

Following God's Lead in All Seasons

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- [0 : 0 0] I'm so glad that we're here today, and as we are going to be dealing with a topic that is challenging as well as exciting, and that is following God's leading in all of our seasons.
- For some reason, that is the wrong slide up there. I hope it's the right verses that come up. We'll be starting in Acts 18, verses 18 through 23 this morning.
- Yeah, we're in the right place. For some reason, it didn't put on the correct slide. So I want you to think about a time when you felt really, really comfortable.
- It might have been in a job that you loved, maybe a place called home, or a routine that just felt right.
- You know, we all love comfort, don't we? We love routine. We love what we know is coming up next. You know, kind of like one of the things that Catherine and I love on a cold day, like it's been the last few days, is that cozy blanket that we pull over us in our favorite place on the couch.
- [1 : 2 0] But what happens when God nudges us to move into a place that might be outside of our comfort zone?
- And what do we do when He calls us into something that's unknown? A place we've never been before. A ministry we've never tried before.
- But we sense God's calling, and we sense it so strongly. What do we do? I remember back almost 40 years ago when Catherine and I felt the call to go back to school in Alabama.
- We had a good job, great pay, and yet it still felt like that move was in God's will.
- And over the next few years we saw God's hand of blessing, and we knew that it was the right move to make. So there are some times when things are rocking along, things are going well, we feel really, really comfortable, and God has a different plan for a new season in your life.
- [2 : 3 6] Now today we're going to continue our journey with the Apostle Paul. He has been in Corinth, and the Apostle Paul was a man who knew something about stepping out in faith.
- We see Paul often stepping out, going to a new location, stepping out and going to a place he's never been before. And in today's message, chapter number 18, we find Paul in a place of success.
- We find him in a place of stability, and things are going well for him. People are getting saved, and people are wanting him to stay because they want to hear what he has to say.
- I mean, who would not want to stay in a place like that, where you're wanted and where you're loved and where people want to hear what you have to say? But the Apostle Paul felt God's move, felt God's hand moving him to a new place, something different for the Apostle Paul.
- And as we read about Paul's experience this morning, I want us to think about our own lives, maybe areas where we have been holding on too tightly to what's familiar.

[3 : 45] And the question is going to be, are we willing to trust God's plan, even if it means stepping out into the unknown?

My hope is that by our time is done together this morning, we'll be inspired to embrace God's direction in our lives, no matter where it leads us.

It might lead you into a new ministry. It might lead you into trying something you've never done before. Or it might lead you thousands of miles away.

We don't know what God is calling us to do today, because God has a way of showing us, prompting us, and leading us when his timing is just right.

So as we consider how God might be calling us, possibly to turn the page in our own lives, let's look at the Apostle Paul's experience this morning and the journey that God called him to.

[4 : 50] And even when it meant leaving what was familiar, and leaving his comfort zone, and going to a place where God had called him. Let's read together this morning in Acts chapter 18, beginning with verse number 18.

So Paul remained a good while. Then he took leave of the brethren, and he sailed for Syria. And Priscilla and Aquila were with him. He had cut his hair off at Sanctria, for he had taken a vow.

And he came to Ephesus and left them there. But he himself entered the synagogue and reasoned with the Jews. In these verses we see Paul in Corinth, a place where he's experienced some success.

People have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ. He has built new relationships. He has shared the gospel. And he's seen lives transformed.

And it's a place where he could have easily settled down. The Apostle Paul could have started a local church, been the local pastor, and possibly even retired there. Because it was a large city, and people were always coming into the city.

[6 : 00] And who knows what potential that place would have had for the Apostle Paul. But God had something else, something different in mind. And Paul senses God's leading.

For him to move on to a new area of ministry. And the first thing that we see here this morning is, be willing to move when God calls.

Be willing to move when God calls. We did it over 40 years ago. God may be, and some of you have felt the call to move at a certain time in your life.

Now there's one thing that we know about our life here on earth and God's will for our lives. God's will is not static.

Meaning, God may call you into something for a season of your life. And maybe there comes a time when God says, okay, now it's time for something different.

[7 : 01] A different ministry. A different endeavor. Maybe a different challenge that he wants you to get involved in. So we know that God's will is not static.

We see that in the life of Paul. We see that in many others' lives as well. So we need to ask ourselves the question, are we holding on too tightly to the familiar such that we may not be willing to move when God calls?

I remember back when I was in Bible college many years ago, there was an older couple. They were in their 60s at the time.

The man had retired from his job. And one of the things that he told me one day as we were sitting around, he said, you know, my wife and I felt God's call to the mission field when we were in our 20s.

He said, we knew God was calling us to the mission field. But, you know, we had begun raising a family and we just felt, as he put it in his own words, he said, we just felt comfortable.

[8 : 12] And he says, we know. Now, we can talk all day long about God's will, God's permissive will, God's perfect will. Was it right for them to go then or was it right for them to wait so many years?

I don't know. I won't get into that too deeply. But he said, we felt God calling us into the mission field way back when. But what he learned, he says, what I learned was it's never too late to do God's will.

Think about it. You're retired and you're older and you take up, you pull up your roots and you move to another state and you go back to school.

Now, that was not easy. He said, you know what, it's been so many years since I had to study and since I had to take a test. But they did it. So there are maybe seasons in our life and what we can learn this morning from the Apostle Paul is we need to be willing to move, not necessarily move geographically, although that might be the case.

It might be simply to move a mindset. It might be simply to move to a different ministry. It might be simply trying a new challenge. So imagine being in Paul's shoes.

[9 : 29] You've worked hard. Things are going well. People are getting saved. Things are positive. They're looking up. And then you feel that nudge from God that says, it's time to go. Not easy, is it?

You know, it's like being in a warm, cozy house. The fireplace is going or the heater is going. And then you feel a call to go outside. Well, you know what? I've got to go check the mail. Or I've got to go do whatever. And then you go and you brace yourself for that change.

And then maybe you want to rush back in and feel the comfort of home again. So rushing out or going out and following God's will is sometimes going to be challenging.

Exciting at the same time, but yet still challenging. So after a year and a half of ministry, we saw in verse number 18, so Paul remained a good while. We saw back up in verse number 11 of chapter number 18, Paul had been in Corinth for 18 months.

So a year and a half, he's there, and we see the thing with Gallio and the Jews who wanted to try to shut Paul down.

[10 : 39] And the Roman proconsul said, not going to worry about it. So he excused the court case or excused the case and basically saying, Paul has permission from Rome.

We're not going to do anything. So Paul can share the gospel. Paul can talk about Jesus all he wants to. It's not anything against Rome. He said, it's something that has to do with your religion, not Rome.

So 18 months, a year and a half, Paul is there. Paul decided that it was God's will that he leave Corinth and return to his home church in Antioch.

Now his friends, Priscilla and Aquila, then he took leave, verse 18, sail for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila were with him. Notice how Luke varies the order of their names.

He started off calling them Aquila and Priscilla. Now it's Priscilla and Aquila were with him, and they accompanied him to Ephesus, and he stayed there, or they stayed there when he left for Senkria.

[11 : 47] In verse 24, we're going to pick up the story of the church in Ephesus and the important part that was played by Priscilla and Aquila. But Paul leaves.

He goes out and says in verse 18 that he had his hair cut off in Senkria. Senkria was a seaport for Corinth, and there was a Christian congregation there.

There was a church there. We see that in Romans chapter 16, verse number 1. It mentions the church there in Senkria. And Paul had his hair cut there at Senkria.

Now we find it odd. Why would you talk about a haircut? Well, Paul had taken a vow. This probably refers to the Nazarite vow, what we see explained in Numbers chapter number 6.

It was a voluntary vow. As a Jew, you didn't have to take that vow, but there were many who did, in fact, do that. And Paul, there are some who would say, well, Paul was abandoning grace because he took a Jewish vow, and he was bound to it for that period of time until that vow was done.

[13 : 06] Well, that vow wasn't a matter of salvation. It had nothing to do with his spirituality. It had nothing to do with his salvation, but rather it was out of personal devotion to the Lord.

He allowed his hair to grow for a specific amount of time. That was the vow, that you wouldn't cut your hair for a certain amount of time, and you would cut it when the vow was completed.

He also abstained from eating or drinking anything that was related to grapes. So he couldn't drink, he couldn't eat anything that had to do with grapes during this period of time.

That was basically the vow. Now we're not told why Paul took the vow. Maybe it was part of a special declaration to God during the difficult days of his early ministry there in Corinth.

We're not sure, but yet Paul took the vow, or maybe it was gratitude for all that God has done in his life. We're not sure. But according to Jewish law, the vow had to be completed in Jerusalem where there was offered the proper sacrifices.

[14 : 17] So Paul had to leave and go to Jerusalem to accomplish that. Now this is kind of where, now we're not told how long Paul stays in Ephesus where he ends up there for a while.

It must not have been long because Paul continues on in his journey. You know, that's where it gets a little bit real for us. Paul was, I'm sure, comfortable where he was.

I'm sure Paul was appreciating all that God was accomplishing in the lives of those that he was sharing the gospel with. So what do we do when we sense God maybe leading us into pushing ourselves into doing something new?

Maybe it's teaching a Sunday school class that you've never done before. Maybe it's you feel God leading you to preach or to do something different, something that's really comfortable.

So we have to, this morning, think about are we willing to move? Are we willing to move when God moves us? I think Paul's a good example of when God challenges someone to step out in faith.

[15 : 29] It's about trusting God for his direction. It's about trusting God to lead us and to pave the way for us wherever it is that he leads us to go. So as we think about Paul's willingness to step out of something familiar, let's take a look at how the Apostle Paul prioritized God's mission.

So he was willing to step out when God called him. But there's a reason why that was the case for the Apostle Paul. Even when faced with opportunities that were appealing, Paul kept the mission number one.

Let's look at verse 20, Acts 18, verses 20 and 21. When they asked him to stay a longer time with them, he took leave of them, saying, I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem, but I will return again to you, God willing.

And he sailed from Ephesus. Now, it's a great opportunity where Paul was. Imagine being a place where people are hungry to hear what you have to say.

And they ask you, they almost beg you to stay there with them, staying at a place where you're wanted and you're appreciated. But Paul makes a surprising choice.

[16 : 52] He says, I've got to keep a vow. I've got to do something, and I have to continue on. Instead of staying, he tells them he has to leave. And he says, I'll come back to you if it's God's will.

Paul's commitment to God's call to head to Jerusalem takes precedence over the immediate, over what's going on in his life. Now, just as Paul was willing to move beyond the familiar, he also understood that following God meant prioritizing his mission.

He had to accomplish this. And it leads us to our next point. Not only are we to be willing to move when God calls, secondly, we need to prioritize God's mission in our life. Prioritize the mission that God has called us to, whatever that is.

Now, I think this decision speaks volumes about Paul's priorities. He's not driven by what's easy. Paul's not driven by what feels good in the moment.

Instead, he's focused on what God's called him to do. And Paul's experience and Paul's willingness to put the mission first, I believe, sometimes means saying no to things that are good and saying yes to things that are best.

[18 : 12] Sometimes, if we have a choice between something that's maybe equally good, we have to ask ourselves, God, what's best? What is something that would accomplish your will in my life, not just something that I settle for?

Probably wouldn't go wrong in either way, humanly speaking, because maybe it's two good choices. But we need to think about, God, what is your will? What is the choice that you would make for my life?

Now, here we saw the Jews that are much more receptive because Paul, as he was accustomed to, even though he knew that his mission was to the Gentiles, when he goes to Ephesus, he still goes to the synagogue, and he still takes time to spend the time here with the Jews.

He was received very, very well, and we find that his time there was very productive. But he wanted to go to Jerusalem to complete the vow that he had made before God, and then on to Antioch so he can report.

He can give his missions report, if you will, to his home church back in Antioch. Though he promised to return. And we know that Paul kept that promise in Acts 19, verse number 1.

[19 : 30] When we get there, we'll see where Paul goes back to Ephesus. And he says, Now, for the Apostle Paul, have you ever said that? Have you ever heard someone say that?

You know, if the Lord will, if God wills? Well, for Paul, it was more than just a religious slogan. Paul meant it. If it was within the will of God, Paul would do it.

Paul would make every effort to accomplish the will of God in his life. So it was one of the strengths and encouragement in the Apostle Paul's life and ministry. He was always endeavoring to do the will of God.

And we know that doing the will of God is one of the blessings in the Christian life. Acts chapter 22 and verse number 14. Because it's our pleasure, it's our calling, if you will, to do the will of God.

We see that in Acts chapter 22, verse number 14. So what happens to Priscilla and Aquila? I know some of you may be wondering. Even if you're not wondering, I'll tell you.

[20 : 33] So Priscilla and Aquila were very important in the Apostle Paul's ministry there in Corinth and areas where he was. Their ministry took them to Ephesus for the next five years.

So for the next five years, they're there. They're ministering in Ephesus. Now, we may also be wondering, and I've wondered, what happened to Silas and what happened to Timothy?

We're really not sure where they end up at this time. Maybe they stayed in Corinth. Maybe they went on to Jerusalem with the Apostle Paul and continued on with him to his third missionary journey.

But interestingly enough, Silas kind of goes off the scene, falls off the scene from Luke's accounts. So we don't see Silas anymore after Acts chapter number 18, kind of leaving us wondering where he went.

But obviously, Silas was most likely doing the will of God for Silas. So we see Paul as God's moving him around. So let's bring this home.

[21 : 41] We have decisions to make in our own lives. Are we putting God's mission first? Or are we putting our desires, our will, our comfort first?

You know, even if it means going out into the unknown. It's not always easy. You know, I remember the first time that I was pushed out of the nest to preach.

It was not easy. It was difficult. Matter of fact, I don't know how the people stuck with me the entire time that I preached. You know, I had about 30 minutes of message that I had prepared, and I think I preached it all in about 15 minutes.

So there are things that maybe God calls us to do that's not very comfortable. But when we prioritize the will of God, when we align our lives with the will of God, God is going to show his greater purpose in our lives, no matter where that is, no matter where he calls us.

So as we think about Paul's example, we ask ourselves the question, are we willing to put God's mission and God's will above our own?

[22 : 49] So let's look at what Paul does next in the next two verses. See how Paul sought community, and he encouraged others, and he strengthened the faith of those around him.

Verse 22, So here we see Paul returning to his home church in Antioch after his travels, and he reconnects with his church family, and he shares the stories about what God's done on this second missionary journey, and all the things that God had been accomplishing in the life and through the life of Paul.

And he is strengthening the other believers that are there, because Paul understood the importance of community. He understood the importance of working together within the body of Christ, serving together, using the spiritual gifts that God has given each of them.

And as they work together, as the Apostle Paul has written in another place about how the church is like a body, and every joint, every piece of the body, every part of the body supplies what it was intended to supply.

And so Paul shares what he's done, not just for himself, but also for the encouragement of others. So no matter where God sends us, just like the Apostle Paul, we should seek community and encourage others, because we were never meant to do life alone.

[24 : 36] We were never meant to do the will of God alone either. We do it together with the body of Christ. So after landing on the Phoenician coast, Paul went and visited his church, visited the church, his home church in Jerusalem.

Then Paul travels the 65 miles southeast of Jerusalem, and he goes to Antioch. And Luke now brings the second missionary journey to a close.

Just as quickly, he's going to begin the third missionary journey. Paul probably stayed in Antioch until from the late summer of A.D. 52 through the spring of 53.

So Paul spent a little bit of time there. And then he sets his sight on Ephesus, 1,500 miles to the west. And we see in chapter 19 that Paul ends up back there.

So along the way, what Paul is doing is he's visiting churches. These weren't new works. These were areas where Paul had been before. He's encouraging. He's strengthening these churches.

[25 : 46] Lystra, Tarsus, Iconium, Derbe. Maybe some even Luke didn't tell us about. But all the regions throughout Galatia and Phrygia.

So this ministry across Asia Minor, as we said, was not new evangelism, but he was going to strengthen the other churches. Some of you have done this.

You finished maybe a long and challenging hike. And you're tired when you get home. But what's one of the things that you do? You go and you share with your family what you experienced on the hike.

And you tell them all about what happened. Maybe it encourages somebody else to take up their own challenge and do something. So this is Paul. Paul's, I'm sure, tired after all this travel.

But he ends up back at his home church and he takes the time to encourage the church about what God has been doing in his life. He didn't just keep it to himself.

[26 : 43] He shared what God was doing. This is a powerful reminder to us that we live in community, that we're not alone. And God also wants us to share our experiences with others as we've experienced it.

So Paul's example challenges us to invest in faith communities. So we're not an island. God expects us to serve with others as well. So ask yourself, are you making time to connect with others?

Are you just wanting to do the least amount? But are we willing to connect with others?

There are all types of opportunities to connect. It might be inviting someone for coffee, inviting someone for lunch after church on a Sunday. It might be inviting them over to do something fun together with you, to learn one another, to learn more about them, what makes them happy, what makes them sad, and maybe how we can be praying for them and sharing and doing life together.

Remember, we're stronger together. God wants us to serve Him together. So as we wrap up this morning, we've seen the Apostle Paul spending time in Corinth a year and a half.

[28 : 05] God has used Paul's time there to see people come to know Him. Paul goes on to Ephesus. We have people who came to know Christ as their Savior.

We have those who wanted to hear more. Remember, Paul has a mission, though, and Paul continues on, leaving that comfort and continuing on with his ministry.

Paul shows us that following God's lead maybe won't always be easy, but it's always worth it. He was willing to move on to accomplish the will of God in his life.

And he sought out community. We're always stronger when we're in community. So what about us? Are we willing to embrace God's mission for our lives, God's direction for our lives?

Maybe God's nudging you to step out of your comfort zone, to take a leap of faith into something new, something different.

[29 : 05] Maybe God is revealing to you a new opportunity to reach someone, maybe in your neighborhood, maybe in an area where God has placed you.

Maybe it's starting up a new conversation with someone that you've not had really a lot of interaction with before. Be willing to step out and put God's mission first.

And here's the good news. We don't have to do it alone. God's with us. He said, don't be afraid. He said, I will be with you. The battle's mine. He said, I've got this and I'm taking care of it.

So as we leave today, let's remember Paul's example. Be willing to move when God calls. Prioritize his mission and seek out community. And ask yourself, where is God nudging me to step out in faith?

Let's commit to taking that step together and trusting that his path will lead to a life of purpose. Let's pray. Father, this morning, as we've come together, we thank you that you lead us.

[30 : 15] We thank you that you guide us. You direct us. Just as you did the apostle Paul a couple of thousand years ago. You still lead us today. You still guide us. And Father, we thank you that you've not left us without direction.

But that you bring others around us to encourage, to build up. And we pray that as we do life together, that we may accomplish your will.

We may see you work in the lives of others. That others may come to know Jesus as their Savior. Father, we thank you for what you're going to accomplish in us and through us.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.