

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
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18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
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Acts 20:22-23; 21:3-5, 10-14 “God’s Will for Your Life”

Intro. One of the most important statements in our Scripture today is found in v.14, “the will of the Lord be done.” Have you come to realize how important it is to follow the will of God in your life? Many can tell you from personal experience that it is far better to be *in* the will of God than outside of the will of God.

The question that our text of Scripture addresses today is whether it was God’s will for Paul to go to Jerusalem. Though he was the apostle to the Gentiles, he always had a heart for the Jewish people. He believed that his trip to Jerusalem would facilitate the salvation of his Jewish people, for he was carrying an offering from Gentile Christians to the poor Jewish saints there. He was also very hopeful that this expression of love would go a long way toward mending relations between Jews and Gentiles. Furthermore, he wanted to demonstrate how the Gospel of grace could change sinful Gentiles into loving saints. So he was determined to be personally involved in delivering this offering to the saints in Jerusalem. Yet there are indications in our text that it may not have been God’s will for him to go.

Paul clearly felt an inward compulsion to go to Jerusalem. He said in 20:22, “I go bound in the¹ spirit....” But was that spiritual compulsion from God, or more from a personal desire? Well in the last of v.4 we read that the disciples in Tyre kept saying [imperfect tense] to Paul “through the Spirit” that he should not go up to Jerusalem. They believed, and Luke seems to affirm, that they had received a message from the Holy Spirit on this matter. Then, in vv.10-11 Agabus, the prophet, took Paul’s belt and bound his own hands and feet in a symbolic demonstration. He was warning that Paul would not find success in Jerusalem, but instead he would be bound² and delivered over to the Gentile authorities. Luke and the disciples with Agabus believed that it was probably not God’s will for Paul to go to Jerusalem. It would result in the cutting short of his great missionary ministry. But Paul had a vision for what this trip could accomplish, and he may have felt that his commitment to Christ was being tested. He may have felt that these warnings were simply meant to prepare him for what he would face. As Jesus expressed determination to go to Jerusalem to die for us, so Paul was willing to go there to die for Christ (v.13). So when the disciples realized that Paul would not be persuaded otherwise, they simply said in v.14, “The will of the Lord be done.” Their own personal preference was certainly that Paul not go out of concern for his safety and freedom. But they set aside personal preference and yielded to the will of God. That is the way it should be.

Is that your attitude this morning? Do you want God’s will to be done in your own life? I’m sure there must be some in my audience who are struggling with the issue of God’s will right now. We can follow God’s will, our own will, or the will of family and friends. What we decide can have significant consequences for ourselves and others. So I hope we all will leave this place truly wanting to do God’s will. If that is to happen, I first ask you to:

¹ In the Greek the word “spirit” has the definite article, so some other translations (RSV, ESV) have “the Spirit” here.

² Paul was indeed bound (21:33; 22:25, 29; 24:27; 28:20).

I. ACCEPT THE IMPORTANCE OF GOD'S WILL

It really is important that you do God's will. God *does* have a will for your life. And Rom. 12:2 says that His will is good, acceptable, and perfect. Though we can reject God's will for our lives, we would do well to follow His will. It is very important to do so, for:

A. Jesus Declared Its Importance - For example, in the Lord's prayer recorded in Mt. 6:10, He taught us to pray to our heavenly Father, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (KJV). In Mt. 7:21, He said it is they that do the will of God that have eternal life. In Mt. 12:50 Jesus said, "For whosoever shall do the will of my Father, who is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother." In other words, only those who are willing to do the will of God have a relationship with Jesus Christ. In fact, you cannot enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ without a willingness to do God's will. We must repent of our transgressions of God's will. So your eternal destiny is determined by your willingness to do God's will. So that makes the will of God very important indeed!

B. It Is Importance Because It Is *God's* Will - It is little concern of mine what the will of Joe Blow is. I don't even know Joe Blow. He's done nothing for me. Besides, if Joe Blow wanted me to do something, I do not believe that he would have the authority and power to make me do his will. But God's will is a different matter! I do know who God is. He is my Creator. His Son Jesus has died for my sins. He has changed my life and has blessed me in many ways. I know that He blesses those who do His will.

On the other hand, if you refuse to do God's will, you will find that you will suffer the consequences. If you are a believer, you could face chastisement. If you are an unbeliever and you never surrender to the will of God concerning your salvation, then you will suffer hell. So I hope you can see yet again the importance of doing God's will.

But we face a problem. Often, the will of man is in conflict with the will of God. In Gal. 1:10 Paul wrote, "...For if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ." In the gospel ministry Paul was often opposed, but he please men, he would not obey God. 1 Pet. 4:1-2 says, "That he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the desires of men, but to the will of God." Sometimes, if not often, the will of your peer group is different from God's will. Sometimes the will of your family is different from God's will. Many a missionary has gone overseas in spite of the opposition of family. For some the will of your children is very important. Over the door of some homes you might as well put up the sign, "Where kids rule." If your child doesn't want to go to church, who wins that struggle? Many young ladies place the will of their boyfriends ahead of the will of God. Sometime your own will is contrary to the will of God. I could name many other examples where many people put the will of others ahead of the will of God. So whose will is most important to you? It should be the will of God.

Why is this? Well too often we walk by sight rather than by faith. We see people, but we do not see God. We see their immediate reaction if we go against their will. Thus, we do the will of ourselves and others over God. People often inflict more immediate consequences when we fail to do their will, so we please them, even when doing so displeases God. But the long-term consequences of not doing God's will are far more serious.

So God's will is indeed important. It ought to be our ultimate ambition in life. Doing God's will brings blessing and inner peace to our lives. So once you accept the importance of God's will, then you need to:

II. GAIN AN UNDERSTANDING OF GOD'S WILL

How do we know God's will? At times God's will can be difficult to ascertain. As we have seen, good Christians disagreed as to whether or not it was God's will for Paul to go to Jerusalem. How could they know God's will? God does indeed have a will for your life. So we all need to determine what His will is. In Eph. 5:10 Paul says, "find out what pleases the Lord" (NIV). Eph. 5:17 says, "So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." It is foolish to ignore God's will for your life, but wise to discover and do God's will. Col. 1:9 says, "for this reason also... we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding." So from these verses we can see that God wants you to understand His will. God's will is not a deep, dark secret that only a few can discern.

So what is God's will? First, we have to look to:

A. God's Written Will – That's because we cannot rely upon our own feelings or opinions as to what the will of God is. Prov. 14:12 says, "There is a way that seems right unto a man, but the end thereof is death." So we need to look to God's written Word to determine His will for our lives. Psa. 119:105 says, "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." God's will for your life is never contrary to the written Word of God. The Holy Spirit will never lead you to do something contrary to Scripture. Sometimes I will hear someone say that God told them or led them to do this or that. Or I've heard people say, "God wants me to be happy, so am going to do this or that." But as a student of the Word, I know that what they are proposing to do is contrary to the Word of God. I know that they are wrong. Besides, the Bible never says God wants you to be happy. He wants you to have joy, but that is not possible when you are outside of God's will.

So first, you must learn the truths of Scripture. You need to read the Bible every day. You need to come to church where gifted and able teachers can help you learn the Word of God and God's will for your life. Then, you can compare your feelings of what God's will is to an objective standard. So much of God's will is clearly revealed in the Scriptures.

Now there are some general statements concerning God's will that we find in the Bible. First of all:

1. God Wills Your Salvation - 1 Tim. 2:4 says that God wills that all men be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. 2 Pet. 3:9 says that God is not willing that any should perish, but that all come to repentance. Jesus said in John 3:3, "You must be born again," so surely that is God's will. Acts 4:12 says, "Neither is there salvation in any other. For there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved" (KJV). 1 John 3:23 says, "And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ." So trusting in Jesus as our Savior is the starting place for doing God's will. Have you repented of your sins (another commandment) and placed your faith in Jesus?

2. God Wills Your Sanctification - 1 Thess. 4:3 says, "And this is God's will, even your sanctification..." Sanctification refers to the process whereby you become set apart *from* sin and *unto* God. You need to obey the moral commands of Scripture. It is God's will that you grow as a Christian. You need to become more and more Christlike each and every day. Anything that hinders your progress in spiritual growth is not God's will. Is there a relationship in your life that is hindering your spiritual walk? Is there a job that is hindering your spiritual walk? I hope you get the idea of what I am talking about.

3. God Wills Your Service - Eph. 2:10 says, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works...." Eph. 4:11-12 says that God has given gifted leaders to the church "to equip the saints for a work of service...." God wants you to serve Him in some way. For example, you can serve the Lord by signing up to help with our Easter outreach. Come the next two Wednesday rehearsals and sing in our Easter choir. Let Drew know if you are willing to be a parking lot or door greeter on Easter Sunday. We need at least two Sunday School teachers. We always need nursery workers. Are you serving the Lord in some way? Outside of the church setting, He wants us to serve Him in other ways, including by being a witness.

This is God's general, written will for your life. We must be willing to do His general will before we can know His specific will. So that leads to the next aspect of understanding God's will. Let's talk about:

B. God's Will in Specific Situations - This can be more difficult to determine. The Bible has many specific details concerning God's will that would apply to all believers. But decisions that apply only to you will not be found there. The Bible isn't going to tell you where you should go to school, or what job offer to take. The Bible gives some general principles which will help narrow down the right choices. But don't look to the Bible for specifics on God's will for you personally. For example, the Bible isn't going to tell you by name who you should marry. The Bible limits your choices to believers, and you certainly can't marry someone who is already taken!

Beyond those limitations, how can you know God's will concerning such an important decision? Don't randomly flip through the Bible, stop at a page, and put your finger down expecting to find the name of the one you are to marry.

I decided to have a little fun with this approach. Suppose someone came to me wanting to know God's will about who to marry. So as a test, I opened the Bible randomly, and put my finger down, looking for a name. The first 3 tries I came up with no name in the paragraph I selected. In my 4th try, I happened to point to a paragraph where a woman was saying that she would never marry! You ladies, would you accept that as God's will? Maybe that approach is not best!

So how can we know God's will in specific situations?

1. Make Sure You Are *Willing* to Do God's Will. Jn. 7:17 indicates that a willingness to do God's will often precedes the knowledge of God's will. The knowledge of God's will comes to those who have willing hearts. In Rom. 12:1-2 Paul encourages us to dedicate ourselves completely to the Lord "that you may know what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God." If you are not willing to do God's will, how can you expect God to reveal it to you? So as you are seeking God's will for your life, make sure you are willing to do God's will.

2. Learn Biblical Principles to Guide Your Decisions. It is possible to discern basic principles in the Bible that apply to all of God's people in every generation. This will at least help you narrow down your choices. For example, I believe that God wants us to participate in regular worship with other believers (Heb. 10:25). So if you are choosing between two job offers, and one would severely limit your ability to worship, then you will know God's will in that situation.

3. Pray for Discernment of God's Will. Ask the Holy Spirit to lead and guide you. Romans 8:14 says, "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God." He will typically give you peace about something when it is God's will. Also, ask God to close the door or open the door to show you His will. However, we need to be careful about this.

I read about the personal experience of someone who was on a diet. She had been doing pretty well, but it was a struggle. One day she had to go downtown. As she started out she remembered the Day Light Donut Shop. They make some real, world class doughnuts. Driving

along she thought, “A cup of coffee and a doughnut would really hit the spot.” But then she remembered she was on a diet. So she said a silent prayer, “God if you want me to stop for a doughnut, let there be a parking place right by the front door.” Sure enough, after circling the block seven times, she finally found a parking place by the front door! I believe that was a case of someone seeking their own will rather than God’s will!

4. Seek the Advice of Godly People. In our text we see that a number of people tried to persuade Paul against going to Jerusalem, and I think they were probably right. In both vv. 4 & 11 Luke refers to the Holy Spirit as their source of their exhortations. So it is good to seek wise counsel. Talk to a pastor, deacon, your small group leader or your spiritual mentor. If you get the same advice from more than one person, you had better pay attention to what they are saying! Finally, you need to:

III. RESOLVE TO DO GOD’S WILL

God’s will is something you should *do*, not just learn about. Jesus said in John 13:17, “If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” Too often we know more of God’s will than we do, especially those of us who have been students of Scripture for many years. And some people regard the will of God as if it is like a cafeteria. We must not pick and choose what part of God’s will we will obey. God expects us to obey Him fully.

So how can we become willing to do all of God’s will?

A. Die to Self-will – Paul said in the last of v.13, “For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” Paul did not put self first in this situation. In his mind he was willing to follow God’s will regardless of the personal cost. Often, there will be a conflict between God’s will and our own will. So self must be put to death first.

The symbol of Christianity is a cross. It is an “I” crossed out. What greater example is there of dying to self-will than Jesus? In Gethsemane He knew He was facing rejection, painful scourging, the cross of suffering and shame, and even the wrath of God, yet He prayed, “Not my will, but Thy will be done.”

When we have died to self, then we can truly pray, “Not my will, but Thine be done.” We should say with the believers in v.14, “The will of the Lord be done.” We must put to death our own will. And the way you do that is to remember that Jesus died for you, so out of gratitude you should be willing to die to your own will for His sake.

B. Recognize that God’s Will Is Best - Somehow, we need to get to the place in our lives where we recognize that God’s will is actually best in the long run. Jesus said in Lk. 11:28, “Blessed are they that hear the Word of God, and keep it.” Again, Rom. 12:2 says that God’s will is “good, acceptable, and perfect.” So if you really believe that God’s will is best, then you will be more likely to do God’s will.

A minister, praying over a child apparently dying, said, “If it be Thy will, spare.” The poor mother’s soul, yearning for her beloved, exclaimed, “It must be His will: I cannot bear ifs!” So the minister stopped praying. Contrary to expectation, the child recovered. But the mother, after almost suffering martyrdom by him as a youth, lived to see him hanged before he was twenty-two.³

³ Foster in Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations*: #7364 (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1979) [Illus.#C-2022].

Conclusion: Oh, what God could do with a few Christians dedicated to learning God's will and obeying His Word! And if you are not a Christian, remember what I said about God's will for your life. It is that you be saved. Will you follow God's will for your life today, by trusting in Christ as your Savior?

Sources: H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on the Book of Acts* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1943); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Dr. Jerry Vines (notes from his sermon on this text); Warren W. Wiersbe, "Be" Series: *New Testament Volumes 1 & 2: Acts* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982). Bruce and Maclaren read, but nothing added.

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