

Folks, can I encourage you wherever you are right now that if you can open your bibles and follow the teaching this morning. I am very conscious with the consumer nature of YouTube and online media that it can make us lazy. You might be sitting today with your jammies still on listening to this, but I think it is really important to exercise the brains that God has given us, and not just take my words as Gospel. It's the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ and his Holy Spirit imparting words on you that matters today so please open his Word because nothing is more precious to you today than this, believe me.

And I am going to use the words of Psalm 19 as we pray :

The law of the Lord is perfect,
refreshing the soul.

The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.

The precepts of the Lord are right,
giving joy to the heart.

The commands of the Lord are radiant,
giving light to the eyes.

The fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever.

The decrees of the Lord are firm,
and all of them are righteous.

And therefore, may these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart
be pleasing in your sight,
Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Amen.

I was driving the other day taking Josh into school and as I was coming home I reflected on the fact that in about 9 weeks from now I will be 50. I don't feel it but I can't escape it. And I definitely can feel the mid-life itch setting in; that I need something to almost give me a new lease of life again. But actually deep down the more important thing that Alison and I have talked about more is about getting a Will sorted. And obviously the purpose of the will is to ensure that our boys know what we desire for them. Without communication how will they ever know. We have to talk to them.

Could you imagine if God failed to communicate with you his will for you and me. Our lives would be full of confusion, ambiguity and divisiveness. Without

Godly wisdom, we can plod our way through life without any sense of aim. And that's not what God hopes for your life. Maybe today you don't know what God's will is for you, and that is so far from what God actually wants. We are not designed to simply follow the crowd. Remember what Paul said to the Romans, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will." (Romans 12:2).

So now this week we are going to follow Paul on his final journey as he says goodbye to friends and makes his way towards Jerusalem and we are going to discover 4 ways on how the Holy Spirit leads him towards God's will. It would be so encouraging to know this morning that we all have a better sense of how to discern God's will for our lives, because through that we become more aligned to his overall purpose for his Church. I'd encourage you to do something with His Word. Seek out his will through these practical steps today.

As we read this passage today. the first way that we hear the will of God is through our brothers and sisters in Christ. In this past year I have realised deeper than before how much of a family we are as a Church. And I will be honest that it has been so so difficult as members of our church family have died without the wider church being able to grieve in the way we normally can as a family. Paul is saying his goodbyes, and he says that they will never see him again, and so there were tears being shed. For us we have a spiritual component to our relationship together that you simply don't have if you are not a follower of Christ. That component therefore means that through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in us we are able to share with one another beyond the sense of friendship.

And this spiritual relationship is seen further in verse 4 when they land at Tyre where Paul seeks out the disciples there. It wasn't about just having a place to stay for 7 days. It's more than that. With that unity there could be frank conversations and we see that here, where they try to convince Paul not to go to Jerusalem.

So what do we do with these verses, because if verse 4 is correct that they spoke to him through the Spirit, then is Paul disobeying God? Well if we go back a few chapters to Chapter 19 verse 21 we see that Paul feels compelled by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem. The NIV translation doesn't provide enough explanation here in its translation as it simply says that Paul decided. It's somewhat more than that. He had resolved his thoughts by the Holy

Spirit's directions to go to Jerusalem. We shouldn't assume that he simply accepts it, but he knows it is the will of God. He knows what he is walking into, imprisonment all for the sake of the Gospel. And the Theologian Charles Swindoll in his insight into this passage says that the Disciples accurately heard from the Spirit about Paul's impending persecution, however the advice they then gave to him to not go ahead with it was not from the Spirit but instead from their own desires and concerns. They knew what was going to happen to him, and in love they didn't want this for their dear friend.

If you have Christian friends, they are going to hear from God about your life in the same way as you will, but it doesn't mean that they are going to like what they are hearing. It doesn't mean that they are going to understand you when you obey God's will. It is important to go out there and seek wise council from others, but it doesn't mean that you should always take it. Paul's followers were following their hearts but Paul had to decide what he felt from God. It is a tricky thing folks, to take council from others, but ultimately discern the voice of God from all you hear. But it still is very important to take that council.

The second way in which we will hear the will of God is through praying.

Verses 5 & 6 tell us that Paul's friends accompanied them out of the city and before Paul boarded onto the ship the husbands, wives and children gathered on the beach to pray with them. What a beautiful picture of Church. They gathered as the family of God praying together asking God to comfort Paul as he journeyed towards persecution. That's why our need to gather corporately in prayer is so important. It gives power to what we pray for.

Paul knew the power of prayer that it would equip him to know God's will in every situation. Here's what he tells the Ephesians in Ephesians 6:18 "And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should". Folks if I was to go into any situation not having already prayed myself, but also in some occasions knowing that a wider group of people were not praying for me, I would feel rather helpless. Maybe right now you are dealing with issues in your family, and you don't know what to do. I'd encourage you to know the power of prayer in understanding God's will for you, and if you can find a group of

people, or maybe me, to share with who you know can be praying for wisdom, I that that it will bring much comfort.

And as we pray, God opens our eyes to his will, and it strengthens our resolve to see his will fulfilled. Our prayers should echo the petition of Psalm 143:10, "Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground". That's what we need to be crying out as a Church as we move out of COVID, that we would know and do God's will and that he would lead us on level ground for what lies ahead. But how will you do that? I'd encourage you to gather with others.

And so the third way in which we will hear the will of God is through prophecy.

I wonder when was the last time you heard a sermon preached on prophecy? Do you treat it as something that is for Old Testament times? Well in this passage we hear about Philip who has 4 virgin daughters who are prophetesses. Now I don't think there was any connection between them not being married and having the gift of prophecy. I think it was merely Luke indicating that they were present in the home.

Next we read about the prophet called Agabus. There were two forms of prophecy seen in scripture. There was the preaching of the word, and there was the predicting of future events. For example Jesus would refer to Jonah as a prophet, and we know after some persuasion that he went and preached to the people of Ninevah. He preached and as a result of the Holy Spirit's gifts people repented and turned to God. Jonah was a prophet using God's word as proclamation. And that's what we try to do here every Sunday, we proclaim the word, we try to explain it with the Spirit's guidance, and challenge you and enable you to live it out. But Agabus is a different kind of prophet. He's foretelling future events and he's acting this out in verse 11. He takes Paul's belt, he binds his own feet and hands and says that this is how the Jews will bind up Paul.

How would you feel if someone came and took clothing belonging to you and using it gave you a prophetic word about what is going to happen next to you? I suspect you would be rather spooked by it. And yet here, Luke and Paul's followers take it on board and try to convince Paul not to go. Unlike today it was an accepted way to declare the will of God for people. And so why is it today we don't hear much about it? Why do those that talk about it get

something of a label? Is it something that we should accept as a way of hearing God's will for our lives in these times?

I do believe that God today is able to use different means to present his will to us and that includes prophecy, however it's such a huge debate and topic which many theologians have wrestled with and one that I am not in any way qualified to provide much wisdom on. I do know that the prophetic voice for me and for teaching in today's church is definitely seen in the exposition of his [Spirit filled] revelation completed in Christ and in Scripture. I have received prophetic words for the life of this our church which have been so important for my direction. I have also had people who have gained such revelation from a passage of scripture and they have been able to come to me prophetically and declare it over my life. That's how I see the gift of prophecy today, and we should be all open to how it can lead us to understanding God's will for us. To encourage you I recommend that you read through the scriptures as you discover the prophetic will of God for our lives and our communities. I'd encourage you that if God speaks through his word for this our church, then please come and share it with me. It won't be an embarrassing conversation. I will very much welcome the prophetic word spoken for our parish. If you want to hear the will of God for your life then hear the prophetic coming from these pages.

Finally, the way in which we hear the will of God in our lives is through our own convictions.

Notice that at no stage did Agabus tell Paul not to go to Jerusalem. No it was in verse 12 that having heard the prophecy Luke and the believers beg Paul not to go. So what do you do when people you respect tell you not to do something? For Paul he is feeling their concern, but he's starting to understand the big picture. If he goes ahead, he's going to break their hearts. What's he going to do? It had to come down to one thing. It was his conviction, his heart. It was beyond proving some cause. It was the harsh reality that even in going, it's not going to end well. He knows the reality of his situation. He says, "I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but even to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus".

Here's what he says in 2 Timothy 4:6&7. These are words from his prison cell, probably some of the last words that he would say. "For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith". He knows

he's about to die, but he's fought for Jesus and kept the faith. All the pain and the suffering doesn't matter.

For each of us, we are going to be faced with terribly big decisions at points in our lives. We are going to hear opinions from others, but ultimately you have to listen to the Holy Spirit and your own conscience, your own convictions. Knowing God's will requires complete faith in him, and to hear God's voice in your own convictions.

And as people see the step you are making for God, hopefully they will stop interjecting, and as Paul's followers did, they declare "The Lord's Will be done". Now they didn't just leave him to finish the journey. It says that some accompanied him. You know many years ago I felt so strongly about God's will in a certain situation. There were many people who didn't believe it was the right thing to do. However I knew, I was convicted by the Holy Spirit, that even though there was risk, even though I didn't fully understand what I was getting into, it was the right thing to do. But what was the hardest thing, was that even a year later, some friends would come alongside me still telling me that it was the wrong thing to do. And to this day I believe it wasn't, not because in some way I accomplished a lot. No, in fact it brought with it so much more hardship. But it was the will of God, and I am glad that I followed his path rather than disobey it. I just wish at the time my friends had accepted it the words, "The Lord's Will be done".

So what is God's will for your life? I know that you will respond with this – God's will is that I should be happy, that I should have good things, and that he always wants what's best for me. Yes he does always want what's best, but some times we realise what's best when we go through the pain and struggles of life. The truth is that we may have to suffer for the sake of Christ. Paul did. Why you may ask would that be God's will? Because without that pain, there is no maturity, there is no reason to have faith, we essentially become spoilt brats, only wanting what we want. As we all consider the will of God in our lives, let's move away from the individual small things that we think we want, and focus more on the bigger picture of God's will that we may boast in the hope of the glory of God bursting in our lives, even if that means we will suffer for his sake. Have you ever seen people who even in the tough times of their lives are able to give God the glory. And it's for these reasons Paul writes to the church in Rome, 'that we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to

shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us'. Amen to that.

Whatever you may be facing or making decisions about, consider what God is trying to do in the bigger picture, and may we desire to know and do his will wherever we may find ourselves, whether in the fertile pastures or in the wilderness. Amen.