**Pastor Tim’s Message Note from 7-11-2021
When God Says No**

Friends, as we all know, we live in a broken and fallen world. And not everything that happens in this world is God’s will. It is not His will that any should perish, but there are many that do. It is not His will that people are abused and mistreated, but many are.

God’s will does not always happen largely because God gives people free will. We are free agents that can choose to follow Christ and the way of God or choose to reject Christ. Because God is a God of love, He chose to give people free will.

And we have all failed to follow God perfectly. That is why Jesus came to save humanity. God knew that we would all need His to save us from our sins. From our choosing to disobey Him and His way for us.

But despite this truth, there are many times that we are earnestly seeking to follow Christ and we would pray for certain outcomes to take place --- that this person would fall in love with us, for us to get this job, for us to perform as a certain level in a sport and many other similar prayers, for this person to physically recover, or many of similar prayers – but that outcome does not happen. What are we to make of this?

I am reminded of that famous song by Garth Brooks called *Unanswered Prayers*. Perhaps you’ve heard of it. In the song he and his wife are attending a high school football game and he runs into his old girlfriend. And he remembers that years earlier he had earnestly prayed that they would end up together.

But now, looking back, he thanks God for not answering that prayer. And by the end of the song, he is thanking God that God said no to that prayer and he ended up with his wife instead of his high school flame.

It is not explicitly a Christian song. God is far more than “the man upstairs,” as he calls him and earnest prayer never actually goes unanswered. But it is true that sometimes his answer is not as we want it to be.

Today’s text from the Book of Acts again highlights supernatural actions of God and some of these actions of God remind me of when God says no.

So as we prepare to turn again to God’s Word, I just want to quickly set the stage for our passage. Paul is in the midst of his second missionary journey. The Jerusalem Council had recently taken place and Paul was eager to share the news that the Holy Spirit made it clear to this council of Christian leaders that Gentiles did not need to convert to become Jews before becoming Christians. I am certain that the story of Peter & Cornielius that we looked at last week would have been a huge piece of evidence that helped the council discern this decision.

And Paul was eager to take the gospel to the major cities. The thought was that if the gospel was proclaimed in the cities, it would make its way to the more rural places as well, as lots of people would come to visit the cities and would take the message back to the smaller towns.

And on this missionary trip, Paul would have certainly had his eyes fixed on traveling to the most prominent city of the region, Ephesus. But God had a different plan. God says no to Paul’s plan, to Paul’s desire, to Paul’s will.

The passage is found in Acts 16:6-10

**6Paul 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. 7When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. 8So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. 9During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” 10After 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.**

Friends, when I was deciding to offer this sermon series on supernatural encounters in the Book of Acts, this was one of the first passages that I knew we needed to take a closer look at.

Paul is traveling with his small group of fellow believers and we are told that the Holy Spirit kept them from preaching the word in the province of Asia. Likely Paul intended to enter into that Roman province and then make his way to Ephesus, for again, Ephesus was the biggest and more influential city in the province of Asia. The Roman Empire governed by setting up various provinces. They were kind of like different states.

It would be like how New York or Philadelphia would be key places to preach and teach about Jesus if you happen to be in New York State or Pennsylvania.

In that part of the world, one could say, “all roads lead to Ephesus.”

In fact, there actually are signs that still today show how far some of the cities were from Ephesus, just as we might see signs in America to major cities.

But God made it clear to Paul and his companions that He was saying no to that plan. It didn’t make sense to them, I’m sure. We are not told how the Lord made it clear to them, whether it was through a dream or a vision that one of them experienced or perhaps it was just a strong check in their spirit that they were not to go in that direction. But God was saying “no” to entering the province of Asia and thus ‘no’ to Ephesus as well.

And so Paul and his companions traveled onward and did not take the road towards Ephesus.

But it doesn’t end there. There is actually a second no as well. First, the Holy Spirit prevents them from entering the province of Asia. Then, we read that the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to enter Bithynia, which was another Roman province.

So it wasn’t just one no from the Lord, but two. I trust that Paul and his companions were thoroughly confused at this point.

And perhaps this offers us a measure of comfort when we feel thoroughly confused in discerning God’s will at times. Have you ever felt that way in your life?

After all of this, the Lord does yet another supernatural thing. During the night, Paul has a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him to come and help them.”

At this time, people from different places often wore distinct clothing, whereas today we might all wear jeans. Likely in this vision, the clothing that this man was wearing would have told Paul where God was calling them to go.

But after this vision, it was clear that God had said “no” the two other times in order for them to best follow His will.

Before we consider the significance of this text for our lives today, I would like to share this about Paul’s time in Macedonia. It appears that it was during this time that he meets Luke. Luke would eventually become a loyal Christian brother to Paul and a fellow traveling companion with Paul for some of his journey ahead.

Might God have said no to Paul in order to bring Paul & Luke in fellowship with one another? Might God’s no’s to Paul have eventually resulted in us now having both the Gospel of Luke as well as the Book of Acts itself, which Luke would later right? It is possible.

The bottom line is that we do not know fully why God said no to Paul. But we do know that God in His sovereignty knew what was best. And sometimes God says no to earnest prayers and longings to follow His will.

Eventually, God would lead Paul to Ephesus and he would have some very powerful ministry. In fact, that would later minister for over two years in the city of Ephesus. But at that point, the timing wasn’t right.

I would like to share a brief story with you about my journey to attend seminary. A few years before I actually went to seminary, my pastor at the time took me to the seminary he attended and showed me around. But I just didn’t feel that the Lord was calling me to pursue enrolling there. Years went by and eventually the Lord made it clear that He was calling me to go back to school. This time, a different pastor shared with me about the school he graduated from, which I haven’t even heard of before. I felt led to check it out and had a very good experience and just a couple of months later I was taking classes.

The school that I entered was a blessing to my faith and my love and knowledge of God’s Word. And I have heard many not very good things about the school that I had originally looked at. Today I continue to thank God for His “no” to that first school.

So today, I want to encourage you. Even as we seek to sincerely follow Jesus, none of us, including Paul the Apostle, fully understand God’s will at all times.

And sometimes God says “no” to our sincere prayers, not because He doesn’t care. He does care a great deal. For He is a God of perfect love.

And we can trust in Him. Not just when everything makes sense, but more importantly, when things don’t make sense.

For VBS we will be emphasizing this year, at all times, we can trust in our Triune God, because no matter the circumstances, He is good and He is for us, and He loves us more than any of us can comprehend.

Let us pray…

Resources:

[Bithynia - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bithynia)

BibleGateway.com

English Bible: Acts – Dr. H. Douglas Buckwalter – Fall 2020