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Surrendering to the Will of God, Part 2

Acts 21:7-15

When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. On 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. He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And 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.'" When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then 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." And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, "Let the will of the Lord be done."

After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem.

Paul is sensing the Spirit of God. The will of God for his life is for him to go to Jerusalem. But the Spirit is also telling him prison and hardships are awaiting there. That's what he knows.

But he says, "I consider my life worth nothing to me. My only aim is to finish the race or complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God's grace."

When Paul was converted, a man named Ananias came to him because he was blinded. And God sent Ananias to Paul to take the blinders off his eyes. And, in the words of the Scriptures, tell Paul how much he must suffer for the name of Jesus. God's will for Paul. But he didn't care, because his life was worth nothing compared to fulfilling the task or the will of God in his life.

So Luke says this: "When we had finished the voyage from Tyre"—now they've left—"and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day." Now he's down here, back near Jerusalem. They unload the ship at Tyre. They go to Ptolemais, right there just a little farther down on the water. They stay there for one day, and on the next day we departed and came to Caesarea. And we entered the house of Philip the Evangelist, who was one of the seven that was appointed earlier in Acts, and stayed with him.

He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied. Interesting that they would hear from God and speak for God.

And then it says this: while we were staying for many days there, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. There's four prophetesses, four daughters who are speakers from the Word of God, but yet God sends another man as a prophet to Philip's house while Paul is there. Just fascinating, this whole journey.

Now they are here in Caesarea. Coming to us, Agabus took Paul's belt, and this prophet bound himself with Paul's belt, his hands and his feet. And he, again from God, let it be known to Paul what awaited him in Jerusalem: "This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt, and then they will deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles."

Paul didn't know how he was going to get to Rome, but now he was given a hint. The text says this in Acts 21. This is Luke writing, who's traveling with Paul. And he says, "When we, Luke and Paul's traveling companions, the group that was with him, heard this, we and the people there in Ptolemais in Caesarea urged him not to go to Jerusalem. Don't do it, Paul. You shouldn't go. Listen to what the prophet says. You're going to be bound, hands and feet. You're going to be turned over to Rome. Stay away."

When Paul answered, he said this: "What are you doing, crying and trying to weaken my heart, my resolve? Your empathy, your sympathy, your worry, your fear over my life—and maybe yours—could thwart the will of God. Your soft-heartedness. What are you doing, crying and trying to weaken my resolve?"

And then listen to Paul's words: "For I am ready not only to be imprisoned, but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."

Do you sense the passion here in Paul's heart? The Holy Spirit has been prompting him for miles upon miles upon miles, as he's traveling to go to Jerusalem. It's building in his spirit. He understands there might be a cost there, and he has nothing to keep him from doing the will of God. He has set his face towards Jerusalem.

We saw this with Jesus on this missionary journey earlier. Paul would write this to the believers in Rome before he would go there, and before he came to Jerusalem. He would write this, Romans chapter nine, verses one through five:

"I speak the truth in Christ. I'm not lying. My conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit. I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart, for I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people. I would go to hell," he says, "for the sake of the Jews to be saved. I would be cut off from Christ for the sake of the Israelite people to be saved."

And then he says this: “For these are the people of my own race, the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship. Theirs is the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law through Moses, the temple worship through Solomon and David, the promises. Theirs is the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph. From them is traced the human ancestry down through the Jewish line that God has worked through all of human history—comes the Messiah, who is God over all and forever to be praised. Amen.”

He says, I'm going to Jerusalem because I want the Jews there to find the salvation of their souls. I don't care what it costs me, he says.

Martin Luther King Jr., from this heart of Paul, would write this statement: “If you've got nothing worth dying for, you've got nothing worth living for.”

Feeling alive today, friends? I mean alive—like impassioned? Stirred? Or afraid? Fearful? Maybe a little selfish? I can tell you this text has stirred me.

Since he would not be persuaded, the text says, we ceased and said, “Let the will of the Lord be done.” After this we got ready and went up to Jerusalem.

Do you have anything near that passionate about, friends? Does the will of God matter? How important is it?

I want to make three observations just at the end of our time here and the message about the will of God.

First of all, we see in the book of Acts very clearly that God has a general will for all people. In Acts 17, verse 26, Paul was speaking and he said, “God has determined the exact time and place where people should live. And he did this so that individuals might reach out and get to know him, though he is not that far from us.”

His will is, with every person he creates, that they would come to the knowledge of him, get to know him, and walk in harmony with him.

Jesus said in Matthew 6:33 to everyone who would listen, the will of God is for all people to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

Of course, the Exodus 20 giving of the Ten Commandments—the very first commandment—very clearly shows the will of God for every person in the world: to put God first, to have God be on the throne of our lives, to have no other gods before him, to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

When Jesus was asked, “What's the most important thing God has for people on the earth?” he very quickly responded: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and then love your neighbor as yourself. And then pray for your enemies.”

General will for all of God's people. And when his disciples were gathered around him, he didn't individualize people. He said to all of them, “Go, make disciples of all nations.” Action here: *Go!* Make disciples. Teach them to obey all I've commanded you. Baptize them. It was action oriented—the will of God for all of his followers.

This is the general will of God. He has a general will for all of us. And if we're leaning into the general will, we might start to hear his individual will for each of us.

How did Paul know God's specific plan for him? Because he was moving in the mission of the general will of God. He was going to make disciples. He was going to teach. He was baptizing. He was doing these things. And as we flow in the general will of God, the Holy Spirit can start to whisper to us about specific things that God has for us.

Which is the second observation: God has a specific will for all individuals.

Ephesians 2:10 says, “We are God's workmanship, created in Christ”—here it is—“to do things he's prepared in advance for each of us to do.” God has a personal plan for you and me in his broader plan in the world. And if we're giving ourselves to it, he'll move us down this specific plan.

Now, here's the third observation: there are many potential obstacles to us living out the will of God. Our own personal sinfulness, selfishness, and stubbornness.

I remember at the end of my college career, I was praying to God, asking him about my life, and I was interviewing for jobs, and they were good-paying jobs. And I got a letter in the mail, and I felt the Holy Spirit tell me to go into ministry, which had very little pay. And I said to God, “I don't like it. I'll give you three months, and then I'm going to get a real job.” That was some 30-plus years ago, but my stubbornness almost took me out of God's will for my life.

I mentioned Jonah to the children. Our own personal sinfulness can distract us. Our own stubbornness can keep us out of God's will.

The people around Paul were filled with worry and anxiety and fear and lack of faith over what Paul was saying to them. And those things can keep us from the will of God. And Paul mentioned that those people could have discouraged him from living out God's plan.

When we talk about the will of God, we're talking about the most important thing going on on the planet. And so I ask you today: have you consulted him lately about his plan for you? Are you open to do whatever he has for you to do?

In the Gospel of John we read that Jesus did his first miracle at a wedding. His mother came to him at this wedding and said, “They’ve run out of wine.” And Jesus said, “It’s not my time yet. Why are you asking me?” And his mother didn’t respond to him. She just turned to some servants beside him and said this line, pointing to Jesus: “Whatever he tells you to do.”

The general will is clear, but I don’t know what God’s specific will is for you. But if you’re giving your heart to the general will of God as revealed in the Scriptures, I have no doubt he will begin to show you his very personal will with you. And I thank so many of you who have leaned into his personal will for you in this church over the years—so many times.

Let’s pray together.

Father, we thank you that your Word teaches us about your ways in the world. We thank you that in your holiness, your righteousness, and your justice, you decided to show mercy, to dispense grace into the world through the sending of your Son Jesus. We understand from his words that the whole world stands condemned without him, and that souls that have not yet been cleansed with the blood of Jesus will not find themselves in your presence forever, but are on their way to an eternity separated from you—where there’s weeping and gnashing of teeth, where there’s great pain and suffering.

And Father, as you have stirred in Paul’s heart a burden for his people, then stir in our hearts a burden for the lost souls among us. Father, we confess we have made other things more important than the work of your kingdom. Forgive us and renew a right spirit within us. Cause us to surrender our will to yours, and then infuse us with the eternal passion of your Spirit.

And Father, I want to pray specifically today for anyone that’s listening here that perhaps hasn’t opened their heart to you yet, and maybe they’re sensing the wooing of your Spirit even now. I ask that you would help them open their hearts to faith, have their sins forgiven through their faith in the work of your Son Jesus.

We pray these things in Jesus’ name. Amen.