

A Perspective on Faith's Future

Acts 21:1-14

A couple of Thursdays ago I sent out an email to everyone on Faith's mailing list. In that letter I explained that God is changing my assignment here at Faith. I've been the Senior Pastor here at Faith for the past 35 years; and my intention was to continue for another 4 years or so. But over the past couple of years I've been having issues with my voice that often make it challenging to preach three sermons on Sunday mornings. More significantly, over the past year I've been having issues with my eyes that make it challenging to study and prepare to preach during the week. These are "career-ending injuries" for a pastor.

Since January of this year I have been asking God, "Is this something I need to press through and try to keep going for another 4 years? Or are you saying that it's time for a change of pace and are you giving me a different assignment?" After a season of prayer, discussion with leadership, and seeking counsel, it's become clear that God is giving me a different assignment. On one hand, this makes me sad; but on the other, I'm genuinely excited about what's next for me and for Faith.

I'm glad to report that I've been in conversation with our elders about succession planning for almost a decade. And so we've been anticipating this transition. It's just that the timeline has been shortened. Our plan is to begin a search at the first of the year, and have my successor in place perhaps next summer.

Please know that Brenda and I love you and love what God is doing at Faith. Our plan is to remain at Faith and walk into the future with you. My specific role here at Faith after I'm not longer senior pastor will be determined during the succession process.

In the sovereignty of God, the first passage I am preaching after sending my letter to the church is Acts 21:1-14. In this passage Luke records how two different churches **wrestled with an assignment** that God had given the Apostle Paul. In the interaction between Paul and these churches, we see both the messiness and the beauty of interdependence in the body of Christ. They had hard conversations because they were part of the same spiritual family. But the net result was that everybody - both Paul and the churches - ended up with a deeper commitment to the will God whatever the cost.

This passage is something of a case study for us as we all **navigate the new assignment** God is giving me here at Faith. We will first consider Paul's assignment from God and his interaction with two churches. We will then discuss some take-aways/perspectives for us in the succession planning process at Faith.

A Case Study: Paul's assignment to go first to Jerusalem and then to Rome.

Let me set the context a bit. Acts 21-28 record Paul's journey first to Jerusalem and then to Rome. The things Paul encountered along the way might challenge how we think about the sovereignty of God. We might have thought that if the Spirit had told Paul to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome, it would be "smooth sailing." Actually, it was a shipwreck. Literally he had a shipwreck as recorded in chapter 27. Figuratively it was a shipwreck

because he had to deal with rumors, false allegations, trials, and plots against his life. Nevertheless, by the time we come to Acts 28 Paul is in Rome “teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (28:31). God was sovereign over the assignment he’d given Paul to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome.

Paul’s Assignment. (Acts 9:15-16, 19:21, 20:22-24. See also Romans 1:8-15, 15:22-33)

Twice in Acts we are told that the Holy Spirit impressed upon him to go to Jerusalem. First, after Paul had been in Ephesus for over two years when we read in Acts 19:21:

21 Now after these events [in Ephesus] Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, “After I have been there, I must also see Rome.”

Second, in Acts 20:22-23 Paul says this to the elders in Ephesus:

22 And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, 23 except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

From day 1 (we read in Acts 9:16) Paul knew that suffering was an integral part of his assignment as an apostle. Suffering wasn’t incidental or optional to his calling; suffering was integral and essential. Because Jesus was his Lord, he accepted the assignment to go to Jerusalem and face imprisonment and afflictions.

I think it’s accurate to say that when God gives assignments, there is ***always*** an element of suffering and hardship and sacrifice involved. Some assignments involve more suffering than others, and I’m not implying that there’s no joy in doing the will of God. But “in this world you ***will*** have trouble” (John 16:33). If you are walking with God and involved directly in the lives of others, it will cost you something. This is not unique to vocational ministry (pastors, missionaries, etc.). This is true for all believers.

So, Paul received the assignment from God the Holy Spirit to go first to Jerusalem and then to Rome. What’s fascinating is that in the very next chapter Luke tells us about the resistance he received from believers in two churches as he made his way to Jerusalem.

Paul’s interaction with two Churches. (Acts 21:1-14) On the face of it, it appears that the believers in these two churches were prompted by the Holy Spirit to tell Paul ***not to do*** the very thing that the Holy Spirit had told him ***to do***. Let’s see what’s going on. First, in the city of Tyre on the western coast of Syria, in Acts 21:4 we read:

4 And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.

It is highly unlikely that Luke is saying that the Holy Spirit contradicted himself, telling Paul one thing and the believers at Tyre another. And there’s no indication that either Paul or the believers in Tyre hadn’t really heard the Holy Spirit. What’s going on? When

we studied the attributes of Scripture a month ago we acknowledged that “the clarity of Scripture” doesn’t mean that there aren’t verses and/or passages that are difficult to understand. This is one of those difficult verses.

I think the best understanding is that this is a compressed account and that something is happening here similar to what happened in the next city, Caesarea: The Spirit had warned these believers that Paul would suffer in Jerusalem, but the believers *wrongly concluded* that Paul therefore shouldn’t go. As John Stott puts it, “. . . perhaps Luke’s statement is a condensed way of saying that the warning was divine while the urging was human” (Stott, J. R. W. (1994). *The message of Acts: the Spirit, the church & the world* (p. 333). InterVarsity Press).

Paul’s decision not to cancel his trip to Jerusalem didn’t harm his relationship with these believers. As a matter of fact, it appears that they were convinced Paul needed to follow the prompting of the Spirit and go to Jerusalem; I say that because verses 5 and 6 tell us that they accompanied him to the shoreline and prayed for him before he got on the ship and sailed away.

Luke explicitly tells us that’s what happened when Paul came to Caesarea. In Acts 21:10–14 we read:

10 While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 And coming to us, he took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, “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.’ ” 12 When we [Luke and those traveling with Paul] heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.

They heard the prophecy predicting Paul being bound and handed over to the Gentiles (Romans) and concluded, “That can’t be the will of God.” So they “urged him not to go to Jerusalem.” Verse 13 makes clear that they weren’t scolding Paul; they were weeping because of their affection for him. Just like you and I don’t want our loved ones to suffer, especially when it can be avoided, they didn’t want Paul to go to Jerusalem.

13 Then 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.”

Paul wasn’t callous to their affection; their weeping was “breaking [his] heart.” But Paul’s ultimate loyalty wasn’t to them but to Jesus. Just as Jesus resolutely set his face to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51), Paul’s assignment was the same. He lets them know that he is ready to be imprisoned and if necessary to die in Jerusalem “for the name of the Lord Jesus.”

14 And since he would not be persuaded, we [Luke included] ceased and said, “Let the will of the Lord be done.”

“This was not a statement of resignation or fatalism” (as David Jackman put it). They had come to the place where they wanted God’s will to be done instead of their will to be done. If God the Spirit wanted Paul to walk into the teeth of persecution in Jerusalem, so be it. The next five and a half chapters describe Paul’s arrest and trials in and around Jerusalem.

In light of what we’ve discussed, let’s think carefully about. . .

Some Implications for Faith’s Future in light of God giving me a different assignment. Of course, I’m not Paul; and my new assignment isn’t anything like his. But there are commonalities. In both cases we have someone in a position of spiritual leadership sensing that God the Holy Spirit is leading them in a specific direction. And in both cases churches therefore have to wrestle with the implications.

Some of the dynamics at play in the churches at Tyre and Caesarea are at play here at Faith Manhattan Church.

The will of God. (Acts 21:14) As we move forward with the secession planning process, it will be important for ***all of us*** to have a commitment to the will of God. In Scripture, the will of God is sometimes universally true for all people everywhere. For example, Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4, “This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality. . .” We don’t have to debate whether or not that applies to all of us.

But here in Acts 21, the will of God is circumstantial, not universal. On other occasions, it was the will of God that Paul escape persecution; in some cities, Paul was sent away to avoid hostile crowds (Damascus, Thessalonica, Berea, etc.). But in this specific circumstance the Holy Spirit impressed upon Paul that he should go to Jerusalem, knowing he would be “imprisoned and afflicted.” As we just read:

14 And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, “Let the will of the Lord be done.”

They accepted that it was the will of God for Paul to suffer.

In a similar way, I (along with our leadership) am asking you to accept that it is the will of God that we have a transition of leadership here at Faith. I have been seeking God about this over the past 8 months. My seeking has involved prayer, paying attention to my own desires, and conversations with many important people in my life. First and foremost Brenda and I have talked about my health issues as well as dreams about the future. We have a desire to be more available to our three married children and to our grandchildren.

I’ve also had conversations with our elders, the Succession Team, friends, and mentors. Different people and different groups of people have asked insightful questions and shared wisdom from their own lives. Several of these individuals have faced or are currently facing life-threatening health issues themselves. They shared wisdom that only

comes through experience. There is broad agreement that it is God's will is for me to have a change of pace and a different assignment.

I was more than a little anxious sending out that letter to the church. I didn't really expect harsh pushback (like, "You shall not retire!"). But neither did I expect how perfectly you would respond. I've received many emails and texts and personal comments to the effect of, "We're sad you're stepping down, but we understand. We're excited about what's next for you. We will pray for you and for the church." Your commitment to the will of God is so very satisfying to me. Well done. Thank you.

Mutual Submission. (*Ephesians 5:21*) This concept is implicit throughout Paul's writings, and is explicitly taught in Ephesians 5:21. In the context of "being filled with the Spirit," Paul mentions:

21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

Paul is describing **mutual** submission, not one-way submission. If you submit to another believer, you aren't saying that they're your boss and you have to do anything they tell you to do. Rather, you are saying, "I want to receive from you anything Christ wants to say or do through you." You are acknowledging the interdependence that God has built into the body of Christ. Since Christ has gifted every believer and indwells every believer, we do this "**out of reverence for Christ.**"

We see mutual submission modeled by Paul and the two churches he visited. For his part, **Paul received confirmation** from the Spirit-led prophecies that he would indeed suffer in Jerusalem. When he was imprisoned and afflicted, surely these prophecies reminded him that God was still sovereign and good.

And for their part, **the churches received the correction** that Paul brought them concerning the role of suffering in discipleship. In Paul they now had a tangible, flesh and blood example of someone who believed and embodied Jesus' teaching that "if anyone wishes to come after [Jesus]" they need to deny themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow him (Luke 9:23).

In terms of application for us, I don't have anything too specific in mind. I would simply encourage each of us (myself included) to assume, "I don't exhaustively understand the will of God for Steve and for Faith Manhattan Church. I need the Spirit-given perspectives of others in the body of Christ. Therefore, by God's grace I will be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger."

Today's passage illustrates that committed Christians sometimes disagree with each other. And sometimes one person/group is right and the other is wrong. This requires great discernment. There's not really a formula for discerning the will of God when it's circumstantial (like when you need to find and hire the next senior pastor). But there is a virtue that will be priceless for us, namely humility.

Humility. (*1 Peter 5:5*) In the context of elders leading a church by example, Peter writes:

5 Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

We don’t have a dress code here at Faith. But if we did, the first item on the list would be humility. Before you come to church, “clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another.” There are a hundred reasons why we should put on humility, but the reason Peter mentions is because God gives grace to the humble.

We are going to need a massive amount of grace during the succession process. We need God to give us things we haven’t earned and that we don’t deserve.

We have heard lots of stories about how things have gone horribly wrong for churches during pastoral successions. A friend of mine pastored a church in Austin for 27 years. They designed what they thought was the perfect succession plan; they were planning to write a book about it as a pattern for others to follow. But in the middle of it things went horribly wrong. We should never presume that we’re smart enough to figure everything out or that we’re so mature that nothing disastrous could happen during this process. No, we need to walk in humility with one another so that we might invite the grace of God we so desperately need. .

Prayer/faith. (Acts 21:5) Throughout Scripture, one of the core ways that faith is expressed is prayer. The only people who pray are those who believe that God exists and that he’s the rewarder of those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6). This is what happened in Tyre after they became convinced that it was God’s will for Paul to go to Jerusalem:

5 When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed 6 and said farewell to one another. . .

They responded by praying. They expressed their trust in God

I have a growing sense that God wants to teach us great things throughout this succession process. Specifically, I think **God wants to teach us to walk by faith and to express that faith through fervent prayer.**

Either God exists or he doesn’t. Either God answers the prayers of his people or he doesn’t. Either the church is the bride of Christ which which he cherishes more than we can fathom or it isn’t.

Through this succession process, we have the opportunity to confirm in our corporate experience that God exists and that he answers our prayers and that Jesus loves and provides for his church. Therefore, in the weeks and months ahead our elders are calling us to walk by faith and to express that faith through fervent prayer. Pray when you’re alone; pray with your family and/or friends; and pray along with your church family when we provide opportunities to gather for prayer.

The Lord's Table reminds us why all of this matters: the bread represents Jesus body which was broken for us; the cup represents his blood which was spilled for us. Since he died for us, we should live for him.