

# **GOD'S SAVING PURPOSES PREVAIL THROUGH SUBMISSION TO GOD'S WILL**

## **Acts 21:1-16**

### INTRODUCTION

As we just had read for us, God promised in the OT that a day was going to come when he would put it in the very heart of all of his people an irrepressible desire to do his will, to obey his word. We know that it is through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the sending out of the HS by Jesus after he ascended into heaven that God has fulfilled the promise he made in the OT. It is one of the chief marks of the true child of God that he or she wants to do God's will and wants God's purposes to be fulfilled in this world. We see this reflected in the prayer that Jesus taught us to pray. In the third petition we daily ask our Father in heaven: "let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Christians are preoccupied with the will of God. We want to do God's perfect will and we want God's perfect will to be done on this earth everywhere and by everyone.

We can see in our passage today that this is the central concern in this story of Paul's journey to Jerusalem to deliver the financial gift he has collected from the Gentile churches to the Jewish church in Jerusalem. Paul is determined to go to Jerusalem, believing it to be God's will. The church in Tyre and the church in Caesarea both seek to convince Paul that it is not God's will for him to go to Jerusalem. Finally, after much passionate discussion the church submits to God's will. They say in v. 14, "Let the will of the Lord be done." The church recognizes that it is God's will for Paul to go to Jerusalem and there to be arrested and imprisoned.

Whenever we talk about the "will of God" we must be careful to define what we are discussing because the Bible, including this passage here, refers to God's will in three different ways. That is not to say that God has three wills but rather that as we relate to the God who rules over all things, who is the sovereign king of the universe, we receive his will or relate to his will in three ways. First and foremost the "will of God" is revealed and made known to us in his word. The invisible God who is the Creator and Ruler of all things has spoken to us in this book and made his will known to us. In this book we discover who we are, who God is, how God governs his world, how we can be saved from God's wrath through Christ and how we are to conduct ourselves in the world. However, does this book contain a description of everything that God has ever done or will ever do in this world? No it does not. Does it contain a blueprint for every person's life? No it does not.

Thus, while it truly informs us as to God's ultimate purposes in the world and tells us all that we need to know in order to be saved and in order to live lives that please him, yet it does not tell us who to marry, what job to have or whether or not the U.S. should withdraw all our troops from Iraq right now or not. It does not tell us when and where God is going to send earthquakes and tornadoes and flu epidemics. It doesn't tell us who should be the president of the U.S. Thus, throughout the history of the church, the second way the church has described God's will is that in part it is secret or unknown to us until things happen. Deuteronomy 29:29 sets forth this distinction in God's will when it says, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law." We know on the authority of God's word that he is working "out everything according to the purposes of his will." Thus we know that everything that happens is according to his will of decree. However, we do not know what his will is until it happens. So Christians live in God's world recognizing that while we may plan, yet God's plans may not be our plans as James says, "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit'--yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'"

The third way that the bible talks about God's will and probably that aspect of his will that most Christians obsess about is God's will for our particular lives. Who should I marry? Where should I go to school? What should be my job? How many children should we have? Where should we live? We want to do God's will and

so while we know that much of what God wants us to do is revealed in the Bible, yet there are a lot of decisions we have to make that we feel God must care about and yet God has not told us in the Bible what to do. It is not only the big decisions of life but each day we must make decisions about how we are to spend our time and other resources. One day this last week I came home from work and I had 2.5 hours before I had another meeting. So I had to decide what to do with my time. I could go for a bike ride, I could clean the pool, I could talk with my wife Jane or spend time with my daughter Jaimee or I could get my disabled son Jared out of bed and do something with him. What did God want me to do or does he not care at all? I can think of biblical reasons to do each of these things, but does God have a preference? Does he have a will for me that I can discern and then follow?

In this story of Paul's journey to Jerusalem we are given some help as to how Christians think about and pursue God's will. As I said, this entire story only makes sense when we recognize that the chief passion of every true Christian is discerning and doing the will of God.

## MAIN POINT

**Discerning and doing the will of God is the passion of all Christians therefore...**

### **I. We listen to the HS (Romans 15:25-27, Acts 19:21, 20:22-23, 21:10-11)**

It is impossible, when we read the book of Acts, to miss the fact that the HS is actively involved in leading and directing and enabling the people of God corporately and individually. In the case of Paul we know that it was while he was preaching the gospel in and with the church in Antioch that the HS told him and the other elders there that Paul and Barnabas were to leave Antioch and go preach the gospel in what is today central Turkey (13:1-4). While on his second missionary journey it was the HS who forbid him from preaching the gospel in Asia and Bithynia (16:6-7). In 19:21 we are told that it was through the Spirit that Paul determined to travel to Jerusalem and then to Rome. On the way to Jerusalem, three times we are informed that the HS tells Paul in every city he comes to that when he gets to Jerusalem he will be persecuted and arrested.

It would seem that determining the will of God, with all this direction given by the HS would be fairly easy for all to discern. However, in vv. 11-14 it is clear that there is a disagreement between Paul and his friends and the church in Caesarea about what God's will is for him. After Agabus delivers the HS's message that Paul will be bound by the Jews in Jerusalem and then turned over to the Romans the church begins begging Paul with intense emotional appeals to not go to Jerusalem. But Paul stubbornly tells them that he is going to go to Jerusalem even if it means that he dies there. Why is Paul so stubborn? The church is sure the reason the HS keeps telling him that he is going to be arrested in Jerusalem is so that he will not go. However, he is sure that it is God's will that he go to Jerusalem. How can Paul be so sure about this? Look at v. 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."

The reason Paul has to go to Jerusalem is "for the sake of the name of the Lord Jesus." To do something for the sake of the name of Jesus means to act in such a way that the greatness and glory and honor of Jesus is magnified and revealed and displayed. So Paul is completely convinced that he must personally deliver the financial gift that he has collected from the Gentile churches in Macedonia and Achaia to the church in Jerusalem in order for the name, the reputation of Jesus to be upheld and magnified. He is not going there to preach the gospel or to plant a church, he is going there to deliver a financial gift. The gift cannot be delivered by anyone else, only him or the name of Jesus will not be magnified. Why is that? He gives the answer to that question in Romans 15 which he wrote from Corinth just before he began this journey from the Gentile churches to Jerusalem with the financial gift.

We don't have time to examine the detailed argument he makes there as to why he must go to Jerusalem and then to Rome and from there to Spain. What is fairly obvious to see in that chapter is that Paul's decisions about what God wants him to do and where God wants him to go are rooted in two things. First, in Romans

15:8-13, Paul describes how God promised the patriarchs of the Jewish faith, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that he was going to bless the Gentiles through their descendants. God's plan from the beginning was not to save only Jewish men and women but to save people out of all the nations of the world through the Jewish nation. More specifically God's eternal plan was to save people from every tribe and tongue and language and nation through the Jewish Messiah. He proves this point by quoting numerous OT Scriptures. The second thing that directed Paul's actions was that Jesus had personally commissioned him to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Thus, all of the OT statements that talk about the salvation of the Gentile nations through the Jewish Messiah apply directly to him. Paul's ambition to go to Jerusalem, then to Rome and then on to Spain is the result of his listening to the voice of the HS as he speaks in the Scriptures.

Yes, the HS, most likely through a prophet in the church back in Ephesus instructed him to go to Jerusalem with this financial gift. But it is Paul's knowledge of God's revelation in the Bible about his purposes in the world that gives him the conviction that he must go to Jerusalem in spite of the fact that everyone else thinks he should not go. Paul could not have stood against the heart-felt pleadings of his friends and the respected leaders in the church at Tyre and at Caesarea if he was not convinced by the word of God that he was acting in accord with God's revealed will. He believed that he must go to the Jewish congregation in Jerusalem as the apostle to the Gentiles in order for the glory of Jesus' saving of the nations as the Jewish Messiah to be magnified in the world. He viewed his financial gift from the Gentile churches to the Jerusalem church as evidence that God was keeping his promise to the Jewish patriarchs to bless the nations through their descendants.

Your confidence that you are doing the will of God will grow in direct proportion to your knowledge of God's revealed will in the Bible. The less you know the Bible the less certain you must be as to whether or not you are doing the will of God. To not be growing in your knowledge of the Bible and the truth that is taught in it is to be indifferent to the will of God. We all must be listening to the voice of the HS as he speaks to us in the Scriptures if we are going to be able to discern what God's will is for our lives. I'm not saying that there is a verse in the Bible that will tell you whether or not you should be a missionary or who you should marry or what you should do with your time this afternoon. However, I can tell you that without a growing knowledge of the Scriptures as they are written you will not be able to discern God's will for your life. Whatever other ways the HS may speak to us he always and most emphatically speaks to us through the Scriptures. As he is the author of the Bible he will never speak to us in contradiction to what he has said on the pages of this book.

## **II. We discern God's will in the context of the community (21:4-14)**

One of the features of the HS's leading and directing of Christians in the book of Acts is that he almost always speaks in public. Paul told the Ephesian elders in his speech recorded in chapter 20 that "the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me." He doesn't say how that happens, only that it happens in every city. Then when he arrives in the city of Tyre and spends seven days with the church in that city we are told in v. 4, "And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem." Here the HS was communicating something to these disciples which led them to tell Paul he should not go to Jerusalem. However, we are not told exactly how that worked other than it was apparently a public declaration. We discover when he comes to Caesarea and the church that is located there what has been happening. A prophet from Jerusalem by the name of Agabus comes to the church in Caesarea with a message from the HS to Paul. But he does not deliver this message privately. In the presence of the whole church he walks up to Paul, takes off Paul's belt, ties his own hands and feet together and declares, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" This is the kind of thing that has been happening to Paul in every city.

So here is this information that has come to Paul and to the church from the HS. The question that faces them is this, "why has the HS told them, as a group, about the certainty of Paul's imprisonment?" Paul's traveling companions and the entire church is 100% sure they know why the HS has informed them. God does not want Paul to go to Jerusalem. Others can deliver the gift. He is too important to the church, to the spread of the gospel. He must not go to Jerusalem but must go to Rome and to Spain. So they beg him and plead with him.

They are so distraught that they weep as they beg him not to go. “God does not want you to go to Jerusalem Paul, why can’t you see that?” Paul is very moved by their pleadings and begs them in turn to desist from their pleading. He knows for sure, as I explained in my previous point that God wants him to go to Jerusalem. He begs them to stop making his journey harder than it needs to be. “Let me go because I must go for the sake of Christ no matter what it costs me.”

Paul is not simply being pig headed here. On several other occasions we have seen how the church told him not to go somewhere dangerous and he obeyed. In both Thessalonica and Ephesus Paul would have gone into the midst of hostile crowds to speak but the church told him not to and he listened. However, here he knows on the basis of God’s word that he must go and he knows that the reason the HS is telling him about the suffering is so that neither he nor the church will be surprised when it happens but they all will accept it as God’s will for him. He and the church will know that his imprisonment is not the result of Satan’s work and for his destruction but is part of God’s plan for him and the church which will result in good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose. As a result of this public discussion the whole church comes to an agreement about God’s will for Paul. In v. 14 the whole church agrees that it is the Lord’s will for Paul to go to Jerusalem to deliver the gift and to be imprisoned.

What we must see here is that God’s will is determined in the context of the gathered community of the church. This goes against the radically individualistic American culture that we live in. We rarely consult anyone else, let alone the entire church as we make our decisions about what God wants us to do. We regularly inform the church that it is God’s will that we do this or that or the other thing rather than ask the church if we should take a particular course of action. Does the HS still give prophetic words like he did through Agabus? Personally, at this time, I am agnostic on the question. There are strong arguments to be made for the ongoing presence of this prophetic gift in the church and strong arguments that it has ceased. But one thing is pretty clear to me; if the HS does still give these sorts of prophetic words to his people it would be very difficult for us to know it because we are not very open to having someone else comment on what God’s will might be for us. I think if we began to seek each other’s input before we made some of those bigger decisions and sought prayer and prayerful input from other Christians, from the church we might be surprised by what the HS might say to us.

### **III. We, like Jesus, submit to God’s will no matter the cost (21:4-8, 13-14)**

Luke records the events in Paul’s journey to Jerusalem in such a way that you cannot miss the parallels to Jesus’ final journey to Jerusalem. Just as the Jews plotted to kill Jesus on his way to Jerusalem, so the Jews plotted to kill Paul as he left Corinth. Just as Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead shortly before he came to Jerusalem, so Paul raised Eutychus from the dead on his way to Jerusalem. Just as Jesus had a final conversation with his disciples after which he did not see them again before his death, so Paul had a final conversation with his disciples, the elders of Ephesus, after which he never saw them again. Just as three times on the way to Jerusalem Jesus told the disciples that he was going to be captured by the Jews and handed over to the Romans, so three times the HS informs Paul the same thing will happen to him. Finally, and most importantly, Paul, together with the whole church prays the same prayer that Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, “Not our will but the will of the Lord be done.” Obviously there are significant differences between Jesus and his journey and its final outcome and Paul’s journey and what happens to him in Jerusalem, yet Luke has arranged the historical material in such a way as to show us that Paul is going to Jerusalem for the sake of the name the Lord Jesus Christ. He is going to suffer because of his commitment to doing the will of God for the glory of Jesus, just as Jesus went to Jerusalem to do the will of God for his glory.

We follow a crucified savior who suffered to do the will of God. Therefore you can be sure there is always a cost to doing the will of God. Doing the will of God always requires us to risk things we value and to suffer the loss of earthly pleasure. This is as true for the simplest act of obedience as it is for the really big, life altering actions. The father gives up watching the football game in order to study and prepare for the purpose of teaching the gospel to his child in preparation for baptism. The wife does not sit down to watch her favorite TV show in order to assist her husband in packing for the business trip. The child cheerfully helps her mom weed

the garden instead of running off to play with her friends. You call up a person you've just met at church and ask him to get together for coffee for the purpose of getting to know him and find out where he is at in his walk with Christ. The man goes to his job each day and politely does as his rude boss asks, seeking to do more than the unreasonable employer asks. The single woman breaks off the relationship with a young man she really likes because the young man she is dating is not a Christian. The teenager who just got his driver's license doesn't give his friends a ride, risking their disapproval, because he knows it would be against the law. You volunteer to spend a night at the homeless shelter. The family, instead of going to a movie, cleans the house and prepares snacks to host the bible study in their home. The college graduate, contrary to his parents' wishes, turns down a really good job in order to go to seminary to prepare for being a full time vocational pastor. The family leaves a secure life and good job to move closer to the aging parents/grandparents to take care of them. The young couple leaves behind the comforts of the U.S. to go live in a majority world country so they can preach the gospel and plant a church among an unreached people group. You set the alarm for an hour earlier so you can read your bible and pray before you go to work.

All of these acts, big and small, we do just like Paul, for the sake of the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. We perform these acts of obedience because Jesus and his saving work on our behalf is the thing we love and delight in more than anything else. We are willing to bear any cost in order to show off his glory and to display his worth by doing his will. We do not permit the cost, the loss of earthly pleasure and comfort to dissuade us from doing his will because he is more delightful to us than any earthly pleasure and his salvation will more than compensate for any suffering we may incur in doing his will.

#### **IV. We support each other in doing the will of God (21:14-16)**

The last thing to notice is that the church, after concluding it is the Lord's will for Paul to go to Jerusalem, sends a delegation with him and finds him a place to stay in Jerusalem (vv.15-16). As we are going to see, being associated with Paul is not a popular or safe thing to be doing in Jerusalem. These people not only interrupted their lives to help Paul but also put themselves at significant risk. This is in spite of the fact that they were vigorously opposed to this trip during the congregational meeting. This is perhaps the most remarkable thing in this story because it is so contrary to how churches so often operate. Often what happens is that a church is faced with a major decision. There is a meeting in which people vigorously put forward their views and seek to persuade the congregation to take a certain course of action. There is a vote and the congregation makes a decision that this is the direction we believe the Lord is leading us. However, the people who opposed the action withhold their support: financial, prayer and personal participation because they disagree with the decision. Brothers and sisters, these things out not to be.

We submit to God's will by submitting to the God directed decisions we make together as a congregation. We believe that God directs us through vigorous discussion and a final vote. This is one reason to become a member of the church, so you can participate in discerning God's will for our church. This is why we participate in congregational meetings. We do not approach our decisions as though we are trying to win a debate but as if we are seeking to discern the Lord's will. Once a decision is reached we all join together in pursuing the action because we all believe this is the Lord's will for us until he manifestly shows us otherwise. It is a marvelous thing to see an entire congregation, after vigorous discussion and a vote, join together in doing the will of God, each person contributing in the ways in which God calls and gifts but all of us together taking risks and suffering loss for the sake of the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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