

Bad Decisions and Bad Counsel

Introduction

Making bad decisions and receiving bad counsel from others plagues us all. One usually leads to the other. Some of our problem is that we think that this can't happen to us because we are spiritual people. I know a number of people who consider themselves “apostles” or “prophets” or “pastors” who think that, when it comes to the things of God, they are spiritual enough that they can't or won't make a bad decision. God speaks to them and directs them; therefore, as long as they are doing God's will then they can't make bad decisions. But, is that correct? The key is doing God's will. However, who determines if one is doing God's will? If you have made a bad decision, you may be off course and NOT be doing God's will. How do you know?

This is a problem that particularly effects ministry leaders and the people of God in the United States. We have developed such an independent attitude that in many cases we cross the line into out and out rebellion. After all, God speaks to me and I follow the Holy Spirit. Who are you to question what God has told me to do? We use “God told me” as the justification for our bad decisions and the justification for not acknowledging that it was a bad decision to begin with. The Lord is not pleased with us using His name in this way.

Paul, the Apostle

When we read the New Testament, we see Paul as one of the giants of the faith. He was certainly a mature man of God. He wrote more of the New Testament than any other writer. He established many churches. He moved in the power of the Holy Spirit, performing many miracles. He understood by the Spirit many deep things of God that had been hidden in previous times. We would be hard pressed to find a more spiritual person than Paul.

In some cases, we have placed Paul on a spiritual pedestal and made him to be more than we can ever be. Surely, with all that Paul did and the closeness with which he walked with the Lord, he never made a bad decision or followed bad counsel from others. He would know better. Right? But, that is not what the Scriptures present to us. Paul suffered from the same struggles with our old nature and desires that we do and was just as capable of making a bad decision as we are.

Paul's Call and Work

The Lord told Ananias to go to Paul and pray for him to receive his sight after Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. Ananias didn't want to do this because he had heard of all the things that Paul was doing to the people of God prior to this. However, Jesus had chosen Paul and He told Ananias to go

because of His calling Paul.

Acts 9:15-16 NASB But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; (16) for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake."

Notice that first on the list was that the Lord had chosen him to bear His name before the Gentiles. This was by the Lord's testimony of him. After the visit from Ananias, Paul was baptized and spent some time with the brethren and then returned to Jerusalem. By Paul's own testimony later, Jesus appeared to him and told him to get out of Jerusalem.

Acts 22:21 NASB "And He said to me, 'Go! For I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"

So, Paul left Jerusalem and went to Ceasarea and then on to Tarsus, which is where he was when Barnabas found him later and took him to Antioch (Acts 11:25-26).

After Paul and Barnabas had been sent forth from Antioch as apostles, they went to the Jews first but the word was rejected. Then Paul's own testimony was that he was going to the Gentiles.

Acts 13:46 NASB Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.

Paul, however, continued to try to reach the Jews. He spoke in the synagogues and public places to the Jews about Jesus; but, they continually rejected the word.

Acts 18:5-6 NASB But when Silas and Timothy came down from Macedonia, Paul *began* devoting himself completely to the word, solemnly testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. (6) But when they resisted and blasphemed, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood *be* on your own heads! I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles."

Continued rejection of the word by the Jews had frustrated Paul. He was ready to stop trying to speak to the Jews and move on to the Gentiles.

However, Paul was a Jew and he loved his people. It broke his heart that they would not recognize Jesus as Messiah. So, in spite of knowing that the Lord had called him to work with the Gentiles and in spite of continued rejection and by his own testimony turning to the Gentiles, Paul kept going back to the Jews and trying again, even though they stirred up trouble and sought to kill him.

A Bad Decision

Paul's natural desire to see his countrymen saved led Paul into a bad decision because Paul made the decision by his fleshly desires rather than the will of the Lord.

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Acts 19:21 NASB Now after these things were finished, Paul purposed in the Spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, "After I have been there, I must also see Rome."

Acts 19:21 WNT When matters had reached this point, Paul decided in his own mind to travel through Macedonia and Greece, and go to Jerusalem. "After that," he said, "I must also see Rome."

While most translations use "purposed in the Spirit" here, there is certainly no indication that it should be capitalized. [There are no capitals in the original language.] Therefore, Paul purposed "in his own spirit" to go to Jerusalem. This would include mental involvement. The Weymouth New Testament is probably the better translation here with "decided in his own mind" to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome. However, Paul was sent to the Gentiles and you don't find very many Gentiles in Jerusalem. So, is this decision to go to Jerusalem coming from Paul's own desires or from the Holy Spirit? Is this a good or bad decision?

We get a hint of Paul's real desire a little later in Acts.

Acts 20:16 NASB For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.

Paul wanted to be in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. Why?

Look at what Paul says about his going to Jerusalem:

Acts 20:22-23 NASB "And now, behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, (23) except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.

Acts 20:22-23 WNT "And now, impelled by a sense of duty, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, (23) except that the Holy Spirit, at town after town, testifies to me that imprisonment and suffering are awaiting me.

What does he mean he doesn't know what will happen to him in Jerusalem? The Holy Spirit had testified in town after town where he visited the brethren that bonds, afflictions, imprisonment, and suffering awaited him in Jerusalem. It seems to me that the Holy Spirit is being pretty plain about the matter.

The word of the Lord becomes even clearer:

Acts 21:3-4 NASB When we came in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left, we kept sailing to Syria and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload its cargo. (4) After looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept

telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem.

The disciples in Tyre spoke prophetically to Paul; “through the Spirit” means they gave him a word of prophecy. The word was clear for him “not to set foot in Jerusalem”. With this information it becomes obvious that Paul was proceeding in a direction that was not in keeping with the will of the Lord. He had made a bad decision based on the desires of the flesh. However, God warned him again.

Agabus, a know prophet and a Jew himself, spoke by the Holy Spirit to Paul and demonstrated with word and action what would happen to Paul in Jerusalem.

Acts 21:10-15 NASB As we were staying there for some 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, "This is what the Holy Spirit says: 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" (12) When we had heard this, we as well as the local residents *began* begging him not to go up to Jerusalem. (13) Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." (14) And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, "The will of the Lord be done!" (15) After these days we got ready and started on our way up to Jerusalem.

Even though Paul was repeatedly warned by the brethren through the Holy Spirit about not going to Jerusalem, he was determined to go anyway, declaring that he was ready to die for the Lord in Jerusalem. Now, we know that the Lord was not yet through with Paul. He still had work to do, so it was not the intention of the Lord that Paul die in Jerusalem. Why is Paul not considering the will of the Lord in all of this? We can only surmise that the natural desire of his mind overrode the spiritual directions from the Holy Spirit.

Bad Counsel

Paul and his team arrive in Jerusalem in spite of the warnings of the Holy Spirit. They are gladly received by the brethren.

Acts 21:17-18 NASB After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. (18) And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.

Paul shared with them the things that the Lord had done through them among the Gentiles. They glorified God for that but immediately began speaking to Paul about the Jews and the things that they were saying about him and how he should show them that they were wrong about him. So, they tell him what he should do to correct the situation. They give him bad counsel, which he received and acted upon.

Acts 21:19-25 NASB After he had greeted them, he *began* to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. (20) And when they heard it they *began* glorifying God; and they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; (21) and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. (22) "What, then, is *to be done*? They will certainly hear that you have come. (23) "Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; (24) take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses so that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law. (25) "But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication."

They told him to "purify yourself along with them". Was he not pure already by the blood of Jesus and the washing of water by the Word? Did he need to step backwards to the Old Covenant rituals? The reason they said for him to do that was so that the Jews would see that he walked orderly, keeping the Law. Paul, himself, had said many times that righteousness did not come by the Law. Keeping the Law would not exalt Jesus. What was Paul thinking?

Their next statement in verse 25 shows that they knew that the Gentiles did not need to keep the Old Covenant Law, but they, as Jews, must surely keep the Law. Apparently, Paul accepted this argument as applying to him so he followed their counsel. The end result was nothing but trouble for him.

Acts 21:26-30 NASB Then Paul took the men, and the next day, purifying himself along with them, went into the temple giving notice of the completion of the days of purification, until the sacrifice was offered for each one of them. (27) When the seven days were almost over, the Jews from Asia, upon seeing him in the temple, *began* to stir up all the crowd and laid hands on him, (28) crying out, "Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the Law and this place; and besides he has even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place." (29) For they had previously seen Trophimus the Ephesian in the city with him, and they supposed that Paul had brought him into the temple. (30) Then all the city was provoked, and the people rushed together, and taking hold of Paul they dragged him out of the temple, and immediately the doors were shut.

Paul went to the temple for purification until the sacrifice was offered for each of them. What is Paul doing going to the temple and following a purification ritual? Why is he waiting on sacrifice to be offered? Is not the sacrifice of Jesus enough? Following bad counsel, he was now coming back under the Law.

But, this got him in trouble. There is no compatibility with the rigors of the Law and the freedom of

Christ. The Jews thought he was desecrating the temple by bringing Gentiles into it because they had seen him with Gentiles earlier. This made them mad enough to kill him.

The Jews seized him and a riot resulted. The Roman commander stopped the riot and rescued Paul from the Jews. After several situations, Paul had to identify more and more with Rome and less with the Jews. Paul disclosed that he was born a Roman citizen and eventually appealed to Caesar for resolution of his situation as his right as a citizen of Rome.

After some misadventures Paul arrived at Rome, where I believe that the Lord wanted him to go to begin with. At Rome Paul was under what we would call “house” arrest. He wasn't confined to prison or anything but had limited freedom of movement while under guard. He rented a house and used it as a teaching center. This was the end of Paul's traveling team and this is where the book of Acts ends.

Lesson to be Learned

The Bible doesn't pull any punches. It shows us people in their full humanity seeking to serve the Lord. We know that there is a maturing process and that mistakes will be made as we learn to walk in the Spirit.

1 Corinthians 10:11-12 NASB (11) Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. (12) Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.

What do these things written about Paul in the book of Acts tell us? He tells us in his own words in the scripture listed above, “let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.” It doesn't matter how spiritual or how mature that we think that we are, we need to be careful. Our flesh can lead us to a bad decision and justify it through bad counsel. Possibly, this is where Paul learned the practical application of dying to self and walking in the Spirit that he spoke about so frankly in his epistles.

There was nothing inherently wrong with going to Jerusalem. The problem would only occur if the Lord wanted you somewhere else other than Jerusalem. Paul had good natural reasons that he wanted to go to Jerusalem. We tend to think of “the flesh” as lust and perverse desires; but, the flesh includes all that we think of as humanly good. Many times we do things in the flesh that appear to be very good works, even religious works. However, if the source is not God and the will of God then the source is self and anything that is self-sourced is flesh and is of the Adamic nature rather than the new nature in Christ.

Paul repeatedly ignored warnings from the Holy Spirit. He rejected the advice and counsel of his closest brethren. He discounted the words of his own ministry team. He then justified disregarding the warnings with nice religious words.

Acts 21:12-13 NASB When we had heard this, we as well as the local residents began begging him not to go up to Jerusalem. (13) Then Paul answered, "What

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are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus."

Paul's words sound super spiritual don't they? The problem though is that even if Paul was ready to die, the Lord was not ready for him to die. He had not completed the works that were beforehand prepared for him to do (Eph. 2:10).

Despite the fact that Paul went to Jerusalem, he ended up in Rome anyway by the will of the Lord. It would have been a lot easier for Paul if he had gone to Jerusalem directly without the fleshly side trip. However, the Lord in His goodness and mercy made sure that Paul fulfilled His purpose anyway, even though Paul's freedom was restricted in the natural as a consequence of his fleshly actions.

We have a good example of bad decisions and the consequences and the Lord redeeming the actions in the Old Testament story of Jonah. He made the decision not to go to Nineveh in spite of God's command to go there and prophesy. As a matter of fact, he went in the opposite direction. However, after suffering trying circumstances including being swallowed alive by a great fish, Jonah repented and the great fish disgorged him out on the shores "close to Nineveh". God redeemed the time that Jonah spent running and brought him back to the place of his will. He did the same for Paul and He will do the same for us if we truly desire His will in our life.

We should not fear making a mistake, even a bad decision. We should fear that we would not recognize the bad decision for what it is. We should fear not having close enough relationships with our brethren that they can speak into our life. We should fear rejecting the prophetic word of the Lord through our brethren because it is in conflict with our desires. We should fear that we might be acting independently of the Body and the will of the Lord. We must have faith that God will not allow us to go our own way if we will desire to walk in His way.