

The Sometimes Bitter Pill of God's Desirous Will – Acts 21:1-16

Introduction

I think we would all agree that we find God's will for our lives to be something of a mystery

At least we're always trying to determine God's will in various situations, right?

We recognize that God has things that he thinks would be best, directions he wants us to go, and things he wants us to do

But if we're honest we would have to admit we struggle a bit, frankly, with deciding just how important it is to follow God's will to the letter

And that struggle comes about in large part because we have a flawed idea about the purpose of following God's will

How would you rank the following outcomes of obeying God's will for your life? - Picture a scale running from left to right with left being not at all important and the right being of paramount importance and put them somewhere along that line - what is most important to you when it comes to obeying God's will?

How God's will aligns with your will; your happiness; God's glory; your spiritual maturity; your comfort; your contentment; your prosperity; your popularity; your physical safety; God's purposes; your surrender; your trust; your witness

Now, picture the same items ranked in order of what you think is important to God

Did you have to move any of them around or were the two rankings the same?

I remember when I was a kid and would get a skinned knee or a minor cut my folks would spring into action, reach into the medicine chest and pull out one of a number of little dark brown bottles

It didn't matter much which bottle they pulled out because all of them contained some form of liquid fire that was applied by a little plastic swab thing attached to the lid

How many of you were ever treated with Mecurochrome or Merthiolate or the ever popular iodine?

The first two would stain your skin a hideous fluorescent reddish color and the iodine turned you brown but, as I remember, they all hurt and we would spend the next few minutes blowing on our wound trying to ease the burn

I was always jealous of those kids on TV whose moms sprayed their injuries with Bactine as those kids were all smiles and hugging their moms

I don't know if it was really better or not because we never tried it but it was presented like a wonder drug it seemed to me that pain avoidance in the pursuit of healing should be something to at least consider

Then when I became a parent I found that I had to talk with my girls about needing to endure a little hurt in order to avoid a larger hurt later and how sometimes we need to suffer a bit of pain in order to be made better

Pain avoidance seems to be hard-wired into the human existence though and we will often do most anything to avoid being hurt

That's certainly true in the physical sense but it's also true in the spiritual sense

If we had our way the road of God's will would be level, smoothly paved, and direct and we become resistant when God's will seems to be filled with peaks and valley, pot-holes and bumps, and twists and turns

We have the mistaken belief that since God loves us he would never lead us into pain or hardship and if the way is perilous or if things don't go smoothly then we must be outside of God's will

But that's not reality and we have to accept that

There are times when the rough road is the right road and the bitter pill is the medicine God prescribes

Our passage this morning is **Acts 21:1-16** and I invite you to join me there in your Bible and to follow along as I read the entire passage

1And when we had parted from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos, and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. 2And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. 3When we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload its cargo. 4And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. 5When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed 6and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.

7When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. 8On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. 9He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. 10While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, "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.'" 12When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. 13Then Paul answered, "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." 14And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

15After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. 16And some of the disciples from Caesarea went with us, bringing us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple, with whom we should lodge.

This passage is a tough one and it may challenge some of our beliefs concerning God's will and our suffering

I. The Issue Before Us

Let's begin by looking at **the issue before us**

As our passage opens Paul has given his farewell address to the Ephesian elders and has boarded the ship that will carry him on the first leg of his journey to Jerusalem

Unfortunately, the English word "parted" in **verse 1** obscures the idea present in the Greek that this was a painful tearing away Paul's travelling companions and the elders had just enjoyed a sweet time of fellowship and they believed that they would never do so again – so parting was difficult and as we saw last week there was much weeping on all sides

In **Acts 20:22-23** Paul shared with the elders how he knew going to Jerusalem was going to result in negative consequences for him personally because the Holy Spirit had testified to him that **imprisonment and afflictions** were in store – a revelation that no doubt added to the anguish they felt at parting

As our passage begins Luke shares a brief journal of their trip as they hopped along the coast roughly 50 miles each day from **Miletus** to the island of **Cos** then to the island of **Rhodes** and finally to **Patara** where they apparently changed to a larger ship that took them directly across the Mediterranean Sea south of Cyprus to **Tyre** which was a voyage of about 350 miles

When they reached Tyre Paul and the others sought out the believers there and spent seven days with them and it was during this time that we begin to see the dilemma facing us

A. The Dilemma

1. First, we know that Paul was determined to follow God's will as it had been communicated to him

In **Acts 19:21** Luke reports that Paul was "resolved in the Spirit" to go Jerusalem and again in **Acts 20:22** Paul tells the Ephesian elders that he is "going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit"

Paul was thoroughly convinced that the Holy Spirit was commanding him to go to Jerusalem, he was literally tied to the activity in his mind, and he was determined to be obedient to the Spirit's leading

Paul's attitude is commendable as he reckons his own safety and well-being to be totally inconsequential when compared to fulfilling his God-given mission

But the believers first in Tyre and then in Caesarea had a different idea as we see that –

2. Second, Paul's advisors were determined to spare him from what had been communicated

In **verse 4** we read that the believers in Tyre were telling Paul “through the Spirit” that he should not go on to Jerusalem

And in **verses 10-11** we see the prophet Agabus act out a prophecy from the Holy Spirit by using Paul's belt to show how Paul would be bound by the Jews at Jerusalem and handed over to the Gentiles

And in **verse 12** we read that Paul's travelling companions joined together with the people of Caesarea in urging Paul not to go up to Jerusalem

Actually, the verb there indicates that they were *continually urging* Paul as an **ongoing action** is what is indicated

The dilemma

So the dilemma we find is that it appears that the Holy Spirit has told Paul to go while his advisors have been told by the Spirit that Paul should not go

But, since we know that one of the attributes of God is that he is unchangeable, we know that God cannot contradict himself

So, let's look at the cause of our dilemma

B. The Cause

1. The message from the Holy Spirit was the same for everyone who received it

Since God is non-contradictory by his very nature, I believe that everyone who received a message from the Holy Spirit **received the same general message**

Paul had been told that imprisonment and afflictions awaited him in Jerusalem

We aren't told what the Holy Spirit revealed in Tyre but logic tells us it was a message of negative consequences awaiting Paul in Jerusalem otherwise why would they try to dissuade him from going

And then the message delivered to and through Agabus included more detail than it seems was previously delivered to Paul as it added the detail that the specific nature of what awaited Paul – the Jews would bind him and turn him over to the Gentiles

But all of the messages from the Holy Spirit were that negative consequences awaited Paul in Jerusalem

The message was the same but there was a distinct difference in how the message was interpreted

2. When Paul and his advisors viewed the Holy Spirit's message through their respective lenses they came to different conclusions

Paul's advisors were well intentioned and they only wanted the best for Paul

But they thought of God's will the way we sometimes do – that God's will ought to be free of serious difficulty and pain

So when they heard correctly that Paul was facing danger in Jerusalem their logical conclusion was that Paul should not go – they were Paul's friends and they didn't want to see any harm come to him

We saw this same attitude in today's Scripture reading when Jesus told his disciples about his impending death in Jerusalem and Peter tried to talk him out of going

No one truly *wants* to suffer and no one who is a true friend wants to see their friends suffer

But Paul viewed his suffering as a minor thing compared to completing his mission so he took the message of the Holy Spirit as a means of preparing him for what was ahead and not as a warning not to go

So the difference was a matter of interpretation of a common message

C. The Outcome

1. Paul remained firm in his commitment to go to Jerusalem

And the outcome was that Paul remained firm in his commitment to go to Jerusalem

The way Luke reports these incidents it appears the pleas of the people in Tyre didn't have much impact on Paul but his advisors in Caesarea included not only the believers there but also his travelling companions – including his dear friend, Luke so their constant, insistent pleas had an effect on Paul

In **verse 13** we see Paul speak out in anguish at their sincere tears on his behalf as they tried to convince him not to go and he cried out saying “You’re breaking my heart” which shows their pleas were laying a burden on Paul

But in **verse 14** Luke writes that they finally saw that Paul was firm in his resolve and was not going to be persuaded

2. Paul's advisors gave in

And when they saw that Paul was firm in his commitment to go his advisors gave in

There are two ways to read their words recorded in verse 14 where they said, “Let the will of the Lord be done”

Those words could have been said with an air of resignation and reluctant acceptance of the inevitable

Or they could have been said as a realization that Paul was in fact being faithful to the will of the Lord

Whether it was with reluctance or understanding, submitting to God’s will in the end was the proper response

God knows we oftentimes struggle when his will is contrary to what we might desire for ourselves and he understands our tendency to shy away from the pain of what he at times asks of us

Just look to the example of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and how he prayed repeatedly for the cup of the cross to be removed from him and yet he prayed with the willingness to submit his will to the Father’s will

We too can approach God and honestly express our reservations as long as we are willing to submit to his revealed will in the end

II. The \$64K Question – Was Paul Wrong?

And that brings us to the \$64k question –

Was Paul wrong in going to Jerusalem in spite of the urging of so many fellow believers?

I have to admit that there are scholars who think he was but I don't believe so for the following reasons:

1. The Lord had told Paul at the time of his salvation that he was going to suffer for his name

Look back with me at **Acts 9:15-16** where we read the Lord’s words to Ananias:

But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”

Clearly, Paul's life as an apostle up to this point has been in line with that revelation as he has suffered greatly for being a faithful witness of Jesus Christ

And the presence of more hardship, imprisonment, and even death would not be a deviation from the Lord's prophetic word to Paul

2. The Lord later commends Paul for his testimony in Jerusalem even as he once again reveals Paul's future to him

Look with me at **Acts 23:11** where we find Paul in Jerusalem in a Roman barracks where he is being kept apart from the Jews who were trying to kill him

The following night the Lord stood by him [Paul] and said, “Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome.”

There is no sense of rebuke or correction here only an encouragement and a foretelling of his impending witness in Rome

3. Paul's own words that he wrote to Timothy at the end of his life show that he believed he had followed God's will to the end

Look with me at **2Timothy 4:7-8** –

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.

Earlier in the same letter Paul in **2Timothy 2:5** made clear that the only way to be awarded a victor's crown was to compete according to the rules without deviation – *An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.*

Paul clearly believed he had run the course that God had laid out for him and that he would therefore be rewarded

4. Then we know that Paul tended to be brutally honest about his failings

In **1Timothy 1:15** Paul called himself the foremost of sinners and in **Romans 7:15-20** Paul made it clear that he shared with all believers in the struggle to do well

There is simply no indication that Paul believed that he had done anything other than what God directed him to do in going to Jerusalem

5. The parallel between Paul and Jesus both resolving to go to Jerusalem while their followers urged them not to (Matthew 16:21-24)

Luke appears to have been deliberately pointing out the parallels between Jesus and Paul in their going to Jerusalem

And since we know that Jesus was not wrong in going against the advice of his followers we must conclude that Luke was indicating that Paul was likewise innocent of the charge of being pig-headed and was only firm in his resolve to be faithful

III. Lessons for Us

A. We need to understand that God's primary desire is not our comfort or our happiness but his glory

When we tell ourselves that God wants us to be happy and comfortable in this life we begin to distort God's will

The belief that God would never want us to be unhappy or that God would never want us to experience pain is simply not supported by Scripture

Paul writes in **2Corinthians 4:16-18** –

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

And sometimes God causes believers to suffer more than they can handle just so they will have to rely on him as in **2Corinthians 1:8-10** –

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.

The truth is that God often sends suffering into the life of a believer and uses that suffering to mature us for his glory

B. We need to know God's will for our lives

Knowing God's will isn't all that mysterious and when we think about it, it's silly to think that God wants to hide his will from us or wants us to have to work hard or even beg to know his will

Here are six steps every believer can take that will ensure that they will know God's will for any situation

1. Walk with God

By this I mean be with God and communicate with God through prayer then listen to God by being in and under his Word

Make this a daily habit and not just a practice you engage in when you want something from God – have a real, vibrant, ongoing relationship with God

2. Listen to God's Spirit

God has given us the Holy Spirit to indwell and inform us but it's possible to tune the Spirit out or to quench the Spirit's leadings

One of the functions of the Holy Spirit is to interpret what we read in Scripture and help us to apply it to our lives and we tune him out by refusing to heed what he tells us and we quench him by engaging in habitual, willful sin

And know this – God's will for you will never go against any teaching in his Word and if what you believe you heard violates his Word it's not a valid leading from the Holy Spirit no matter how convincing it might seem

3. Surrender your will to God's will

We saw this in the example of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane – he prayed for what he desired but subordinated his desire to the Father's will in humble surrender

You can't fool God and he knows whether you are truly surrendered or whether you merely want to know his will so you can decide if you agree with it deferring any decision on obedience until you can make certain it meets your approval – far too often what we really want to know is, "Can I do what I want and still be in God's will?"

4. Obey what you already know to be God's will

God has revealed so much in his general will for mankind and we need to be obedient to what we know before we can expect him to reveal anything further

What makes us think that God would waste his time showing us his specific will if we are shunning his general will?

Remember, the one who is faithful with little will be given charge of much

5. Pay attention to how God has wired you

God's will is seldom a radical departure from how God has designed us

I often tell the story about the young man who said he was hesitant to say he'd follow God's will because God might make him move to Africa and eat worms

God's will for you will typically follow along with who you are and to the extent that it isn't compatible, trust that God will mature you and change you until you are fit for it

God isn't just waiting to make us miserable

6. Look at your present circumstances

Actually, these last two go together somewhat

We tend to think of God's will on a case-by-case basis and we miss the overall arc of our lives and how God's will has continuity as our lives follow a prescribed path

Perhaps we miss it in the day-by-day because we're absorbed in the moment but often when we look back we see clearly how God was directing us all along on a specific path

I experienced this myself when I felt God calling me to vocational ministry

Actually, God didn't call me to ministry right away – he began by giving me the sense that he wanted me to get involved in various aspects of lay ministry – which I did

Then, sometime later I sensed God telling me he wanted me to go to Bible school to prepare – but I honestly didn't know what God had in mind for me because he didn't reveal it yet

During those first years in Bible school I used to tell people who asked me what my plans were that God hadn't told me that part yet; he simply told me to get ready so I was getting ready

But when the call to vocational ministry came it didn't come as a complete surprise – as something out of left field

It was a natural progression from what God had been telling me all along

Paul knew from the beginning of his Christian life that the Lord set him apart to minister to the Gentiles and that he was going to suffer greatly for it

So when God made known his desire for Paul to go to Jerusalem and certain hardship Paul had no problem recognizing it as God's will because it fit

C. We need to not just *know* God's will; we need to *do* God's will

It would have done no good whatsoever for Paul to have known God's will or even to have been thoroughly convinced of God's will if he hadn't in the end done God's will

Admittedly, doing God's will is sometimes a struggle – especially when other people have different ideas

People around us often give us bad advice with the best of intentions

I certainly think that was true of all those people who were advising Paul – I don't think they had any guile or intention to deceive Paul into doing wrong

And we will also run into people who mean us nothing but the best but they are simply wrong when it comes to understanding what God's will is for us

Still, we should seek counsel because there is wisdom in a multitude of counselors but then we need to weigh their advice and put it before the Lord –

Because, in the end **as long as it doesn't violate Scripture** determining God's will is pretty much an individual matter and we are responsible for what God is telling us to do

Sadly, we often heed what we suspect or even know is bad advice because it fits with what we want and we think it gives us some sort of cover before God for our disobedience

Conclusion

Will God's will ever lead us into suffering and pain? Clearly the answer is "yes"

Is the fact that a thing doesn't work out or that a struggle results from doing a thing a sure indicator that it's not God's will? No, it isn't

God uses all manner of circumstances and events in the lives of individual believers and even in the life of a church in order to bring about his purposes of spiritual growth and the furtherance of his glory

In fact, I would have to say that it's more likely that following God's path will result in more hardship than ease because those ends are better served by struggling than they are by coasting

As much as we might prefer it, the easy road is not always God's road and

There are times when the rough road is the right road and the bitter pill is the medicine God prescribes

The story of missionary Jim Elliot and his four co-laborers and how they went to minister to the Auca tribe only to be murdered by a band of Auca warriors even before they had a chance to present Jesus to them is well known

Now, put yourself in the place of Mr. Elliot's friends - had you been shown by the Holy Spirit what fate awaited that 28 year old man and the others would you have tried your best to dissuade them from going?

I believe you might well have if you were truly a friend because their deaths would seem pointless and unnecessary

But their deaths led to a photo essay about them in Life magazine which in turn stimulated unprecedented giving toward missions and a surge of people travelling to the mission field - even to the Auca many of whom accepted Christ and even welcomed Jim Elliot's wife and daughter to live among them just two years later

Who's to say that wasn't God's plan all along?

We said at the beginning that God's will is sometimes mysterious – and to our way of thinking it sometimes doesn't seem to make sense

But it doesn't need to be a mystery in terms of knowing what God would have us do

The key is to be continually walking and communicating with God, to be in tune with the Holy Spirit and make sure that our lives permit him unhindered control of our will, to obey what we already know, and to seek to generally discern the path of our life to see the direction God is leading us

If we do those things, God's will need never be a complete surprise to us even if it means we need to occasionally adjust our priorities to match God's priorities - even to the extent Paul demonstrates in his attitude regarding his own life relative to his fidelity to God's will in **Acts 20:24**

As God's children, believers can appropriate the truth of the assurance God gave to Jeremiah in **Jeremiah 29:11**

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

There are times when the rough road is the right road and the bitter pill is the medicine God prescribes

God's will might be tough at times but there is no safer or more prosperous place to be than in the center of his will

Let's pray