

Sunday, May 23, 2021

## In Search of Guidance

(Reimagining Church Series; Message 28)

(Where Do We Go from Here?)

Acts 21:1-36

**Review (Slide):** We're continuing our series on Reimagining Church...

*August - focused on prayer and waiting...*

*September - focused on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit...*

*October - focused on the early church's Rule of Life: teaching, fellowship, breaking bread and prayer*

*November - focused on the Church's mission*

*January - focusing on Spirit-empowered leadership*

*February and April - focusing on the marks of a believer: a personal relationship with Jesus, being in community, a wall-break and bridge builder, a balcony person, and a pray-er...*

*May - Where do we go from here...*

### Scripture

*After we had torn ourselves away from them, we put out to sea and sailed straight to Kos. The next day we went to Rhodes and from there to Patara. <sup>2</sup>We found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, went on board and set sail. <sup>3</sup>After sighting Cyprus and passing to the south of it, we sailed on to Syria. We landed at Tyre, where our ship was to unload its cargo. <sup>4</sup>We sought out the disciples there and stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup>When it was time to leave, we left and continued on our way. All of them, including wives and children, accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray. <sup>6</sup>After saying goodbye to each other, we went aboard the ship, and they returned home.*

*<sup>7</sup>We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and sisters and stayed with them for a day. <sup>8</sup>Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. <sup>9</sup>He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.*

***<sup>10</sup>After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. <sup>11</sup>Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'"***

***<sup>12</sup>When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup>Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." <sup>14</sup>When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."***

***<sup>15</sup>After this, we started on our way up to Jerusalem. <sup>16</sup>Some of the disciples from Caesarea accompanied us and brought us to the home of Mnason, where we were to stay. He was a man from Cyprus and one of the early disciples.***

***<sup>17</sup>When we arrived at Jerusalem, the brothers and sisters received us warmly. <sup>18</sup>The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present. <sup>19</sup>Paul greeted them and reported in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.***

***<sup>20</sup>When they heard this, they praised God. Then they said to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. <sup>21</sup>They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs. <sup>22</sup>What shall we do? They will certainly hear that you have come, <sup>23</sup>so do what we tell you. There are four men with us who have made a vow. <sup>24</sup>Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law. <sup>25</sup>As for the Gentile believers, we have written to them our decision that they should abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality."***

***<sup>26</sup>The next day Paul took the men and purified himself along with them.***

***Then he went to the temple to give notice of the date when the days of purification would end, and the offering would be made for each of them.***

***<sup>27</sup>When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, <sup>28</sup>shouting, "Fellow Israelites, help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place." <sup>29</sup>(They had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with Paul and assumed that Paul had brought him into the temple.)***

*<sup>30</sup>The whole city was aroused, and the people came running from all directions. Seizing Paul, they dragged him from the temple, and immediately the gates were shut. <sup>31</sup>While they were trying to kill him, news reached the commander of the Roman troops that the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar. <sup>32</sup>He at once took some officers and soldiers and ran down to the crowd. When the rioters saw the commander and his soldiers, they stopped beating Paul. <sup>33</sup>The commander came up and arrested him and ordered him to be bound with two chains. Then he asked who he was and what he had done. <sup>34</sup>Some in the crowd shouted one thing and some another, and since the commander could not get at the truth because of the uproar, he ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. <sup>35</sup>When Paul reached the steps, the violence of the mob was so great he had to be carried by the soldiers. <sup>36</sup>The crowd that followed kept shouting, "Get rid of him!"*

## **Message:**

**The protesting reformer Martin Luther was called to appear before the Diet of Worms to recant his statements about the church.**

George Spalatin, a friend and counselor to Luther begged him not to go. Luther's response: "*Tho devils be as many in Worms as tiles on the roofs, yet thither will I go! I shall not flee, still less recant.*" While most saw it as foolishness, Luther saw it as the call of God.

Schaaf, the church historian writes, "*There stood the poor monk of rustic manners. With the fire of genius and enthusiasm flashing from his eyes and the expression of intense earnestness on his face, before a brilliant assembly of the emperor, six electors, the Pope's legates, bishops, dukes, princes, counts, and dignitaries from foreign countries and thousands gathered outside the building, Luther enters the courtroom. In spite of the probable consequences, Luther responded to their indictment with, 'Here I stand, I can do no other.'*"

**Fifteen hundred years before, that was the Apostle Paul.** The Christians in Tyre told Paul what they heard from the Spirit: "*Don't go to Jerusalem*" (21:4). A prophet named Agabus, listening to the Spirit, tied himself up with Paul's belt and announced, "*If you go to Jerusalem, they'll bind you and hand you over to the Gentiles*" (21:11). Hearing what Agabus said, the Christians in Caesarea told Paul, "*Don't go to Jerusalem*" (21:12). So Paul doesn't go to Jerusalem, right?! No, Paul goes to Jerusalem.

Paul undoubtedly would have taken these warnings seriously. Everyone knows, including Paul, what lies ahead if he goes to Jerusalem. Reporting this, Luke tells us these warnings were given in the Spirit without telling us how he reconciles that with the fact that Paul is still convinced he must go. Paul, too,

has been listening for the Spirit's guidance. Paul says he is ready to be bound and even die for Jesus! "*The Lord's will be done!*" (21:14b).

Paul goes to Jerusalem and is warmly received by the Christians there. But within a week, the Jewish leaders mob Paul and the Roman authorities step in to protect him. The Jewish leaders plot Paul's death. The authorities move Paul to Caesarea; he is placed under house arrest.

Luke portrays Paul as being in step with Jesus and the Spirit; he narrates Paul's last pilgrimage here in **Acts 21-22**, as he narrated Jesus' last pilgrimage to Jerusalem in his Gospel.

**Where do you get Luther and Paul's confidence in the Holy Spirit's guidance?** Some commentators and historians commend Paul (and Luther) for their courage. Others call it a major mistake. How do you know when you are hearing the voice of God through His Spirit?

**Guidance is another word for discernment (they are often used interchangeably); guidance and discernment are simply the intentional process of seeking God's will, counsel, and direction. Let's consider some things that may assist us.**

## **FIRST: RESOLVE TO DO GOD'S WILL**

**The decision to follow God's will must come first - even before we know what God wants us to do.**

John Ortberg says believers are to "*mercilessly resolve to do God's will.*" Followers of Christ resolve to be **obedient**; resolve to pursue **holiness**; resolve to resist evil; resolve to be like Christ. And, because we'll no doubt fail, to **re-resolve** again and again - daily, hourly, sometimes minute by minute.

Dallas Willard, in his book, *In Search of Guidance* (renamed *Hearing God*) says, "*Divine guidance only makes sense when set in the context of a larger life of the right kind.*" That is, **seeking** God's will and direction only makes sense if we're actually going to **do it**; and it only makes sense to do it if we're fully devoted to Jesus and are committed to continue to do his will for the rest of our life.

Too many in the Church have bought into Burger King's mantra that we should "*have it our way!*" What's wrong with living together before marriage? Everyone fudges a bit on their income tax. It's just a small lie; no one will ever know. A little pornography can be good for a marriage. No, my fiancé isn't a Christian, does it matter? No one really cares if I don't contribute my time or treasures to church.

The reality is most people **don't really want** to know God's will. We would simply prefer God to support our will. We figure if we don't know his will,

then, like the Epicureans, we can just do what we want with impunity and without guilt.

We might be curious to know if God agrees with us - but if we don't have a relationship with him, if we're not fully devoted to following him, why would we be interested in doing what he says? We'd like to know God's will in advance so we can decide if we're going to obey or not. God doesn't usually work that way. If we resolve to do God's will and then mercilessly seek to discover it, we will. "Do we?" is the first question we need to answer.

## **SECOND: BE DEVOTED TO GOD'S WORD**

**We talked about this in Acts 2. Being fully devoted to God's Word defined the early church - along with fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer.** These are the things that transform us; they define who we are; they guide our life.

Sadly, the things most people are interested in (determined by simply looking at the advertising in newspapers, magazines and online) are fine dining, weight loss, the right clothes, a nice car, a nice place to live, and the latest hairstyle. (There used to be a full church two-page spread of churches to attend in Saturday's paper; now we don't even get a Saturday paper!)

*"You can't buy happiness" one car ad says, "but now you can lease it."*

We spend enormous amounts of time and energy thinking about what we're going to acquire next (and repairing or recycling the things we bought just a bit ago).

**To recognize God's voice and validate what we are "hearing" as we listen for the Spirit, we need to spend time in God's Word. The CRC *Reveal Study* results indicate only about 25% of us are in the Word daily; at Covenant, it is 17%. We need to **read** it; **memorize** it, meditate on it, pray about it, study and **discuss** it, and put it into **practice**. It needs to become a part of us - our **thinking**, understanding, perception, feelings, will, believing, decision-making and eventually our **actions**; we need to have the Word wash over us so we are transformed!**

**Joshua 1:8** - *"Do not let this book depart from your mouth. Meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do everything written in it."*

**Psalms 119:11** - *"I've hidden Your word in my heart, that I might not sin against You"*

**We need to be people of the Text; people of The Book!**

### **THIRD: BE ATTENTIVE.**

Be alert to the **circumstances** in your life - notice them, observe them, think about them. Be consciously aware of what you're thinking, hearing, and desiring; be sensitive to the leading of **God's Spirit**.

We're not a reflective culture. God's Spirit often speaks to us through our **circumstances**, our **thoughts**, our **desires**, our conversations with others. God is **not limited** to audible sounds, physical gestures and written symbols to communicate like we are. He can put thoughts in our head, circumstances in our path, desires in our heart. Sadly, we're often not in tune or listening.

In **Acts 21:15-26**, Paul shows up in Jerusalem and that presents a problem. The Church was walking a fine (political) line between maintaining good relations with the Gentile Churches (established by Paul) and the Jewish community. Now Paul brings an offering from the Gentile churches.

If they accept Paul's offer, they would be accepting the man who taught others "to forsake Moses" and "not to circumcise their children or observe the customs" (**21:21**). If they decline it, they'll be rejecting Paul who had founded these churches in front of believers who came with Paul from those churches.

They converse. They listen to one another. They come up with a plan. God gave us a wonderful mind and encourages us to think; to use the head as well as our heart in the decision-making process.

**Seeking Guidance is not a passive process but an active and continuous exercise.** Seeking God's guidance isn't just sitting back and waiting for God's email or tweet. Do we really believe whatever happens during or results from our passivity is God's will? "*Sometimes it seems,*" says N.T. Wright, "*the Spirit gives people enough information to know what is likely to await them but leaves them with the responsibility of deciding whether or not to go anyway.*"

When we face choices and decisions, we're called to exercise: exercise divine awareness; exercise spirit-focused listening; exercise good judgment; exercise spiritual wisdom; exercise heartfelt initiative; exercise godly obedience.

### **FOURTH: SPEAK WITH GOD**

**This is another mark of the early Church - prayer.** "*Speak to God constantly about your concerns*" (cf. **Acts 1:14**). Be in communication with God throughout your day; pray without ceasing!

**In Acts 1, Jesus leaves his disciples to return to heaven.** They are left to wait. While they're waiting, God promised to send his Spirit. They return to Jerusalem. They return to the upper room. They join together in prayer. It is what the Church does. It is what followers of Jesus do. They join together; they pray constantly; they bring their concerns and requests to God.

If we want God's guidance, we need to cultivate the **habit of talking** with him regularly. A *habit* means doing the same thing over and over again in a similar way. We need to have conversations with God when we're happy, upset, stressed, anxious, content, or lack understanding or wisdom - that is, all the time.

**How is your prayer life? Your prayer life is a barometer of your relationship with Father, the Son, and the Spirit.**

## **FIFTH: LISTEN TO GOD**

**Prayer - our conversation with God - is meant to be a dialogue.** Walter Wangerin, in his book Whole Prayer, says there are four parts to prayer: God speaks, we listen. We speak, God listens. In prayer, sometimes we speak; but mostly we listen, because when God talks, we should listen and not interrupt.

**How do we listen to God? Acts 16**, Paul has a vision (dream) of a man from Macedonia standing and begging him to "*Come over and help us.*" He responded in obedience. In **Acts 23:11** - "*The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, 'Take courage.'*" He listens and takes courage.

In **Acts 27:23**, Luke writes of Paul: "*Last night the angel of the Lord stood beside me and said, 'Do not be afraid.'*" Paul is confident it will happen just as God said it would.

It is not a coincidence that these things all happened at night. Perhaps that's because Paul had set aside some time each evening for listening. Perhaps it's because Paul - a type A personality - slowed down enough so he could hear God speaking. (Maybe both).

**Where** do you hear God best? Don't wait to discover that until you have a crisis; make it part of your regular rhythm. Some hear God best lying in bed at night, some while gardening, some while seated a piano, some while driving, some while worshipping, some while reading Scripture. Find your sweet spot; find it now. **Deepen** your relationship with the Father. **Practice** listening.

## **SIXTH: DECIDE**

**What if you don't get a clear sense of God's guidance?**

Perhaps you've heard the story of the woman seeking guidance who closed her eyes let her Bible fall open and then - eyes still closed - pointed to **Matthew 27:5**: "*Judas went out and hung himself.*"

"Okay...let's try that again. I'll give God a second chance." Closed her eyes, let her Bible fall open; finger down on **Luke 10:27**: "*Go and do likewise.*" ("Yah, not doing that!")

“Okay, God. Last chance.” Closed her eyes; Bible open; her finger pointed to **John 13:27** - *“And whatever you do, do it quickly.”*

What, if after listening for God’s guidance, his direction eludes you? Don’t **force** or conjure up a false sense of certainty. Don’t default to do what you want to do. Continue **praying** and wait on the slow work of God and His Spirit.

**Choose** what seems most clear. Sometimes God says - *“You know me; your heart resonates with me heart; you **choose**.”* Maybe God is saying: you’ve committed to be obedient; you know my Word; you know my heart; we’ve spent time conversing together, so do what you know is right in your soul...

Guidance (discernment) like spiritual formation is a journey. God’s ultimate goal is to transform us into wholly, holy, mature Christ followers. Paul says...

**Romans 12:2** - *“Don’t be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...his perfect, holy, and acceptable will.”*

**Colossians 1:28** - *“He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.”*

**Ephesians 4:15** - *“Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.”*

**God’s ultimate goal is to form us into a person of wisdom and discernment, a **mature follower** who knows whose footprints to walk in.**

Like a parent, we tell our little children what to eat, what to wear, where to go, and when to go there. But imagine my son - who’s thirty-five calls me and asks what he should wear today; Marilyn and I would be concerned. We want our children to grow up! So does God!

We want our children to get to make wise and godly decisions on their own. If they talk with us about major decisions, we’re honored. We might offer our insight, but we recognize it is their decision to make because they will have to live with the consequences of their decision.

Every time we make a **decision**, we hopefully **mature** a little bit. When we take ownership of the process and the resulting blessings or consequences, we grow up! God did not create us as a puppet where he simply pulls our strings; God created us as a **person** in his **image**.

God wants His children to grow into maturity, learn to think wisely, express our opinions lovingly, deal with our differences graciously, resolve our conflicts peacefully so we and His church grow powerfully!

The process is as important as the decision; in fact, it is often more important; a good process usually yields a good decision we have the confidence to follow.



## SEVENTH: OBEY

God does not give us *carte blanche* to do whatever we want. He gives us the opportunity and challenge to **follow him** and exercise the gifts, abilities, and passions he has entrusted to us so in obedience we can become more **Christ-like**.

**Suffering, death, and resurrection** is not the biography of Jesus; it is the path for all who would follow Jesus. The Gospel, the Good-News, must pass through suffering to get where it has to get – to the ends of the earth. The “cross” in **Luke (9:23)** becomes the riot in Antioch, the stoning in Lystra, the beatings and imprisonment in Philippi, the riots in Thessalonica, being run out of town in Berea, the anti-Jewish violence in Corinth, being shipwrecked, and the confrontation in Ephesus. Why should we expect Jerusalem would be any different?

Paul will be going to Jerusalem, but the Gospel will be going to the ends of the earth. It doesn't arrive quietly; it can't! It is designed to change the world. If we're followers of Jesus, we shouldn't expect an easy, comfortable, peaceful life.

Lots of amazing things had happened in the early church: the Holy Spirit had come; many Jews had embraced the Gospel; Gentiles were being baptized; the disciples were carrying the Gospel “*to the ends of the earth*.” The Spirit is at work. But don't miss the sad words in **Acts 21:20** – “*they were all (fiercely) zealous for the law*.” The Jews – lifelong God fearers – are still focusing on the “*unbreakable law of Moses*,” the sanctity of the Temple and the land; the national dream of liberation from Rome and restoring the Kingdom to Israel (cf. **Acts 1:6**). As much as some things change, they were a **work in progress**. Sadly, some people/things change very slowly or don't seem to change at all.

Speaking from the perspective of a church leader, we often find ourselves in Paul's position: Zealots on the left and right, Zealots in front and behind. We struggle to live real life in obedience to the real Jesus realizing we can't always explain to people how life is so complicated. It is not complicated because we've made it complicated, or because the Gospel isn't clear, or because we're fatally compromised, but because living Christ-like in God's world is very challenging. The Gospel must be allowed to address real life - not only from an ivory tower but from down in the weeds on its hands and knees - embracing life with God's grace, Christ's love, and the Spirit's power in the trenches.

Paul steps into the Temple. Ignoring the facts (Paul came with four other Jews all in a state of purification) and making up (twisting) some of their own facts (e.g., that Paul brought a Gentile into the Temple – instead of just into Jerusalem), the Jews created a scene like the Gentiles had done in other cities. Paul's statement that “*the Gospel of Christ crucified (and risen) was a scandal*”

*for Jews and folly for Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23) came true. It is still true.*

It was the last time Paul would see the inside of the Temple; in fifteen years, it would be destroyed and never rebuilt.

**Following Jesus in this world will never be easy; being Christ-like will never be comfortable. Have you come to the point in your spiritual life where you have the confidence to follow the Spirit’s guidance in obedience wherever it takes you?** Is your faith strong enough that you can say, “Here I **stand!** I can do no else!” Are you willing, as Paul was, to step into an unknown future, confident enough that God is by your side and say, “**The will of the Lord be done!**”

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