

“Will God Really Guide Me?”

Text: Acts 15:36 – 16:40

Series: Book of Acts [#20]

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Theme: **God Leads Those Whose Hearts Are Completely His.**

Introduction

The apostle Paul has now become the central figure in the book of Acts. Many Christians would say that Paul was an all-time *superstar* of the faith—after all, God gifted him greatly, spoke to and directed him clearly, and worked through him powerfully.

Think of a few other *superstars* of the faith.

- Noah. God told Noah He was going to destroy the human race because of its wickedness, but also that Noah would be used to preserve the human family and animals. God even told him the design for the ark.
- Abraham. God told him to leave his country and go to a land which he would show him, and that He would bless Abraham and make a great nation from him.
- Moses. God told Moses that he was to lead the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and to their own land.

Have you ever felt a bit envious of these people? Or, perhaps even a bit cheated? “Yes, God spoke to, directed them, but what about me?” You are in a very, very large group of people if you have ever asked, “Will God really guide *me*?” or thought, “I love God and want to please Him, but sometimes I don’t have a clue about what He wants me to do!”

None of us should feel envious or cheated, because God has never cheated any of His children. The fact is that God is not looking for a few greatly talented people to direct, and then to do His work. He wants to direct, develop and work through each one of His children. One of the things God requires of us in order to know His direction is to be devoted to Him.

In 2 Chronicles chapter 14 we find King Asa of Judah facing a million-man Egyptian army. He went to God in prayer. He trusted God and God blessed Him with a great victory. But later when Israel harassed Judah, King Asa quickly made a defense pact with nearby Arabs. God sent a prophet to set him straight. God reminded Asa of His help in the past, and His message to this very human king was, “...the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support *those whose heart is completely His*” (16:9a).

That principle does not change. *God leads those whose hearts are completely His.* This morning we are looking at a clear example of this in the apostle Paul. His heart was devoted to God. Let’s begin by looking at his example in these events and then at some of what it means to have a heart that is completely devoted to God. Paul is a good example of a person

being led by God.

An Example Of A Person Being Lead By God.

This section begins with Paul getting ready to move out again after “some days” back in the sending church at Antioch. Paul wanted to see how the new believers from that first journey were doing.

But a personal and organizational argument arose between Paul and Baranabas. Luke’s account of this is very brief. It is easy and tempting for us to read our own thoughts into this incident. There was a very sharp disagreement between the two. It was not a matter of what was true or false, nor what or who was right or wrong. Baranabas wanted to take John Mark on this new trip but Paul did not want to risk taking him because last time John Mark left before the work really began. When they didn’t agree on this, they agreed to go out separately—Paul to visit the churches with Silas, and Barnabas to his home turf of Cyprus with John Mark. While the disagreement was sharp, there is no indication of personal anger or animosity. And we know that later Paul came to value John Mark.

So Paul moved out, visiting the churches. This was Paul’s third visit to them (he had visited them twice on first trip). Paul went north overland to Derbe, where he met Timothy. (Let’s go to our maps; back of Bibles; screen; from Antioch in Syria, to his home town in Tarsus, and the to Derbe.)

Timothy’s mother was Jewish; his father was a Gentile. Here we are told his mother was a believer (16:1). Years later Paul wrote to Timothy, “I am mindful of the sincere faith within you, which first dwelt in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am sure that it is in you as well” (2 Timothy 1:5). Timothy had a good reputation among the churches in the area (Derbe, Lystra and Iconium—map). And so, Paul took him along with them. The team continued to visit, instruct and strengthen the churches that were founded on the first journey.

With that completed, Paul did not head back home. He was looking for new opportunities to spread the gospel. Paul’s desire was to go to *Asia*. Look at 16:6, “They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.” Luke was not speaking of the continent of Asia as we refer to it today, but the Roman region or province. Even so, we can’t be certain of the exact area. If Luke is referring to the Ethnic regions, it would have meant going north (map). If the political divisions, south, down toward Ephesus (map). A later reference (18:2) may indicate that Paul’s desire was to go south toward Ephesus. Whichever area it was, God did not allow Paul to go there at this time.

So, Paul headed west. Go on to verse 7, “and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them.” (map.) So, what was he to do? He continued west to Troas (map). Here God gave him a vision of a man appealing to him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (9). Verse 10 tells us Paul concluded that this vision was God’s call for him to cross over the Aegean Sea into Macedonia, or

northeastern Greece (map).

And this brings us to Paul establishing the work at Philippi. (Map.) Philippi was a Roman Colony, which meant it enjoyed a special status and privileges. Luke indicates that there was no synagogue in Philippi, most likely because there were not the minimum ten Jewish men to form one, or not ten men able or willing to form one. So Paul went to a site the Jews used for prayer. It was there that Lydia came to faith in Christ.

As Paul and his team continued to minister, Satan's forces began to stir up trouble in an interesting way. There was a slave girl possessed by a demon who made money for her owners by telling fortunes. The interesting part is that the demon in her did not challenge Paul, but actually spoke the truth. Look at verse 17,

“Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, ‘These men are bond- servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation.’ She continued doing this for many days.” (17-18a)

Paul became “greatly annoyed” (18) with this going on day after day, and cast out the demon. As you can imagine, the owners were angry at losing this easy source of money. So they had the local officials arrest, beat and jail Paul and Silas. In jail at midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing praises to God, when a great earthquake struck which opened the jail's doors and the prisoners' chains. Paul and the other prisoners didn't try to escape. As a result of this witness, the head jailer and his family placed their faith in Christ.

Because of the new believers in Philippi and for the future of the church there, Paul stood his ground on his rights. He and Silas were Roman citizens, a fact the local officials had carelessly not determined. Those officials violated Paul and Silas' rights by beating them and throwing them into jail. After Paul and the team encouraged the believers, they left Philippi. We will look at more of this journey next time.

These events show God clearly speaking to and leading Paul. So, let's now move to a portrait of the heart of a person being led by God.

The Heart Of A Person Being Led By God.

There are six qualities evident here. This list is not exhaustive, but each one is essential. The first on is to truly care for God's people and work. Let's go back to the beginning of this section, 15:36, “After some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.’”

Paul was refreshed, and now had a compulsion to see how the people and new churches were doing. His focus was not on what he had accomplished, but the believers and the ongoing work of God. This clearly shows that his heart was devoted to God.

Do we show this same evidence of devotion to God? We know different people care for God's people and work differently depending on their personalities and gifts. We see that in Paul and Barnabas, and we see it in all of us today. The key is not that you and I care in

exactly the same way, but that we actually do care for each other.

Run the tape the highlights of last week through your mind. What evidence do you see of you truly caring for God's people and work? God leads those whose hearts are completely His. People whose hearts are completely God's are people who truly care for God's people and work.

A second quality is to develop and keep a team player attitude. Paul was talented and self-assured. He also was a team player. On this second missionary journey he was not out doing his own thing. He and Silas went out after once again being commissioned by the church in Antioch. He also looked for others who could join and help them. At Derbe he invited Timothy to join them. At Troas, Luke joined them. Paul developed and kept a team player attitude.

Part of giving our hearts completely to God is recognizing that His plan for us is to work together, to be team players. This is critical to hearing and understanding God's directions for us. Back in chapter 13 we saw that it was while the church at Antioch was ministering and worshipping together that God made His directions for them clear.

Being a team player is part of God's design for all of our relationships and work. A lady was away from home at a convention when she suddenly remembered it was garbage day. Her friend couldn't understand why she was concerned about that and tried to reassure her by telling her that her husband would take care of it. "You don't understand," the lady said, "It takes *both* of us to take out the trash. I can't carry it, and he can't remember it." That's one kind of team work.

Being a team player in ministry is not always easy. It is not always the quickest nor the most efficient way to get things done. But it is God's way. If we are truly committed to God, we will develop and keep a team player attitude. And as we do that in our families and in the church, God will direct us.

Next there is the quality of doing all things for the sake of the gospel. We see this when Paul had Timothy circumcised. This incident raised questions back then, and even now. Look at Luke's brief comment in 16:3,

"Paul wanted [Timothy] 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."

Timothy was Jewish because his mother was, but he had never been circumcised. Verse 4 tells us Paul was sharing the "decrees" from the Jerusalem council with the churches, which included the decision that the ceremonial law has no part in being saved. So why did he have Timothy circumcised?

In Galatians 2:3 there was an issue over Titus, who was a Gentile, and Paul adamantly refused to have Titus circumcised. So what was going on here? The only reason given here was "because of the Jews who were in those parts" (3). This was a difficult situation and

decision for Paul and Timothy. Timothy was Jew, but uncircumcised. They wanted no unnecessary obstacles to the gospel. This was not a matter of truth in the church, but of witness and effective service among the Jews who were not believers.

We see Paul's motive for this in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23,

“For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.”

Paul never compromised on the truth. He never had “the ends justifies the means” kind of thinking. But he was flexible on methods and was committed to “do all things for the sake of the gospel.”

Do we do “all things for the sake of the gospel?” It is common for people to think, “Yes, that is the way it should be... at least for missionaries, pastors, elders.” It is the way it should be for each and every believer. Run the highlights of the last week through your mind again. What thoughts, words, actions were consciously driven by the motive of doing all things for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of Christ?

A fourth quality is to walk with God, expecting Him to lead you. After Paul visited the churches, he thought first of going in one direction, and then another. But God did not permit him to do go in either of those directions at this time (16:6-7). Then, when he received a vision of the Macedonian asking him to come over to help them, verse 10 tells us he “conclud[ed]” that this was God's call. Whether it was trying to go in a direction and God saying no, or God giving him in a specific direction, he was thinking, planning, evaluating, all the time *walking with God and expecting God to lead him*. The “Yes” or “No,” the direction, the timing was always up to God. Paul looked for that. He depended on that leading of God for each step.

Do we both look for and depend on God to lead us? Sometimes we may not wait for God to lead us. At other times we may not even think about asking God to lead us. While at yet other times we may think waiting for God to lead us means sitting back and being passive.

One church had a tradition of not having pastors nor a designated preacher on Sundays. They would wait for people to speak as they felt led by the Holy Spirit. But the time came when the church hired a pastor. Early in their first pastor's ministry when it came time for him to speak he sat quietly. This went on for several Sundays. One of the leaders talked with him about this. The pastor said he had not felt led to speak. The leader said, “Pastor, if you

want us to feel led to pay you at the end of the month, you need to feel led to preach.”

Has your journey through the last week been one of looking for and expecting God to lead you? Don't rush ahead of God. Don't get discouraged if His timing is faster or slower than you think it should be. Be fully devoted to Him, walking with Him, looking for Him to lead, depending on Him to lead you.

The next quality flows from that, following God's leading. Paul heard God say “No!” twice to directions he wanted to take in spreading the gospel. Let's go back and look once more at the scene in Troas, verse 9,

“A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’”

What did Paul do? Verse 10,

“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. So 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.” (10-13)

When God gave him direction, Paul followed it.

When God leads, do we follow... immediately, fully, willingly? At times all of us have thought, “Yes! I *will* follow! But when is God going to speak? When is God going to show me the way?” If we want to see God's direction for what is not clear, we need to follow his direction in what is clear.

Jesus told a parable about a beggar and a rich man. The rich man died and was in torment. The poor man died and was with God. The rich man pleaded for the poor man to be sent back to warn his brothers. The answer, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31).

Salvation was the focus of this parable. But the principle applies to our faithfulness as believers. Make sure you follow the truth you have and understand from God's Word, and the directions God has made plain to you.

If we want to see God's direction for what is not clear, we need to follow his direction in what is clear.

Then, finally, having a heart wholly devoted to God includes rejoicing always. Think again about the familiar account of Paul and Silas. They had been arrested, beaten, thrown into stocks in the secure part of the jail. At midnight they held a two-person Praise and Worship service, singing and praising God together.

Remember, it was to the church here in Philippi that Paul later wrote, “Rejoice in the

Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!” (4:4). They knew firsthand that he practiced what he preached, even in very difficult circumstances.

Peter’s first letter opens recognizing that its first readers were suffering greatly, being tested as by fire. He went on to write that though they had not seen Christ, they believed in Him and loved Him, *and* that they “greatly rejoice[d] with joy inexpressible and full of glory.”

If our hearts are completely devoted to God, we too will rejoice always. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Nothing can steal the joy of Christ. Yes, there will be times of great and troubling questions, and times of deep sorrow. There may be times of great testing. But in spite of and throughout all of that, God will give inner joy to every believer who puts Him first, who devotes all of himself to God.

Conclusion.

“Will God Really Guide Me?” Yes! God leads those whose hearts are completely His.

God spoke to the people of Judah in captivity through a letter from Jeremiah saying,

“For thus says the LORD, ‘When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.’” (29:10-13)

This was God’s message to a specific group of people in a specific situation, but the principle behind it is the same one in His message to King Asa and the same one we have seen in Paul.

As you reflect now on Paul’s example and the truth God has for you in it, thank Him that He is the Loving, Great and Gentle Shepherd who will lead you through every circumstance, day, and season of life. Examine your heart. Is your heart, are you, completely devoted to God? None of us are perfect. But none of us should have any pockets which we isolate from God’s gracious rule. Ask God to help you see yourself clearly, and to devote yourself completely to Him.

Ask God come and lead you through everything you face now, and everything you will face. Determine to think and live in such a way that you will never be comfortable unless you know God’s leading. And then, live with confidence, knowing He *will* lead you.

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