

## The Will of the Lord Be Done

### Acts 21:1-14

#### INTRODUCTION

As we come this morning to Acts 21, we see that Paul is coming to the conclusion of his third missionary journey. He began 4-5 years prior in Antioch and traveled west through Asia Minor to Ephesus (where he remained for 3 years). He proceeded north to Philippi and into modern-day Greece to Thessalonica, Berea, and Corinth. He then retraced his steps back through these same cities, strengthening the disciples until he came to Miletus, which is just south of Ephesus. We learned last week that here Paul met one last time with the Ephesian elders before continuing on to Jerusalem.

Why was Paul so passionate about getting to so many cities with the Gospel? The reason is the same for why our entire world is passionate about getting the COVID vaccine to every city in the world: They know the vaccine can eliminate the deadly effects of the virus. Similarly, Paul knew the Gospel of Jesus could eliminate the deadly effects of the virus of our sin, if only he could get it to every city. Missions that are bigger than ourselves make it easy to sacrifice ourselves in order for the mission to be accomplished. This is what drove Paul to say in Acts 20:24, "But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the Gospel of the grace of God."

No one questions Paul's sacrifice of himself in getting the Gospel to every city possible. But what Paul's associates did question is why he wanted to return to Jerusalem. When Paul has been so fruitful among so many Gentile cities, why would he return to the central Jewish city that killed Jesus and now passionately wants to kill him?

What we find in Acts 20 and especially in our text today in chapter 21 are repeated attempts to persuade Paul away from returning to Jerusalem. In v.4 it says, *“Through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.”* And in v.11 we meet a prophet named Agabus, who took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands and said to Paul, *“Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles,’* aka the Romans who may crucify him just as they crucified Jesus. Even Paul himself confessed in Acts 20:23 that the Holy Spirit testifies personally to him in every city during his return that imprisonment and afflictions await him.

Yet the simple story of these fourteen verses is Paul’s firm, forward movement to Jerusalem despite all forewarnings of impending suffering. Why does Paul feel this conviction to march onward? It didn’t make much logical sense to Paul. It may have even confused him spiritually. Yet what thing we do know is that the Holy Spirit made it clear somewhere along this missionary journey that God’s will for him was to return. Paul even says in Acts 20:22 that he felt constrained by the Spirit to return to Jerusalem. For Paul to not go to Jerusalem would be the same as disobeying the will of the Lord. When those with Paul finally realize in 21:14 that he cannot be persuaded away from returning, they simply say, *“Let the will of the Lord be done.”*

So what does this have to do with us? I’ll say this: Sometimes fulfilling God’s will is really hard. It involves sacrifice. It confuses others, even our Christian friends. It challenges our faith because it may seem contradictory to where the greatest harvest for the Gospel may be. We can faithfully sow God’s Word in one place with great fruit for several years and then suddenly God might say, “Stop!” And we need to stop because fulfilling God’s will is more important than fulfilling what seems right to us.

Proverbs 14:12 says, *“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.”* Such is the result for everyone who doesn’t know God’s will or directly disobeys God’s will. So our big idea today is obvious:

**All Christians are called to do God's will.** But I want us to ponder further what God's will is. I then want us to consider in our personal lives how we are to do God's will. Finally, we will conclude with a word of encouragement for when we fail to fulfill God's will.

## WHAT IS GOD'S WILL?

### 1. God's sovereign will.

God's sovereign will refers to God's complete control over everything that comes to pass. Nothing can stand against it, nothing can stop it. In Acts 4:27-28 it says *"Truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."* So it was the will of the Lord that Jesus died. Isaiah 53:10 confirms this when it says, "It was the will of the Lord to crush Him" (Him being Jesus). Not even the sinful activity of others stopped God's will. God works in and through noncompliance to still work out His decreed will.

Parents, especially moms, can relate to this when you tell your kids that you are going over to your friend's home for a gettogether. Now this benefits your kids as well because your friend has several kids the same age as your kids. In their excitement, they begin getting out of control. So you finally tell them, "Listen, if you can't finish your breakfast and behave, we will not go to your friend's home!" But in the back of your mind, you know that no matter what they do, you are going to your friends' home. It's the same with God: No matter what our level of obedience or lack thereof is, He will accomplish His sovereign will.

This biblical truth is not meant to make us feel like we are under the control of an evil puppet master who purposelessly pulls the strings on our life however He wants. Ephesians 1:11 says he does all things according to the counsel of His will. And His wise will for your life as a Christian is your good. It is meant to be a comforting thing to know that a good God, even

one who allows suffering, is sovereignly watching over our lives with kind care connected to His covenantal promises in the Gospel.

When the Ephesians elders finally admit in v.14, *“Let the will of the Lord be done,”* they are confessing their submission to God’s sovereign, good will in the life of Paul. It is not an easy thing for us to fully open ourselves up to God’s sovereign will. But there are hard situations in life that require us to have a firm standing when we feel like falling down. What is the basis for your firm footing? Is it that you are working out your good plans or that you are trusting God to work His good plans?

So if you are suffering today, trust that God is sovereignly directing the events of your life toward your good. You may never witness what the good is. But what is that ultimate good He is working toward? Your love and trust in Him alone. He wants you to glory in Him alone and forfeit all other forms of trust. He directs His sovereign will towards this end.

## 2. God’s revealed will commanded in Scripture.

Moving from God’s sovereign will that is often not revealed to us, we come to God’s revealed will commanded in Scripture. God’s sovereign will happens whether we believe in it or not. It is based on God’s omnipotence. God’s commanded will is based on our obedience. Therefore, due to our sinful nature, it does not always happen. In fact, more often than not, it is disobeyed.

God’s revealed will comes to us in the revelation of His Word, the Bible. If you want to know what God’s will for your life is, simply read the Bible. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, *“This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.”* Here we have a very specific instance of what God commands us: holiness, sanctification, sexual purity. This is his will of command. But, oh, so many do not obey.

Then Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, *“Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”* There again is a specific

aspect of his will of command: Give thanks in all circumstances. But many do not do this will of God.

One more example from 1 John 2:17: *“And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever”*. Not all abide forever. Some do. Some don't. The difference? Some do the will of God. Some don't. The will of God, in this sense, does not always happen.

The challenge for us is to immerse ourselves in the Word of God so that we know exactly what He wants from us. It is not clouded; it is not hidden; it is not in code. He has made it clear and explicit. Reading Scripture is like keeping the windows of your home open and clean. It allows more light to shine into your soul to bring conviction of wrongdoing and repentance toward righteousness.

### **3. God's discerned will applied from Scripture.**

The last form of God's will is His discerned will applied from Scripture. This refers to many of those daily or seasonal decisions that are not explicitly answered in Scripture. The Bible does not tell you who to marry, or which car to drive, or whether to own a home, or where you take a vacation, or which brand of orange juice to drink, or a thousand other decisions you make.

Now many of us think that God wants to speak very directly to us in regard to the answers to these questions, especially the bigger ones. We begin looking everywhere for answers: t-shirts, quotes, divine coincidences, feelings within us, conversations with friends, open doors, closed doors, etc. In essence, what we are trying to do is uncover God's sovereign will, which isn't usually revealed to us. Deuteronomy 29:29 says, *“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever.”* There are two types of knowledge we can use as the basis of our decision-making: God's secret will or God's revealed will in the Bible. Searching out God's secret will will require a form

of divination and spiritualizing that leaves us hearing voices behind us and interpreting dreams far more than we should. Am I saying God never speaks this way? No, he clearly does. But it is NOT the primary way we should seek to know His will!

Instead we should be seeking out the application of His revealed will in Scripture. God's Word is meant to be THE filter by which we discern godly decision-making. This is a wisdom from Scripture that we can possess because 1 Cor 2:16 says we have the mind of Christ. Therefore, we can discern God's will as we filter it through the wisdom found in God's Word. If we believe the Bible is amazingly relevant to daily life, then it must have direction for how we make daily decisions!

Romans 12:2 tells us how to discern God's will: *“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”* The key here is a renewed mind that has been illuminated by the Holy Spirit. And we are to discern God's will by testing it against Scripture by way of the vehicle of our renewed minds.

When faced with a decision, our question should be, “What does God's Word say about that? If you are wondering who to marry, God's Word says to marry another believer. It should be someone who encourages your spiritual maturity, someone who prays for you. Guys, find a woman that can be a helpmate and love you and God deeply. Women, find a man who can lead you spiritually, who wants to provide for you and protect you. Here's the thing: Many people might fill this description, and here is where God gives you freedom! He's not going to point His special arrow over the top of the only one right for you! Being led by God in this way gives you freedom, not constraints, because you know you are in line with all God has revealed in Scripture.

Paul's decision to return to Jerusalem falls into this category of God's discerned will applied from Scripture. It doesn't say that God directly spoke to Paul, saying he must return to Jerusalem. All we know is that Paul felt

constrained to go, that the Spirit was leading him that way, even against the desires of his friends who urged him in the Spirit not to go! I don't believe Paul was making this decision purely because of an existential feeling birthed within him. I think this contributed to it, but he wanted this prompting to be rooted in God's wisdom. There were disciples in Jerusalem who needed strengthening. They needed the stories of God's powerful work among the Gentiles to inspire their faith. Paul likely also wanted to bring aid to them to help amidst their persecution. There were many good reasons for Paul to go that aligned with what God would want.

There was a story I read last week about the great 19th century preacher, George Whitefield, who became convinced that his firstborn son would become a preacher just like him. He decided to name him, John, after John the Baptist. After he was born and baptized, he preached a sermon on all the great works he believed God planned to do through His son, in a sense prophesying based off a strong impression he had. Sadly, four months into John's life, he suddenly passed away, leaving George utterly dismayed, confused, and heartbroken.

But with time he realized his error in interpreting his strong feeling as synonymous with God's will. He apologized to his congregation for holding anything else with the same level of certainty as he had in God's Word alone. The lesson here is not that God never guides our thoughts and prompts us in specific ways, but that we cannot be 100% sure he is speaking to us unless we read it in the Scriptures. Our preferred course of action should be to discern God's will through the lens of Scripture. Let God's wisdom reign down upon us from God's Word to help us make good decisions. It doesn't mean they are always right, but they are directed by what we do know, God's revealed Word in the Bible.

## HOW DO WE DO GOD'S WILL?

Once we have discerned God's will according to the Bible, it's imperative that we follow through. James 4:17 says, *"So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin."* If you believe God is prompting you

to speak with your neighbor about the Gospel and you fail to do it, for you it is sin. If you had a sense that God was saying to buy a less expensive car, but you went ahead and bought one almost out of your price range, for you that is more than a bad decision; it is sin. From our passage here in Acts 21, we learn from Paul that we should do God's will quickly, entirely, and joyfully.

### 1. We must do God's will quickly.

Whenever it was that the Apostle Paul felt the urge from the Holy Spirit to return to Jerusalem, Paul did not delay or procrastinate. Instead of going back to Ephesus to see the Ephesian elders again, Paul told them to meet him further south in Miletus back in 20:17. In 21:4, Paul spent just seven days strengthening the disciples. When he crossed the Mediterranean Sea, he spent just one day in Ptolemais, according to v.7. Paul was quick to obey the Lord's will.

Where else does the Bible mention our quick obedience? Psalm 119:32 says, *"I will quickly obey your commandments."* Psalm 119:60 says, *"I hasten and do not delay to keep your commandments."*

We at times can be gun shy in pulling the trigger with obedience. When God tells us what to do, apprehension sets in. We pause and often wait longer than we should. Sometimes the opportunities for doing God's will come and go. We either hop on board or watch the opportunity fly by. Do you remember when you were a kid at the amusement park and you were finally tall enough to go on the big roller coaster? I remember going to Cedar Point in Sandusky, OH when my good friend. We approached the biggest ride in the park, which I was finally tall enough to ride. My friend dragged me into the line. We waited almost two hours to ride it! When it finally came time for me to hop into the seat, I froze! My friend was calling me to sit down, but I just couldn't do it! All I vividly remember is watching the attendants hold up their thumbs, say "clear" and the train take off up the giant first hill.



We also can miss opportunities if we sit for too long. You might ask, “But what if I don’t understand why God is asking me to do that particular thing?” You don’t have to understand something to benefit from it.

I don’t understand how heavy planes fly in the air, but I travel in them. I don’t understand how computers work, but I use them everyday. You don’t have to understand God’s commands to obey them and benefit from them.

Children often ask why they have to obey. And parents often say, “Because I said so.” What parents mean is this: “Today you’re not old enough to understand, but trust me—I know better. And I need you to do this for your own good.” Like a child, sometimes you’re tempted to ask God, “Why do I need to do that?” And like a loving parent, he might want to say, “Because I said so. I know more than you. One day you’ll understand, but today you don’t. And I need you to do it anyway, for your own good.”

Here’s a principle: In the Bible, anytime God gives a stated command without a specific date, he wants you to do it now.

When Emma is preparing dinner, she might tell the kids and I: “Come to the dinner table at 6 p.m.” In that case, she meant we should come to dinner at 6 p.m. But usually she just says, “Come to the dinner table.” That meant we should come immediately. It’s the same thing with God. If he tells you to do something without a specific timeframe, he means you should do it now.

When we delay obedience, we’re questioning God. We’re asking, “God, do you really know what’s best?” Rather than questioning God, we should trust God as a loving Father and obey quickly!

## **2. We must do God’s will entirely.**

Paul’s passion and drive was to fulfill God’s will in his life. This was not haphazard or lackadaisical. In Acts 20:24 we learned that Paul’s aim was to finish his course and the ministry he received from the Lord Jesus. It doesn’t say part of the mission but all of the mission, even if the mission was hard and given to persecution.

This was definitely the case in our text for today. Paul is certain God has willed for him to return to Jerusalem, so what does he do? He goes to Jerusalem! V.15 says that he arrived at his destination.

We as Christians can sometimes be quite selective about what aspects of God's will we are willing to do. We think that if we have done 95% of God's will, that is good enough and we've done very well, surely better than most other people.

I remember the second job I ever had was working at a Sunoco gas station. I worked the front desk and occasionally helped with basic car maintenance, like oil changes, in the garage. On my first day working there, my boss gave me a broom and dust pan and told me to sweep up ALL the cigarette butts left in the parking lot. It seemed like an easy job but as I got to it, there were far more there than I realized! I got to a point where I felt I had gotten enough so I told my boss I was done. He went out with me to look at how I did. As he scoured the parking lot, he quickly found 10 cigarettes left upswept. He proceeded to tell me it was a test to see how faithful of a worker I would be. He didn't want what I thought was a good enough job; he wanted me "all in" while I was going to work there.

Similarly, God doesn't want what you think is enough. He wants you to see the measuring scale accurately: It's what He thinks is enough, which according to His holiness is 100% commitment.

Now if you have a skewed view of the Gospel, giving 100% to God means you don't have any room left for fun in your life. This is exactly what most immature Christians think: Giving it all to God means giving away so much of what I love. This is the same lie Adam and Eve fell for in the garden: If I give full obedience to God, then I'm missing out on something fun and special over there. Yet God gave them a warning sign not to cross that boundary because He knew it would cost them.

God doesn't give us boundary markers to keep us from fun; He gives us boundary markers to keep us from evil, and suffering, and despair, and

even death! When you fail to give up something self-gratifying for the sake of Jesus, you are failing to see that what you are clinging to is actually life-taking, not life-giving. Jeremiah 2:13 says, *“For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the foundation of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.”* In other words, not embracing all of God’s will is a partial rejection of Jesus as the fountain of living waters and an invitation for the world to attempt being for me a source of living waters, which it always fails to be. Clinging to anything worldly will always leave us spiritually dry, devoid of the healing and satisfying waters of Jesus Christ.

So what is your 5% that is keeping you from God’s full enjoyment and blessing in your life? 1 John 5:3 says *Jesus’ commands are not burdensome*. In fact, His burden is light and His way leads to rest for our souls. Today is the day of salvation, the day for you to release your fist and surrender entirely to God’s will.

### 3. We must do God’s will joyfully. (v.13)

But lastly, we must learn to do God’s will joyfully. In v.12 of our text, we see Paul’s friends and the Ephesian elders were urging him to not go to Jerusalem. But in the next verse Paul answered, *“What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”* When the people were adamantly persuading Paul not to obey God’s will, it says that it was an attempt to break Paul’s heart. This means that before their appeal, Paul’s heart was full and complete in doing God’s will. In other words, Paul’s heart was full of joy in doing God’s will.

1 Thessalonians 5:16 says, *“Rejoice always,”* which means we should be joyful in all the work God has for us to do. Psalms 119:14 says, *“In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches.”* God wants there to be a joyful excitement in fulfilling His will.

Guys, I'm sure you can think of several occasions you've gone along with something your wife really wanted to do but you didn't want to do in the slightest. This could be shopping for new clothes, joining her at that new tea room in town for lunch, or spending the weekend at your in-laws place. Guys, you know your reaction to her idea is critically important. Will you joyfully go along with her idea or will you express a begrudging attitude of discontent? I'm sure you remember times where you chose the latter and even though you went along with your wife and did everything she wanted to do, she knew your heart wasn't in it and you didn't want to be there. As a result, she was quite displeased and your relationship didn't advance at all.

The same situation can be experienced in our relationship with God. There will be things He calls us to do that we turn a sour face toward. And even though we go ahead and do it anyway, God's not pleased. God's not honored because our heart wasn't in it. We like to think the performance of the duty is enough, but God wants our duty to be accompanied by delight.

Husbands, imagine you got your wife flowers and jewelry for her birthday. When she comes to thank you with a big smile, you should smile back and say, "You're welcome; it's my joy to bless you in this way!" But what if instead you replied with a straight face, "Well, I had to; it *is* your birthday"? Her heart would immediately sink and she'd probably want you to return the jewelry and she'd throw the flowers in the trash! Why? ***Because all healthy relationships need both duty and delight.***

Yes, God wants your duty and obedience. And yes, there are times when our heart is not in it but we still do it because it's the right thing to do. But there is also a battle for delight in our duty that's worth fighting for! Paul joyfully moved towards Jerusalem and I think God smiled with a full heart because of it. Similarly, God smiles with a full heart toward you when he sees your joyful submission to His will.

## **WHAT IF WE FAIL GOD'S WILL?**

To conclude today, it's important for us to consider one final, brief question: What if we fail God's will? We all know this happens everyday, and after a message loaded with exhortations to fulfill God's will more, what do we do later today and tomorrow when we fail to fulfill it? We can look at Paul's life and honestly be disappointed by our own lack of spiritual commitment. But here's something I think Paul considered and we can consider as well.

In Acts 21, Paul set his face toward Jerusalem, knowing that persecution awaited him. It was God's will for him to go. In Luke 9:51 it literally says *Jesus set His face toward Jerusalem*, knowing that persecution awaited him. Yet it was His Father's will for Him to go. Now the main difference between Paul and Jesus is that Jesus went to Jerusalem, fulfilling the Father's will perfectly. Paul I'm sure did well, but definitely had his sinful mishaps along the way. When Jesus arrived, he was persecuted and went to the cross and died a sinner's death. But on the third day He rose again, victorious over all sin and death!

When Paul was walking toward Jerusalem and had his own bouts with sin, I think he was remembering the person of Jesus who walked the same road as Him and yet never sinned. Because of this, each of Paul's missteps is able to be covered entirely in God's grace. He can confidently move forward in obedience knowing that someone went before Him in perfect obedience to cover all his shortcomings.

The same is true for you, brothers and sisters. In your pursuit of obedience, One has already gone before you to cover all your sin and all your missteps. *If you fail God's will, you can know that Jesus has already fulfilled God's will for you.* Therefore, you can receive His grace and keep trudging along in pursuit of Him. Be encouraged today! Press on to know the will of the Lord and to fulfill it with all your heart!

## **CLOSING PRAYER**