

Acts 16:6-10 (1984 NIV)
Lord, What Do You Want Me To Do?

VV. 6-10

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. 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. ⁹ 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.

Introduction

Pastor John Phongshar is the Principal of the Bible school in Yangon where I teach as an itinerant teacher. He's also a church planter and has established a church in downtown Yangon—the Adonai City Church. Whenever I am in Yangon, he would ask me to preach and minister in his church on Sunday.

One time, he told me an interesting story. The father of a member of his church passed away. Pastor Phongshar had shared the Gospel with him and led him to the Lord while he was still alive.

At the funeral service, many family members, relatives, neighbours, friends and even strangers were there to pay their last respect to the deceased and support the bereaved family.

While Pastor Phongshar was sharing a message of comfort, a man who's a stranger to the family suddenly went into trance. And he said, "I am the spirit of the dead man. I had never believed in Jesus Christ when I was alive. This preacher is a liar by telling you that I had believed in Jesus."

Immediately, there was a great commotion, and many cast their accusing looks at Pastor Phongshar as if saying, “What! How dare you!”

As Pastor Phongshar was figuring out how best to handle the situation, the son of the deceased countered the stranger, “You claim to be the spirit of my father. Now, tell me—what’s the name of my father’s father?”

Almost immediately, the stranger stopped his trance-like gyrations and looked a little stunned. Then he said repeatedly, “I don’t know. I don’t remember. I don’t know. I don’t remember ...”

The son shot back, “What! You don’t know and you don’t remember the name of your own father? What kind of son are you? You are not the spirit of my father; you are a lying spirit!”

Another great commotion was aroused, but now all the accusing looks were on the stranger. He was not beaten up. Instead, the people carried and threw him out of the house with him still in his supposedly trance-like state.

Pastor Phongshar ended his story by saying this to me, “In our society, there are many spirits who claim to be the voice of God. We really need to be discerning as to whether God is really calling and speaking to us.”

Christians all over the world need such discernment as well, especially when options, choices and opportunities abound with many voices claiming authority to direct and lead us. God calls us to obey. Yet He also gives us the free will to choose how we would respond to His call. This implies that God’s people everywhere need discernment to know God’s call so as to obey Him accordingly.

When Saul was on the road to Damascus, he was struck down by a blinding light and heard the voice of the Lord. He only asked two questions. He said, “Who are you Lord?” and the answer came

back, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” Then he asked a second question, “Lord, what do you want me to do?”

That question rings across the ages in different variations.

- “Should I get married or stay single? Lord, what do you want me to do?”
- “Lord, I’ve got a house. Should I keep this house or should I buy another house?”
- You’ve a job in Singapore, and you get an offer from a mega MNC to take up a well-paid position overseas. You’re not sure what to do. You ask, “Lord, should I stay with my family in Singapore, or should I uproot my family with me and take this big break overseas? What do you want me to do?”
- You are in ministry. You get a call from a bigger church than your present one. The question on your mind is, “Lord what do you want me to do? Should I make the move?”

Lord, what do you want me to do? Perhaps, some of us are at this time trying to seek an answer from God to that question. This can be a struggle because it is not making a choice between a clearly good thing and a clearly bad thing. Very often, it is making a choice between two equally good things—and that’s why it is a struggle.

To do what the Lord wants us to, we first must have a heart that is willing to be God-guided. People who are willing to be God-guided will always receive guidance from the Lord. Why is that? Because God always speaks loud and clear enough for a willing heart to obey.

Acts 16:6-10 is the story of Paul, Silas and Timothy at the beginning of their second missionary journey. They had joined forces to visit the churches, preach the Word, and strengthen the saints. It was Paul’s desire to go west and preach the Gospel in the province of Asia. But we’re told that the Holy Spirit wouldn’t let them go west so they went north instead, intending eventually to go northeast into Bithynia. But the Spirit of Jesus stopped them. So they went due west across the top of Asia to the sea port town of Troas, which is where Paul received a vision of the man from Macedonia. From Troas, they crossed the Aegean Sea and began

preaching in Macedonia. God called and they chose to follow what the Lord had wanted them to do.

How does the Lord guide His people whose hearts are willing to be God-guided? As we seek the Lord in our prayer and in His Word, how does His guidance come through to us? Our text reveals four answers to this question.

I. God's guidance comes through obedience in the ordinary (v. 6).

Verse 6 tells us that “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.” Then they tried to go to Bithynia but they couldn't go there. So they come to Troas where Paul has the vision. On the very next day they get ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called them to preach the gospel there.

Paul was on a mission from God to preach the gospel. That's why he made one journey after another. That's why he kept moving from one province to another. That's what his team was about. Their destination was to go places where they could preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul knew what he was going to do. The only thing that wasn't clear was exactly where he was going to do it. Was it going to be in Asia or Mysia or Bithynia or any of many other possibilities? The guidance he needed concerned exactly where to preach, not whether to preach or not. In Paul's mind, he was to continue preaching wherever he found himself.

A fact of life is this—99% of life is ordinary. It's just the same cycle day after day. You just get up, do what you've got to do; when you come home, you do what you've got to do at home. The next morning, you get up and repeat the routine again. That's very ordinary.

My point is: You begin to discover the will of God when you do what you already know to be the will of God in your present situation. The way you discover God's will for the future is to do what you know to be the will of God right now. There are people who want to wait and try to live only for those mountain-top

experiences when the clouds part away, and God just seems so real and close to them.

Perhaps we too wish for these experiences every day. When we say, “Lord, show me your will today,” what we mean is this—“Lord, give me some special feelings and visions today.” And God says, “I have already shown you my will. Now, just get up and do it!”

- What is God’s will for a student? God’s will for a student is do your best in your studies (never mind if you don’t come out as the best).
- What is God’s will for a banker? Take care of the money, don’t lose it!
- What is God’s will for a teacher? Do your lesson plans and come to class ready to teach.
- What is God’s will for a salesman? Know your product, make your contacts, and go see them.

Yes, the Lord wants us to be passionate in our everyday work, but never to be possessed by our everyday work—“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might” (Ecclesiastes 9:10). And as we go about faithfully doing the ordinary things, we are to live and speak for Jesus as His witnesses in where we are.

Perhaps there are many people who want to live on the mountain top of life all the time. Brothers and sisters, that’s not where you often discover God’s will. You discover God’s will often in the mundane of every day. Why should God show you His will for the future if you are unwilling to do what you know to be the will of God in the present?

When we are willing to obey what we know to be the will of God in the ordinary, God is free to show us the next step. We are always looking to the future, but God says, “Do what you know to be my will right now, and in the doing of my will in the ordinary, I will show you my will for the future.”

God’s guidance comes through obedience in the ordinary. Our response: *We are to be faithful to the Lord now, even in doing the ordinary things.*

There's a second thing we learn about how the Lord guides His people whose hearts are willing to be God-guided.

II. God's guidance comes through unexpected changes in circumstances (vv. 6-7).

So Paul and his team wanted to go west into Asia but the Holy Spirit prevented them. Question: How did the Holy Spirit do that? Answer: I don't know.

We just don't know for sure how it happened. But somehow they knew they were not to go west. So instead they go north toward Bithynia. Why? They intended to preach the gospel there. The same purpose was now redirected through an unexpected change in circumstance. But as they get up north and try to enter Bithynia, "the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to". Again, the Bible doesn't explain how this happened. Somehow they knew the Spirit of Jesus was saying "no". So they headed west preaching the gospel and ended up in a place called Troas.

Now what was going on here? God was revealing His will through unexpected changes in circumstances. Have you ever had that happen to you?

- You have your life all planned out. You are going confidently this way. Then the boss calls you in and says, "We're downsizing. We are changing our priorities. You don't fit our profile here."
- A letter from your dream programme in university comes that says, "You have excellent grades but unfortunately our incoming intake is full."
- A dreadful disease strikes you and all your plans to work towards a grand retirement grind to an abrupt halt.

An unexpected change in circumstance, and when that happens, we may think God has made a mistake. But Proverbs 16:9 reminds us, "In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps." What does that mean? It means you make your plans but God determines which way you're going to go. You think you are calling your own shots, but the Bible says you make your plans but God determines you are going to go that way because He's

going to block off the road this way. So even though you want to go this way, there's nothing this way. You've got to go that way—God's way!

How did Paul decide to go north in the first place? When west was cut off he had to go north. What made him decide to go west at the end? When the north was cut off that was all that was left, so he went west and preached the gospel. That's what I mean by unexpected changes in circumstances. Sometimes God's will is seen most clearly through unexpected changes in circumstances.

Paul and his co-workers were open to be redirected in their itinerary. Their openness teaches us to guard against certain pitfalls related to divine guidance:

- *Pitfall 1: When we seek affirmation more than we seek direction.* This means all we want is for God to rubber-stamp our decisions or plans. We then hear what we want to hear and see what we want to see.
- *Pitfall 2: When we mistake man's needs for God's will.* The needs of the world are unending and can pull us in every direction. But our push and pull must come more from the Lord than from anyone else. Assess human needs in the light of our divine call before we rush to meet them.
- *Pitfall 3: When we fear God's silence.* The Spirit of God told Paul and his co-workers to turn away from going west and head towards north instead. The instruction was clear but the reason for this change was never told to them. In that sense, God was silent. Why? I believe often times, such silence from God is used to test our conviction, strengthen our faith, try our obedience, reveal our need for God, and deepen our walk with God.

Guidance comes through unexpected changes in circumstances. Our response: *We are to be open to let God change our course and plan in order to do what He wants of us.*

There's a third thing we learn about how the Lord guides His people whose hearts are willing to be God-guided.

III. God's guidance may come through the supernatural (vv. 8-9).

When Paul and his team got to Troas, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Paul was in Troas which was in Asia, but Macedonia was in Greece—the continent of Europe. In between is the Aegean Sea. What is the significance of this? If Paul goes to Macedonia, he's taking the gospel from one continent to another continent. That's a major move of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Why did he get such a compelling vision? If I'm reading this right, I think Paul's heart was so heavy for the people of Asia that he didn't want to go to Macedonia, or never had Macedonia in mind all this while. I think he wanted to get the gospel strongly rooted in Asia and maybe later go over to some other places, like Macedonia. But God said, "No! I don't want you here anymore, I want you in Macedonia." So He used the vision to get Paul to go where he wouldn't have thought of going in the first place.

I believe that there are times when God does speak supernaturally through dreams, visions and supernatural signs. But my caution is this: Don't ever make a major decision in your life solely on the basis of a supernatural experience you think you've had! Test it! Give it the test of time, of Scripture, of counsel and further confirmation. Beware of your own deceitful heart and beware of deceiving spirits as well.

But of course, God can do the supernatural! That's what He did here. It's a vision, but the vision is in line with what Paul has been doing. It's in line with his call to be a preacher and it's in line with the Great Commission call to take the gospel to the whole world. So here is a vision that was completely compatible with the Word of God and His call upon Paul's life.

Yes, God's guidance may come through supernatural events. But the Bible teaches us to live more by faith and less by sight. We don't dictate to God when and how He should do a miracle. He is more than able to do that on His own terms.

Our response: *We are to be willing to believe in God's supernatural acts, yet not to be wilful to demand that God must only do the supernatural.*

There's a fourth thing we learn about how the Lord guides His people whose hearts are willing to be God-guided.

IV. God's guidance comes through the work of wise counsel and common sense (v. 10).

After Paul had seen the vision, he got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called him to preach the gospel there. Note the word "concluding". It means to take all the facts and to arrive at a common-sense conclusion. It means to discuss, to debate the alternatives, to figure out the best way to go, and then come to a conclusion. It's a word that implies the use of the mental processes.

Verse 10 tells us that Paul, Silas and Timothy talked it over, debated it, they talked about where they had come from, they talked about where they couldn't go, they talked about the open door, they talked about their abilities, they talked about the man from Macedonia in the vision. When they put it all together they concluded—using good common sense in the process—that God wanted them to go to Macedonia. Because they were so committed to doing God's will, they weren't blown away by a vision. They just fit it in the big picture of their ongoing ministry in the Lord and said, "OK, now here's where we go." That's how God's guidance comes—through wise counsel and plain common sense.

Note that once they figured out God's will, they immediately did it. Luke the author of Acts wrote, "We got ready at once." Once you have determined the will of God, what's the next step? It's the Nike step—JUST DO IT! Once you've figured it out, don't sit around and talk anymore! Get up and do it! End your meetings! Obey the Lord's mandate! Fulfil your mission!

When Paul and his co-workers were in Macedonia, the Lord used them to bring to faith in Jesus Christ the first converts on European soil recorded in the Bible—a woman named Lydia and her

household in the city of Philippi. But when they went to Macedonia, did Paul and his co-workers know in advance who was going to be there to meet them or what the outcome of the trip would be? No! Why? Because when God shows us His will, He doesn't show us the full picture. What does He show us? The next step! How is the will of God revealed to us? Step by step by step ... as we obey him one step at a time.

Guidance comes through the work of wise counsel and common sense. Once done, what's next? Our response: *We must come to a point where we stop discussing and start doing if we are to do what the Lord wants of us.*

Conclusion

A cousin of mine, aged 56, passed away recently and suddenly (May 2014). One morning, he sat down to take his breakfast. Then he suddenly collapsed onto the floor. That was the last of him. He was a non-Christian and single.

I visited the wake with my family. At the table I talked with one of his brothers. He said that he heard I was no longer full-time in church, but now doing assignments in the mission field. And then he added, "When we were in the same school, I remember you had different aspirations. I never imagine that you will end up doing what you are doing now."

I replied, "Well, I myself never have imagined that too at that time. Christianity to me then was something to mock at and not to believe in. I was such a pain in the neck to so many of my Christian classmates."

Indeed, the Lord was dealing with me with so much grace as He moved me from paganism to faith in Him and to where I am now. Many years ago (in 1984), the Lord tugged my heart and I sensed His call to prepare myself for vocational Christian ministry. I wish I can tell you that I responded immediately, "Lord, here I am. Send me!" I did not respond like that. In fact, I struggled to let go and let God. I reasoned, "I am already actively serving God in church as a lay person, witnessing regularly from door to door in the neighbourhood,

and passionately reaching out to others in the workplace. So I am already fully committed to God's work."

You may say that I sensed His "higher calling" as I served and obeyed Him in the ordinary affairs of church life and work life.

But the more I tried to rationalize, the more restless I became in spirit. One day, I decided to test this leading by bringing the matter up with my mother. At that time I was already well settled in my work, still single, my father had passed away, and my mother was still an unbeliever. I remember praying this, "Lord, I am going to bring up this matter of vocational Christian ministry with my mother again. She had objected to it a few times before. But if this is your calling for me, move away this mountain (i.e. my mother's objection) and clear the way for me to obey your call."

During dinner that evening, I paused and said, "Mother, there's something I want to talk with you again ..." And I went on to share with her the burden in my heart. After I had finished, I waited for her response.

She looked at me and asked me one question, "You are my only child. Are you allowed to marry when you are doing this kind of work?"

I replied, "Of course! I am allowed to have children as well."

With a deep sigh (which I trust was one of relief and not heaviness), she said, "Well, if this is what you want to do with your life, go ahead. But do it well so that you will have no regrets later on."

God had moved away this huge mountain before me! I had no more excuses but to obey!

A supernatural change of heart that resulted in an unexpected change of circumstance!

In the coming days, I sought counsel from godly people about my calling and where to be equipped (overseas or local). Eventually, I decided on a local seminary as I wanted to keep my mother company as much as I could.

My church fully endorsed my seminary application and also committed to support me financially. I then drew out a large part of my savings, brought my mother to the bank and opened a new account in her name, and transferred the money I had drawn out into her account. Then I said to her, "All the money in this account is for you. Use it whenever you have needs. Don't worry about me. The church is helping me."

With that, I turned my back on the working world, and began my ministry journey in teaching and training God's people in God's Word in seminaries, in churches, and now in the mission field.

Yes, I sought advice from others and I did my sums.

After that, I came to a point where I stopped discussing (and calculating) and started doing so that I could do what the Lord wanted of me.

I am now enjoying the Lord's season for me. The Lord is good ... all the time!

God has promised to be our guide. We can depend on that. Our trust is in the unfailing faithfulness of our great God. He has said He will be our guide even to the end. Therefore, brothers and sisters, I say this to you as I conclude: "If you are truly willing to do God's will, He will truly guide you because you honestly want to be guided by Him."

And God guides you by his Spirit one step at a time. *When you obey the Holy Spirit one step at a time, you will have walked in step with God your whole life time.*

The gospel of Jesus Christ could move forward in Acts because those who served Him were willing to be God-guided in their heart.

In the same way, our faith life in Jesus Christ can move forward if we are willing to be so God-guided as well.

I pray that you will have a blessed journey walking in step with the Guiding God in your days ahead. Amen!