the night He was about to be arrested and crucified. He was overwhelmed by the pain and suffering which would come to him soon. He would have liked to avoid the suffering and pain. But he did not follow his feelings, understanding or will. Through prayer He sought the will of God. And God sent an angel to strengthen Him (Luke 22:43). Through prayer, He could overcome fear and remained in peace.

Peace of mind is a sign that we are following the guidance of the Spirit of God. Such peace is a peace which does not come from circumstances but it comes from the Spirit, it comes from inside.

If you don't have peace when you make some decisions, or while you are doing something, or while you are heading in some direction, you need to wait and pray more. Don't hurry in making a decision while you don't have peace in your heart. Don't persist in doing something when you don't have peace in your heart. Take enough time to pray and wait patiently on receiving peace, the fruit of the Spirit. And you will be able to find God's will and follow God's will with the peace of the Spirit.