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Acts 16:1-13

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THE WAY GOD GUIDES: COMPROMISE, CONFUSION AND CONCLUSION

One of the things I wrestle with from time to time is knowing the will of God. How do I know what God wants me to do? How will God guide me to do his will? Do I go this way or that way? Almost every significant decision I've made in the 35 years that I've been a follower of Christ has confronted me with these questions. I wrestled with this in choosing a university, in getting married, buying a house, saying yes to a job, and in many of the smaller decisions I've made along the way.

You have asked these questions, too. All of us do. As a matter of fact, I would venture a say that all of you are asking these questions in some area of your life as you sit here this morning. What I've found is that God is more than willing to be my guide, but he does it in ways I could never predict. 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. It seems he is much more interested in developing our faith and character than in merely telling us where to go. He takes the stuff of our lives (events, people, problems, emotions, and perplexities) and uses all these things to guide us. It seems he merges them together into a mosaic where only over time a pattern of his overruling guidance appears.

That's what happened to the apostle Paul and his friends in Acts 16. This is the start of the second missionary journey, a journey of epic proportions in which 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's radar screen when they started out.

I. The ways God guided Paul

A. Paul's idea to revisit the churches

It all started as Paul said to Barnabas in chapter 15, "Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are" (Acts 15:36b). It's helpful to compare this with how the first missionary journey got started. In chapter 13, the Holy Spirit spoke to them and said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2b). And off they went. That's pretty clear guidance, isn't it? But here in Acts 16, 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 remembered all those baby Christians and concluded, "We need to help them grow in grace. They need our help."

Some people think that Paul was wrong to move out on this occasion without the clear leading of the Spirit. But it seems to

me that he really didn't need any. He'd already been called to be a missionary to these people. 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. There are some things we already know to do.

For example, say God calls you to help children grow in their faith, and he clearly leads you to teach fourth grade Sunday School. So 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 he calls you to do until he redirects.

B. Paul and Barnabas go separate ways

But then something really hard happens at the end of chapter 15. Paul and Barnabas get into a battle over whether to take John Mark, who had deserted them on the first trip. Paul didn't want to take him, but Barnabas wanted to give him another chance. They could not work it out, so Barnabas takes John Mark and they go off to Cyprus to encourage the new believers there. Paul takes Silas and they head to Asia.

We might 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 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. Have you ever considered the fact that God might actually guide you and further his work through a disagreement or conflict with a friend?

C. Paul recruits and circumcises Timothy

So Paul and Silas head west to Derbe and Lystra, two of the cities they had visited earlier. In Lystra they meet up with a young man named Timothy.

And he came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And behold, a certain 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 ob-

serve. So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily. (Acts 16:1-5 NASB)

Paul loved to find young men and take them with him, to mentor them and then turn them loose in ministry. Timothy has a proven track record, so Paul wants to take him with them. But there's a problem. Timothy was from a mixed marriage. His mother was Jewish but his father was a Gentile, so he'd never been circumcised. Now if you know anything about the book of Acts, you know they had already dealt with that issue. The apostles had already decided a long time ago that one didn't have to be circumcised to be saved. So we might say, 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 says right on the heels of this in verse 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 verse 3 it says he did this "because of the Jews in those parts." The issue here wasn't Timothy's salvation. Paul didn't do this for Timothy. He did it 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.

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. To them, there is no room for gray. Everything is black and white. While there *are* some things that are black and white, there may not be 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:

And they passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; and when they had come 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 (16:6-8).

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! 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 the apostle 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 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 that 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 was. 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. Everywhere they tried to go, God seemed to say, "No."

Have you ever been there? You're trying to be faithful, to do what's right, but everything you try ends up being a "No." I talked to a man in my church a few weeks ago who felt called to become a policeman. He wants to be a policeman for all the right reasons. 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 how Paul must have felt. First, he thought God wanted them to go south. He tried to go there but God said no. Then he thought they should go north, but God shut that door. They couldn't go south, they couldn't go north. So where did they go? They went further west, to Troas. They were confused, bewildered, frustrated, not knowing what to do next. Let me ask you: Have you ever been to Troas? Troas is a place of confusion and bewilderment. Troas is that place where you puzzled over what to do.

E. The Spirit opens doors

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 at what happened in Troas:

And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a certain man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And 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. Therefore 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 (16:9-12)

Paul has vision. He 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 verse 10 says something very fascinating. They did make plans to go to Macedonia, but only after together they "concluded" that this was what they were supposed to do. The word "concluded" means "to bring together." It seems that Paul submitted his vision to the group. They took that together with everything else that had happened up to that point. They brought all the facts to-

gether and concluded that this was the direction the Lord wanted them to go.

By the way, there is one small detail here you shouldn't miss. It was at this point that Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, joined Paul and his associates. Notice in verse 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 – a voyage of 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 not.

II. The ways God guides us.

Now let's step back from all this. What can we say about how God guides us? Throughout this story we see that God does guide us, but not always in ways we could have predicted.

One of the things that's clear in this story is 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, and 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 Bythinia. 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.

Anne Graham Lotz writes about how she and her husband attend football games at his alma mater, the University of North Carolina. Thousands of people cram in the parking lots, and she can't see where she's going. But she takes her husband's hand. At 6'7", he is a head taller than her. He can look over the crowd, and he leads her to their seats. She says, "The way I get from the car to my seat is just by holding his hand and following him closely through the crowd."¹

It's really no different in following the Lord. The most important thing is to stay close to him. We may not be able to see exactly where we're going, but we can trust that step-by-step he'll lead us through the crowd to the place he wants us to go.

But another thing that's clear from this story is that the Spirit of God often leads us through times of darkness, confusion, perplexity, and frustration. Who could have predicted that? We don't understand why he shut 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. He was left as perplexed and in the dark as we often are.

John Kavanaugh was a brilliant ethicist who went to work for three months at "the house of the dying" in Calcutta. He was seeking a clear answer as to how to spend the rest of his life. On the first morning there, he met Mother Teresa. She asked, "And what can I do for you?" He asked her to pray for him. She then asked, "What do you want me to pray for?" "Clarity," he said. "Pray that I have clarity." She shot back, "No, I will not do that." When he asked her why, she responded, "Clarity is the last thing you're clinging to and must let go of." When he commented that she always seemed to have the clarity he longed for, she laughed and said, "I've never had clarity; what I've always had is trust. So I'll pray that you trust God."²

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, our own agendas, and I think, our own pride as well. We hand things over to God where they belong.

We can make our plans, we can have our dreams, but we have to hold them loosely. 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.... It is better to go to Troas with God, than anywhere else without Him."³

Still another thing I learn from this is that when God does guide us, he does so through a variety of methods. In this story, God uses sheer faithfulness to the calling we've already received. He uses disagreement between two 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 whom 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 heads and think to discern the Spirit's leading.

Several years ago, I became convinced that God as leading me out of my current church. I told our elders I was 99% sure of this, but I wanted to wait for three months to tell the body. One of our guys graciously said, "So you're telling us there is still a 1% chance you'll stay?" I said, "That's about all." But over the course of those three months God caused me to rethink things and he eventually convinced me to stay. When I look back at that time, I see a variety of methods God used to guide me. One of them

was the ministry opportunities that sprung up around 9/11. Another was a very painful conflict and parting from a fellow elder and pastor. Still another was some things going on in the life of my kids. Finally, my own emotional tank got filled up after some extended time off.

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. Hop on and buckle your seat belt." It takes faith to hop on because we don't know what lies ahead. Although we may not 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: we can see for miles ahead and the wind is at our backs. But one thing we know: He *is* our guide.

Imagine what it would be like if you knew that. Imagine how your life would be different if you trusted that at every point on the roller coaster, you were exactly where he wanted you to be. Imagine being able to rest in the fact that whatever the next turn or tunnel or straightaway brought, he would be your guide, but in ways you never could have predicted.

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¹ Randy Bishop, "Just Give Me Jesus" (Christian Reader, September/October, 2000), 25.

² Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust* (New York: HarperCollins), 2000.

³ G. Campbell-Morgan, *The Acts of the Apostles* (New York and London: Fleming H. Revell, 1924), 377.