

HIS WORK – HIS WAY

⁵ I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, ⁶ and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go. ⁷ For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. ⁸ But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, ⁹ for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. ¹⁰ When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am. ¹¹ So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers. ¹² Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity.

Introduction

1. All of God's Word is profitable to us for life and godliness. Sometimes we are tempted to quickly pass over personal information at the end of the NT letters, assuming that we have already mined the richness of the communication. There is nothing really of value remaining for us to consider. So we skip quickly over it.
2. However, as we read these last few passages in this final chapter, we can gain practical insights regarding how we are to live and do the work of God in a way that pleases Him. And that is valuable insight to gain.
3. There is an attitude among some evangelical Christians that God will tell us what to do and where to go. We just need to ask Him and then listen for His direction. There is no real need to study or discern or decide. More often than not, the way we know God's direction for us is not that simple, nor is it that certain.
4. The Bible often speaks of wisdom. It is something we are to ask for and it is something that God has promised to provide. He gives us wisdom so that we will discern His will and choose His way. From our perspective, it would be a lot easier if He just told us in an audible voice what He wanted us to do. There would be no confusion as to what He wanted. There would be no need to discern or decide. We wouldn't really need wisdom. The only decision to make would be to obey or not. But that is not the normative way God works.
5. If you follow this passage with me, I think you will see a more clear and accurate picture unfold as to how we are called upon to discern God's will and to do it in His

way. In this paragraph we are faced with **three** significant **issues** that will help us understand the way in which God directs us and provides for us as we learn to walk by faith. Most of us would rather see where we are going than to try to navigate in the darkness. In a strange sort of way, walking by faith is a little bit like walking in the darkness with a very small lamp that allows us only to see a couple of feet in front of us. We have a general idea where we are going, and a general idea of how to get there, but we have to learn to walk carefully as we go if we expect to get to our destination without detours or injury. So let's get started with consideration of what I am calling "intensions and permissions."

I. INTENSIONS AND PERMISSIONS (5-7) - ⁵ I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, ⁶ and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go. ⁷ For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.

A. It is right to plan – I know of a couple of people who spend their whole life waiting for God to tell them what to do at the moment including when to get up in the morning and what to wear. They are expecting an answer and if they do not "hear it" they will stay in bed! We must first realize that God has already given us an entire book of His expectations and general commands concerning how we are to live. Those require no further revelation or voice or sign. We are called upon to obey, pure and simple. Clearly in other matters God expects us to make intelligent, wise decisions based on those general principles He has included in His Word. These surely include...

1. The direction to take... Paul was in Ephesus (v. 8) when he penned this epistle.

Based on what Paul was hoping to accomplish, including a visit to the Corinthians, he already had a mind as to the direction he intended to take. He would remain in Ephesus through Pentecost and then He planned to spend the summer evangelizing in Macedonia, eventually making his way to Corinth. He could have decided to board a boat and travel due west from Ephesus to Corinth – a journey of 250 miles or so over water. Instead, presumably he planned to travel north nearly 300 miles, then west 150 miles and then 200 miles south. That would provide an opportunity to visit other churches like Berea and Thessalonica and Philippi along the way. As he considered what he wanted to do, this was his intension concerning direction. What about how long he might stay?

2. The duration to remain... The duration of his visit was less certain than the intension of the visit. His visit could have been relatively brief or it could last through the winter. But it would be more than an overnight stop on his way to some other destination – though he did plan to visit elsewhere, particularly to deliver the offering to the church in Judea, and he was counting on the Corinthians to “help me on my journey.” It is always right to plan ahead. We should plan what we believe would be the appropriate response to accomplishing the will of God for us. However, when we plan...
 - B. It is right to include “God alterations” – Paul uses two words that will help us here.
 1. “Hope” – Hope here implies “expectations.” Paul was intending and planning to spend some quality times with his friends in Corinth, but that hope included awareness that God may have other plans and His plans override our plans. Do you remember this counsel from James? **¹³ Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”— ¹⁴ yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”** Plan, yes, but always be aware that God may redirect! Paul also includes the word...
 2. “Permits...” Jesus told this story: ***“The land of a rich man produced plentifully, ¹⁷ and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ ¹⁸ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’ ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’*** We are wise if we live our lives with the awareness that God can alter our plans at any moment. He is sovereign. He can do whatever He wants. So any planning I do must be set with that in mind. We should respond like this: “To the best of my understanding this is what we should do – but God may have other plans for us and we must willingly submit to His sovereign purposes because He always does what is right and best!” God does not always permit us to do what we desire. When our plans do not work out as we expected, our response might be frustration or disappointment or even anger. But when we realize God's plan and

purpose and His right to control, if He prohibits us, we will see it as a good thing! So the bottom line is plan. Plan well. But always be prepared that God may have other plans for you. Accept those as His will and continue to trust Him! By the way, God did not allow Paul to proceed with his plan. In fact Paul went from Plan A to Plan B (2 Corinthians 1:15) and eventually settled for Plan C, which turned out to be a quick and painful trip to Corinth, a return to Ephesus, then to Troas and from there to Macedonia and finally to Judea! It is often easier to look back and see how God led us than to discern His leading in the midst of changing circumstances! But He does lead us! What other factors were involved in Paul's decision-making process? He gave consideration to...

II. OPPORTUNITIES AND ADVERSARIES (8-9) - ⁸ But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, ⁹ for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

A. Open doors

1. You may have heard or spoken yourself about open doors. Paul had remained in Ephesus longer than in any other city (about 3 years). He did not stay there because it was comfortable or a nice place to settle down and relax. He stayed there because he saw in Ephesus opportunities to continue to extend the work of God. God seemed to keep the opportunities open so that Paul could be effective.
2. An open door is just that – it is an opportunity to consider. Paul took some and bypassed others. Sometimes God seems to slam doors and there appears to be no way around. The opportunity is closed for the time being. Sometimes there are multiple doors opened at the same time and only one can be taken. Paul could have gone any number of places to preach the Word. There were other doors opened and no doubt there were many invitations to come, but he chose Ephesus as one of those open doors.
3. Just because a door is open does not mean that it is all smooth sailing! There are often...

B. Obstacles

1. These obstacles could be any number of issues. Sometimes the obstacle can be financial. The door seems to be open but the funds are low or non-existent. Does that mean the door is closed? Not necessarily. It means that this is an obstacle to

overcome. The obstacles might include health issues or family pressure or sudden crisis. In Paul's case the obstacles were "many adversaries."

2. Being in a tough situation does not mean that we are facing a closed door. The enemies of the cross are everywhere. Any work for God includes adversaries. Before I started Monday morning to write this sermon I read the little book *Unmarked Memories*, written by Lolly Erdel's parents, Frank and Marie Drown. Frank was a personal friend of the five missionaries who were martyred in the 1950's in the jungles of Ecuador. He was the head of the search party and was among those who ultimately found their bodies and had the task of burying them in a common grave deep in the jungle, and then returning to tell the young widows the fate of their husbands. The door was open for ministry but the adversaries were many – in this case savages with spears. Later at least two of the widows would return and win many of these Indians to the Lord Jesus. Perhaps more than 1000 new missionaries signed up due to the martyrdom of these five men. Obstacles are God's way of testing faith and magnifying His name and showing the worth of following Jesus and accomplishing His purposes. Obstacles come in all kinds of forms even just inside open doors of opportunity! I appreciated this quotation: **We are all faced with a series of great opportunities brilliantly disguised as unsolvable problems.** But God can make a way, sometimes over, sometimes through or sometimes around such obstacles and often the way past the obstacle involves the work of His people. That is what Paul speaks of in verses 10-12 when he addresses...

III. PROTECTION AND PROVISION THROUGH DECISION (10-12) - ¹⁰When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am. ¹¹So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers. ¹²Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity.

A. God's protection through His people (He through believers provides...)

1. Personal emotional protection ("**put him at ease**"). Just because people are "doing the work of the Lord" does not mean that they are fully together, self-sufficient and confident. Sometimes God chooses basket cases to do His work! That is where God's people can help each other! "**Put him at ease.**" Paul does not tell the

Corinthians how to do that, but he calls upon them to try. At least when he is among the Corinthians he should feel a certain ease; that he was in a place of safety and protection. The Church at Corinth was not very happy with Paul and Timothy, as Paul's companion might bear the brunt of their frustration. Paul tried to head that off before it happened. (God, through His people, also provides...)

2. Personal defense protection ("**let no one despise him**") – Timothy was relatively young and he was an outsider. He was likely timid and not a little nervous. There would be some who would challenge his ability or his demeanor or his character and he was pretty fragile to handle those kinds of challenges. So Paul calls upon the Corinthians to gather around him and not allow any among them to despise him.

B. God's provision through God's people (This protection comes in the form of...)

1. Practical help – When Timothy arrived it would be for a brief visit and then he would need to be on his way. It cost something to travel and the only way these people could get from one destination to another was the support of the host church. That is where the Corinthians could help. They needed to provide the travel money.
2. Peaceful help – The word "peace" kind of sneaks up on us in the text: "**Help him on his way in peace...**" That suggests not only helping with the need but also doing it in such a way that Timothy would find joy and blessing in the gift! That is the mark of a generous heart! Practical help from a stingy heart is no blessing.

C. God's direction through decision - **Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity.** Part of discerning God's direction is...

1. Based on desires – Paul wanted Apollos to go to Corinth. I can only imagine what it looked and sounded like when Paul "**strongly urged**" someone to do anything! But Apollos said, "No, not now." "**It was not at all his will to come now...**" Paul does not tell us, if he even knew, why Apollos had chosen not to go at that time. I will speculate. The Corinthians had made Apollos a rival to Paul in Corinth. We learned something about that in chapter 1. So this strong request shows the magnanimity of Paul to desire the return of Apollos. It also demonstrates the modest delicacy of Apollos to decline the request. Perhaps it does not really matter. With right motives and a desire to please the Lord, if we just don't believe something to be the right

decision now, for whatever reason, so be it. If Apollos was making a mistake, God was and is able to providentially redirect! It is okay to follow our desires if our desires are in line with His. It is not wrong counsel to say, “Do all you know of the will of God and then do what you want. If we are doing the will of God for His glory, our desires will be His desires. I think this suggests the genuine love Paul and Apollos had for the people of God in Corinth. God’s will, concerning direction, is also discerned...

2. Based on opportunity – Apollos was not being stubborn. He simply did not believe it was time to take this opportunity. But as God provided, he was not opposed to coming and ministering to the Corinthian church at a later time. He was living out Paul admonition in Ephesians 5:15-17 – ***15 Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the best use of the time (the most of the opportunity), because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.***

Conclusion

1. So what have we learned based on this passage? Plan carefully but with awareness that God has the right to change our plans whenever and however He chooses – and please remember that this is a good thing! We have also learned that He provides opportunities in the form of open doors for ministry. Even with these we need to choose where to go, not basing our choices on what might be the path of least resistance, but what might be the best place for spiritual harvest. We have also learned that God protects and provides, often through His people ministering to one another.
2. What is God’s will for you? I know some of that. It is clearly recorded in the Scripture: ***“This is the will of God concerning you!”*** In regard to some of the specifics, I don’t have a clue. But I am confident that if you determine to serve Him and you look for opportunities to please God and serve one another, God will direct your paths and grant you His blessing. And that is a great way to live!