



The God who Leads (Acts 16:6-12; 21:1-14)

The story is told of a young man who had been two timing his girlfriends. He liked Sharon, but he also liked Maria. They were beginning to smell a rat and he knew he had to decide which one he wanted to continue to go out with. He was in a quandary, so he decided to go into a church to pray. Not knowing much about churches, he went to the local Catholic church and went in, sat down and wondered what he should do next. Should he have Sharon, or have Maria? He looked up towards heaven and noticed a sign on a statue. It said Ave Maria. Inspired, he went out and dumped Sharon.

Do you need direction in your life? We need new direction as a church, or we're just not going to be here in a few years. Church in decline. Need to be a church in growth.

We need to seek God. How do we do that? How does God guide us? How do we know the way to go?

Let's take the two examples we had read to us from Paul's life.

- Be prepared to explore outside your comfort zone

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. 7 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.

Need direction? So did Paul. He had his plans. But his plans got thwarted because God had other ideas. This passage is comforting isn't it? Here was a great Christian man like Paul. He had plans to go back and strengthen the churches he had established in Phrygia (in the centre of modern day Turkey) and maybe to preach in the neighbouring province of Asia (western Turkey). It was extending familiar territory. But it soon became obvious that's not what God had planned for them. To use a cliché – doors were being closed in their faces.

So having got blocked by the Spirit from going to Asia, they tried Bithynia which was on the Black sea coast. Blocked again! What about Mysia next door? They got to go through Mysia and ended up in Troas which was the historic Troy - a seaport on the Aegean.

Quite a journey and not quite the place they had planned to go and of course we know that they ended up on the other side of the Aegean in Macedonia. What can we learn from this? To know the direction God is calling us, we have to move. It's easy to sit around and wait for enlightenment from heaven, but we are called to GO. It's about being proactive. It starts with desiring to go somewhere with God. God is calling us on a journey as a fellowship – and that starts with us being prepared to move. As a Pastor we've had three interesting years here. Our first was spent doing things with a church that we had either not done for a while or never done before. Opportunities were appearing all around. In the second year and third year we saw the "impossible dream" of the ceiling restored. Now God is moving on, desiring to take us into new things. And we have to get up and follow. Maybe we don't fancy moving. It's comfortable here. Comfortable maybe; but for how long. Jesus says follow me. The only thing I know right now is that if we don't change as a church, then in very few years, this fellowship will cease to exist. If we don't follow the path God leads us in, then our light goes out.

- Be prepared to listen to God

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.

Looking for opening and closing doors is not the only way God expresses His will. Paul had the vision of the man from Macedonia. God spoke through a dream. We know that God speaks in other ways, through prophecy, words of knowledge, through His written word. He speaks to us and through others to us. We've got to place ourselves in a position we can hear the voice of God. In this case, Paul had a dream. There's a difference between hearing and listening. You are hearing me this morning. I make a lot of noise. But are you listening to what's being said? Perhaps you want to dismiss what I say – after all it is only my first Pastorate. After all, I've only been a Christian for 38 years, done almost every job that could be done in a church, been a church leader before, preached since I was 17, was a Baptist lay preacher 15 years, done my apprenticeship in a growing, lively church and spent 3 years being taught in Spurgeons – so what do I know about any of this?

Do you want to know the will of God? The be prepared to listen for what God has to say in whichever way He has to say it. Part of our Way Forward process is to get back to what we should have been doing a long while back – through proper pattern of prayer meetings. I know some of you don't believe in coming to prayer meetings. I'll just say this. If I want to know someone's intentions, I speak to them. If I don't, goodness knows what I may conclude. Some of the worst problems in this church have cropped up over the past three years because people did not communicate with one another.

If that's the case in human relationships, it's true of God too. If you want to know God's mind – speak to Him. If WE want to know God's mind as a fellowship, then WE must speak to Him corporately. If we don't then we won't perceive His will corporately. That's why we have corporate prayer.

It's the way of the New Testament. People got together to pray. When Peter was thrown into prison they prayed – and were shocked when he was released. That's the power of prayer! Why? They had a shared problem and they shared the prayer and the experience.

If you have problems with prayer, now would be a good time to deal with them. God want us to listen to His voice and move forward together as a church.

- Be prepared to take a new course

Paul hadn't planned ending up in Troas and then in Macedonia. As he moved, he had to start to entertain things that he had not previously. As we move forward, we are going to have to start to entertain ideas and things that are new to us.

Paul was called to Macedonia. There was plenty of work to do in Asia, Byrthinia and Mysia. He was from Asia Minor. As a citizen of Tarsus, he knew the language and customs. He understood the culture. But now he had to deal with places like Philippi which was a Roman colony and Greek civilization in Thessalonica, Athens and Corinth. And Paul changed his approach and manner in those situations so he scratched the people where it itched and they came to Christ in their droves.

Do we stay with what we know, or do we start to listen to the voice of God and do things we never have done. As I've mentioned before when we looked at Joshua at the beginning of the year we'll know the way to go, because we haven't been there before. God calls us to go and present the gospel in strange places, or in familiar places in strange ways; to entertain presenting the gospel in ways we never thought of.

Let' s face it. The way we have been doing the gospel hasn' t produced too many disciples. Who has come to the Lord and been baptized in the last three years? Our own children. Praise God for that but no newcomers have come to know the Lord. We barely get any non-Christian visitors. We' ve been going round in circles in our Asias and, Bithinyas when God has called us to go to Macedonia. We need to be where people are, know what grabs them, know where their interests and passions are - then tap into them and show them where Christ is in it all.

Do you know what fires up your non-Christian neighbours or friends? That unbelieving member of your family. The go and put a fire under them. Show them Jesus in it. That Macedonian man for you is that friend or neighbour who does not know Christ? Go over to his or her territory, become absorbed into their life and passions and bring Christ in. Let' s scratch where it itches rather than trying to get them in here or interested in church. They' re not going to come - we need to go. Or at least we need to see how we can bring something of their world here so we can minister to them.

- Be prepared to stick to what God has revealed to you.

Paul knew that he had been called to Jerusalem Acts 20:22 *"And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. 23 I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me* and as we get to chapter 21 he is told twice, first by the people in Tyre and then by Agabus. He was told repeatedly and clearly. The disciples pleaded with him not to go because of these warnings. But God had spoken. The disciples interpreted it as a warning not to go, but Paul saw it as confirmation of what was going to happen to him. He says this, *"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."*

Paul knew what God was leading him into. The kop out was there for him. He could have listened to Luke and the others who pleaded with him not to go. But he chose God' s way. Some commentators think that this is another example of scriptural honesty – that Paul made a mistake – an error of judgement in ignoring both prophecies. But was it? Sooner or later he was going to get caught and killed. But the prophecy of Agabus meant one thing to Paul. He was going to be handed over to the Gentiles. Which Gentiles? The only ones available – the Romans using his citizenship. The result - imprisonment - but the opportunity to witness to Caesar as well as King Agrippa on the way! And so he did. And while he waited he came up with some of his most important letters – Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon.

There's one thing I guarantee about The Way Forward. We will understand where God wants to take us. But for most it is going to be a difficult route. The most important will be that we understand what we believe. What is the substance of the gospel? What do we rely on for salvation? How do we take that unchanging and unchangeable message and communicate it to a whole new generation?

One of our problems is that we often confuse the delivery with the message. We rely on ideas, principles and methods that served us well in the past but haven't yielded us disciples in decades. The trouble is that we've confused them with the gospel. We can't see out of the box. We can't move the gospel out of the box. Let's get real. People aren't going to come here. We can run special services here from now until whenever, but only the one or two will ever come. We need to be creative and imaginative. After all, a substantial number of non-Christians enter our doors each week – but not to worship, not to seek Christ. In fact, they're not interested in faith at all, just in the toddler group or the Swaffham Players. Well we say. At least they come in and that's a witness. Rubbish. How many have come to the Lord from these two groups in the last 5 years. None. How many have started coming to church regularly. None. One or two have come occasionally. We've planted the seed you say. Yes. We've planted so much seed that it's rotting in heaps on the field! We're called to reap the harvest. So let's no longer waste our time and energy on seed-sowing and put our energy into activity which are going to reap. As Ian told us last week, that means focusing activity into a few things we do well rather than try to do all the traditional things.

Perhaps you don't like the idea of doing things differently. It isn't comfortable for you. You may be like Luke who pleaded with Paul not to go to Jerusalem because it was going to be hassle if he did. They saw the problems, but Paul saw the possibilities. But look at the outcome. Yes, it was dangerous. Yes, it took time to come to fruition. But Paul did see Caesar and the rest is stuff of legend as they say.

Friends, it's time to move forward. Get out of your comfort zone and start seeking God. Spend time together in His presence. Start to see the new things He's leading us in. Don't see the problems, see the possibilities. Let's not kop out, but persevere. Let's see God glorified here in Swaffham.

