

Acts 16:6-10 Postcards from Paul: Troas-An Unexpected Divine Direction

“What career should I pursue?” “What college should I attend?” Should I take this new job just offered to me or stay at my current job?” “Should we move?” “Should we put an offer in on this house, or that house?” Those are some of the questions that you face at various times in your lives. They’re pretty big questions, and I’m sure you could add to this list some more big questions which you’ve faced in your life. So how do we arrive at answers to those big questions? How do we make big decisions in life?

You know, sometimes don’t you think it would be great if God would send a Macedonian man in a vision to let you know exactly how to answer all of those big questions we face in life? To have the decision packaged up really nice for you, clear cut and clearly communicated from the Lord? “Hey, do this! God wants you to do this and not that! This is God’s will for you!”

Now, that’s exactly what happened with the Apostle Paul as he was getting going on his second missionary journey. Last week, Pastor Olson’s sermon told us about events that happened at the tail end of Paul’s first mission journey. After that first mission journey, Paul spent a little time back in his home base of Syrian Antioch and he also spend some time in Jerusalem. But about a year after his first missionary journey, Paul and a new missionary partner, Silas, started out on another mission trip. And Paul and Silas began this second missionary journey by revisiting a bunch of the places Paul visited on his first mission trip, places like Lystra and Pisidian Antioch. And in Lystra they picked up a third mission partner, a young man named Timothy. So then Paul and Silas and Timothy continued on to the west heading across what is modern day Turkey. Paul wanted to plow new ground with the gospel, so to speak. He wanted to take the message of forgiveness and salvation in Christ to parts of the world where the gospel had not yet been preached. Paul was looking for a new mission field. And we hear in the opening verse of this lesson from Acts 16 that Paul had a plan to do just that. They were planning to keep traveling west to the province of Asia (this is not a reference to the continent of Asia; this is a reference to a Roman province known in those days as Asia). And this province of Asia had a bunch of well populated port cities on the Aegean Sea-cities like Ephesus and Miletus and Thyatira-no doubt, a ripe mission fields where people needed to hear about Christ’s salvation.

So, Paul and Silas had made a good plan, right? A good decision. A God-pleasing decision. A decision about doing mission work in a place that would have given glory to God and would have shown love for neighbor. A decision that would have fulfilled God’s will. So full speed ahead, right?

But that’s not what happened. What happened is what we hear about in verse 6. **“Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.”** Paul and Silas were kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the good news about Jesus in the province of Asia? What is the deal with that?

And this didn’t happen just once. It happened again. After not entering Asia, Paul and Silas made a different plan. They decided to set their sights north and east and go to Bithynia. To share Jesus in a different place where it had not yet been preached. A good, God-pleasing plan, right? Yes. But then we’re told this happened, **“When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.”** The Spirit of Jesus-which is just another way of talking about God the Holy Spirit-prevented Paul and Silas from entering into Bithynia. Now, we don’t know exactly how the Holy Spirit prevented them from entering these two regions-did someone receive a revelation from God, did the Holy Spirit speak directly to them and tell them not to enter these places, was God working through some regular human events in a way that prohibited them from entering Asia and Bithynia? We don’t know. And finally, it doesn’t matter. What the Scriptures do tell us is the Holy Spirit prevented them from entering those prospective mission fields. What’s the deal here? It would obviously have been very much a God-pleasing desire in Paul and his missionary buddies to share the gospel of Jesus with people that didn’t know him as Savior. Why did God do that?

Well, finally, we can’t see for sure every reason God might have had for preventing Paul to go to Asia and Bithynia. The Scriptures don’t tell us all of the reasons. But what the Scriptures do tell us is that God had a different plan in mind for Paul and his mission partners. When they reached that port town in Troas, Paul received ***An Unexpected Divine Direction***. St. Luke, who, by the way, apparently joined Paul and Silas and Timothy at this time in Troas because he starts talking about “we” here....Luke shares with us these details: **“During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.”**

So there it is: we can confidently say it was the will of God for Paul to not preach in Asia and Bithynia at this time. And it was the will of God for Paul to be preaching in Macedonia at this time. We can say that because God clearly revealed his will to Paul about these things. God showed them the path they were follow. And we’ll hear in next week’s

sermon about the way the Lord blessed their work in Macedonia, specifically, in Philippi.

But what about us? What about when there are two or more paths in front of us, and we need to pick a way? In other words, how do we Christians go about making God-pleasing decisions in our lives? And how do we know that we are doing the will of God in our lives when we make decisions? Well, first of all, if you are waiting around for a vision of a Macedonian man to tell you what you should do next, you should probably stop doing that. But in all seriousness, sometimes I think some Christians get the impression that, when it comes to big decisions in their lives, they need to receive a clear sign from God, that God will somehow show them exactly what they should be doing. Is that true?

To dig into this, let's talk about the will of God for a moment. God revealed his will for Paul in a direct way in this account, right? God did it through the vision of this Macedonian man—*"Come and help us! Preach the gospel here!"* So where does God reveal his will for our lives to us? Well, God does that in his Word. In fact, this is why we sometimes refer to the Bible as the revealed will of God. In the Word, God tells us many things in a very direct way about what he wants and desires: he wants all people to be saved, he wants you to know that Jesus died for your sins and rose to give you eternal life, he wants the gospel to be preached all over the world. He wants us to trust in Jesus, to grow in our faith, he wants us to glorify him by obeying his commands. He wants us to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. All these things are explicitly stated and revealed as the will of God.

But what about the matters I spoke about at the very beginning of this sermon: what career to pursue? What college to attend? Should we buy that house? Should I take that job offer? How do we make decisions when the alternatives are both good and God-pleasing things? Now please note: we are not talking about a choice between a good and a bad thing here— a good and a sinful thing. This is not, "Should I rob a bank or not?" That decision is clear. God's revealed will says, **"You shall not steal."** God's will is clear when the choice is between good and evil.

But what about when the choice is between something good and God-pleasing and something else good and God-pleasing? *Should I become a nurse or a teacher? Should I go to UW-LaCrosse or UW-Eau Claire? Perhaps most importantly, shall I have pizza or tacos for dinner?* For decisions like these—great and small, God does not reveal his will to us. He doesn't tell us what to do. Instead, for these decisions God gives us the gift of human reason.

So, we weigh our options. We apply to the situation what God's revealed will does tell us. We think in terms of how we might best glorify God and serve our neighbor with our decision. We ask God for wisdom and discernment. We consult with other wise Christians. And then we make our decision. And we ask God to bless that decision. And he will. But we do not expect or demand that God decide the matter for us, to send the proverbial Macedonian man in a vision, and we should not expect God to do that because he does not promise to do that for us.

And this also means that we do not torment ourselves trying to figure out what lies hidden in the mind of God. Sometimes I get the impression that some Christians think they somehow need to crawl inside God's mind and discover that one right alternative when it comes to things like career choice or the job offer or the like. And they think if they don't pick exactly what God had in mind, then they've blown it, they've sinned, and their plans are destined to fail. No. Don't think that way. God gives us direct revelation in his Word about many things—the most important things, like our salvation and about how we live a holy and pure life. But he doesn't give us direction about everything in his Word. In those situations, God tells us to use the grey matter between our ears, to make a decision, and do it with a heart of faith, trusting that God will work through that decision we made for our good.

Oh, and that leads to one final and important point: what if the decision we made didn't work out so well? Is God telling us we made a wrong and sinful choice? Is that why God didn't bless the decision? No, it would be wrong to think that way. Think of it in terms of this story in front of us. Was it sinful for Paul to desire and plan to go to Asia or Bithynia to preach there? No, of course not. But what we can draw from this account is that sometimes God works through our thwarted plans and through failed plans to bring blessings and good into our lives. Sometimes God shuts doors in our lives to open up new doors of blessing. God closed doors to Asia and Bithynia for Paul because he had in mind to open a new door, to do mission work on a completely new continent. In the same way, God may prohibit some of our plans from working out smoothly and we may allow some of our decisions to fail because he has plans to bring us greater blessings through whatever it is he has in store for us. You can put your faith in that. After all, we're talking about the God that loves us so much that he did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. How will he not also graciously give us all good things? So trust that you have a Lord who will be with you as you make big decisions in your lives. And trust that he will bless those decisions in the ways that he knows is best for our eternal good in Christ. Amen.