

Your Will—God’s Will

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Acts 21:7-16

Sermon Series:
God’s Big Story

***...our
destination
matters to
God.***

Alice in Wonderland came to a fork in the road. She felt a sense of panic as she stood frozen by indecision. She lifted her eyes toward heaven, looking for guidance. Her eyes did not find God, only the Cheshire cat leering at her from his perch in the tree above.

“Which way should I go?” Alice asked the cat.

“That depends,” said the cat, fixing a sardonic smile on the confused girl.

“On what?” Alice asked.

“On your destination. Where are you going?” the Cheshire cat queried.

“I don’t know,” Alice stammered.

“Then,” said the cat with a grin, “it doesn’t matter.”

It matters for the Christian. Our destination matters. We don’t want to waste our lives. We want them to count for something. I suspect the author of *Alice in Wonderland* would concur that our destination matters to God. After all, Lewis Carroll was a pen name for a clergyman—the Rev. Charles Dodgson.

In the book of Acts, Paul is a man on a mission. Paul is determined to deliver money collected by Gentile Christians for poor Jewish Christians. This collection is intended not only to alleviate poverty among Jewish Christians,

but will go a long way to improve Jewish-Gentile relations.

But the real reason why Paul seems bound and determined to get to Jerusalem is because God calls him there. We read in Acts 20 Paul’s words to the Ephesus church: “And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem” (20:22). The Greek word for captive is commonly used to describe a physical binding with ropes. Paul speaks of his captivity to the Spirit as a spiritual restraint, a divine compulsion, if you will.

How does Paul know where God wants him to go? Does he hear a voice or see a vision? We have no way of knowing. The only thing Paul tells his readers is that the Holy Spirit has summoned him there (20:23).

Paul is met on the journey by a prophet named Agabus, who takes his belt and ties Paul’s hands and feet with it (21:10-14). The prophet’s mime is a portent of things to come. People will bind Paul’s hands and feet in much the same manner Paul once did to followers of the Way.

Paul’s traveling companions interpret Agabus’s prophecy as a warning to avoid Jerusalem. We read in verse 12, “We and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go to Jerusalem.” The “we” includes our narrator, Luke, who joins the others in trying to talk Paul out of going.

...God's way is not always the easy way.

Paul replies, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart?" (21:13). The New English Bible translates this verse, "Why are you trying to break down my resolve? For I am ready not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." Paul never wavers from the conviction that God wants him to go to Jerusalem and Rome. His traveling companions come reluctantly to the same conclusion. When Paul will not be persuaded, they say to one another, "The Lord's will be done" (21:14).

These words are reminiscent of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). We prayed earlier in worship, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

So what? So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Look at it this way. God has a will for your will, just as you have a will for your life. When you pray, "Thy will be done," you are asking for God's will to take precedence over your will.

Our Scripture lesson teaches that God's way is not always the easy way. Paul's life is a case in point. He is arrested, beaten and a bounty is placed on his head. His trial occupies a total of seven chapters and 270 verses in Acts. Why does Luke go into such elaborate detail to chronicle Paul's persecutions? It's to reinforce the point that God's way is not always the easy way.

We equate the easy way with God's way. We ascribe God's will

to circumstances that turn in our favor. We attribute happy-ever-after endings to God's blessing. Circumstances that go against us call God's benevolence into question.

In my writing this summer, I identified eight obstacles facing the 21st century church. Let's talk about one of those obstacles: Americans are addicted to happiness. The pursuit of happiness in America has reached epidemic proportions. "I just want my kids to be happy" has become the universal mantra of today's parents. Don't get me wrong. Happiness is awesome. Chris and I have two adult children and we want them to be happy. But with so much attention devoted to happiness we could be setting our kids up for disappointment. We could leave them ill-prepared for a life that can't always be pleasant. We cannot insure a soft landing for our children.

We preachers pander to this happiness ethic. We reduce the gospel to mere personal fulfillment. We talk incessantly about the comfortable aspects of God. The attributes of God that appear more challenging and confrontational are conveniently expunged.

After an extensive tour of the United States, well-known German pastor and theologian Helmut Thielicke was asked about the greatest defect of Americans. His answer was rather jarring: "Americans have an inadequate view of suffering." We have come to regard suffering as something to be avoided at all costs.

In the classic tale of *Winnie the Pooh*, Christopher Robin and his

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friends go on an expedition to find the North Pole. Along the way, Roo falls into a stream. Pooh finds a pole and fishes Roo out of the stream. After the emergency, Christopher Robins asks Pooh, "Where did you get that pole?"

Pooh looks at the pole in his hands. "I just found it," he says. "I thought it ought to be useful. I just picked it up."

"Pooh," says Christopher Robin solemnly, "the expedition is over. You just found the North Pole."

"I did?" says Pooh.

So they stick the pole into the ground and Christopher Robin ties a message to it. "North Pole. Discovered by Pooh. Pooh found it."

We look to find happiness in romance or wealth or job satisfaction. When we find some measure of satisfaction, we stick a pole in the ground and declare, This is it. I have found happiness.

Happiness will prove strangely elusive if it becomes the sole focus of our quest. Happiness is the by-product of living with purpose and meaning. It sneaks into our lives when we are doing other things. Helen Keller said, "Many people have the wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained by self-gratification, but through fidelity to a worthy purpose."

God brings joy and happiness beyond our wildest dreams. Happiness comes when we seek God, not happiness.

My second observation about God's will is that God's way is not

always obvious to us, especially when we are in the moment. Paul might have been certain God wanted him in Jerusalem and Rome, but his traveling companions were not at all convinced.

Paul's divine appointment in Jerusalem results in his inquisition before the Supreme Court of the Jews, called the Sanhedrin (Acts 23). He is tried before the governor, Antonio Felix, who doesn't want to be bothered. "That's enough for now....When I find it convenient I will send for you" (Acts 24). It never becomes convenient for Felix to review Paul's case, so Paul languishes in prison two more years. When Porcius Festus succeeds Felix, he is asked to arbitrate Paul's case (Acts 25) but essentially passes the buck by sending him to Herod Agrippa II, king of Judea. Agrippa refers Paul's case to Caesar in Rome. At the close of Acts, Paul is placed under house arrest for two years.

If I were in Paul's sandals, I would have asked, God, what's the point? This mission is not exactly what I had in mind!

Paul's arrest turns out to be God's convoluted way of getting Paul to Rome. Along the way, it secures him an audience with the Jewish Supreme Court, two governors, a king and the Roman Emperor. You talk about having an impact on people in high places!

God doesn't always take us on the most direct route. Sometimes God leads us on the scenic tour. Our roundabout journey may be God's way of moving us God's way.

Sometimes it is only as we look back on a situation that we can discern God's clear leading.

God's will is not always obvious. God's purposes don't always fall from the sky in leaflets. Don't expect 100 percent clarity.

Thomas Merton prays, "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you."

You may be confused by events in your life right now. It may be a family crisis or a relationship meltdown. It may be a health crisis or a job loss. I spent time this week with people in our jobs ministry who are in transition with employment. Many told me their toughest assignment in finding a job is keeping centered on God and not worrying about the future.

If you are sincerely seeking God's will, you will find it. God will see to it that you get the memo. God is far more eager to reveal His will than we are to find it. If you are committed to do God's will, God will do the rest.

Trust God. Follow Jesus. Pray the serenity prayer.

"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; Courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

"Living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time;

accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that he will make all things right if I surrender to his will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him forever in the next. Amen."

- Reinhold Niebuhr

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