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Guidance in Uncertainty

This series of "Diggings" has been studying the issue of guidance from God. In our first volume we addressed "Guidance in Difficulty" by recognizing that God uses difficulty as a way to grow us in strength, vision and wisdom. In our last volume we looked at "Guidance in Silence," where God desires for us to be faithful where we are in life and situation. This volume will seek to understand "Guidance in Uncertainty."

We followed the first missionary journey of Paul which went to Cyprus, up to Galatia, Derbe, Lystra and Iconium, then to Jerusalem and to Antioch. The second journey takes him back to Derbe, Lystra and Iconium.

As a reminder, there are two missionary organizations in the church. One is led by Peter, based out of the Jerusalem church, also called the Church of the Circumcision. Members of this church include Barnabas, John Mark, and James (the relative of Jesus who becomes Bishop of Jerusalem). The second missionary organization is Antioch of Syria, the Church of the Un-Circumcision and is from a largely non-Jewish background.

We pick up with the Book of Acts as Paul is on his second missionary journey. It has been a year or two of not being sure what to do next. He has been faithful in Antioch and he feels right about tying up some loose

ends, going where he's been before.

That's a great principle of what to do when you are waiting. Are there some loose ends you can work on? Where have you been before that may be the location of unfinished things you can complete?



Mountains of Central Turkey

A key verse that gives us direction on the issue of guidance in times of uncertainty is found in Acts 16:6-8. *"They went through the region of Phrygia and the Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia Minor. When they had come opposite Mysia they attempted to go to Bythunia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them, so passing by Mysia they went down to Troas."*

We tend just to skip over these verses because they have certain words we have a hard time pronouncing and places we don't know or understand. However, if we avoid these

verses we can miss great insight and principles for life. We have one of those here: *When you're uncertain of which way to go, try left and right.* They already tried being faithful where they were. Now they needed to step out in faith.

Sometimes we tend to be hesitant to step out and need to remember Acts 16:6. Have you noticed sitting in your car in the driveway how hard it is to turn the wheel? However, if there is a little bit of motion, you can easily turn the wheel. That's kind of what Paul did.

After waiting for a year or two, he and his companions set out on the road. Very wise. May I relate it to church ministries? Why don't you try volunteer work with the homeless or the prison? How do you know in advance how you will feel about it before you try? Don't feel you have to know before you go.

We have a nice example of this principle working in Genesis with Abraham and Sarah. They were told to go to the Promised Land. They begin the a journey and do not know where the Promised Land is. One of the verses describing their trek says, "*...being on their way, the Lord led them.*" Notice that they are already on the way and it's during the journey, not before, that the Lord gives them guidance. It's not until they get to Shechem, which today is a town in the West Bank called Nablus, that the Lord lets them know they are in the Promised Land.

Waiting in uncertainty sometimes is not that helpful because there are little baby steps you can take to try a new direction, a new interest, a new subject, a new place. Sometimes you need to be on the way to feel a sense of rightness.

Paul decides that it's time to get back on the road. The next morning they get on a boat and suddenly all that uncertainty is left behind on the dock as they set sail for Macedonia, northern Greece. After making landfall at Neapolis, they begin following the Via Ignatia. Blisters and all, they arrive in the city of Philippi, named in honor of Philip II, father of Alexander the Great. It's a Roman colony in Greece with a small Jewish contingent.



Neapolis, port city of Macedonia

Paul's normal custom was to go to a synagogue upon his arrival in a city, but Philippi didn't have a minyan – a quorum of ten Jewish males – required for a synagogue. The rabbis taught that if there was not a synagogue, the most appropriate place to worship was a source of running water. So Paul, Silas and Timothy went to the Gegantes River on Sabbath morning, where the Jewish community met for worship, and it was here they met Lydia. Lydia was a wealthy woman from Thyatira and one of the wealthiest women in the Mediterranean world. She was a seller of purple cloth, one of the rarest of fabrics, and probably had an inventory worth several million dollars.

Lydia insisted that Paul and his companions stay in her home. Her financial status made her a woman who wasn't used to hearing the word "no." She, and apparently others, were persuaded by Paul's preaching to follow Jesus and as a result, Philippi became a very early Christian center. Even before the Roman Empire made it legal to build churches (the Edict of Milan in 315 AD), there is evidence of a Christian house of worship dating to the late 200's AD, making it one of the earliest Christian church buildings found. That means that there's a strong enough Christian community in Philippi with people in town who are responsible for the town and building permits who are Christians.

The Book of Acts tells us that Paul and his companions ran into some trouble in Philippi after an incident with a servant girl who had a gift of proph-

esying. She might have worked as an oracle for the gods worshipped at Delphi. She was a slave and after meeting Paul, Silas and Timothy she wanted to quit her activities which angered her master. He had the trio arrested, beaten publicly, and thrown into jail in chains. Beating Jewish men was fine in their day, however, Paul was a Roman citizen and was beaten without due process. This became a problem for the leaders of Philippi who were forced to apologize to him publicly before he would leave town. Paul, Silas and Timothy go from Philippi to Amphipolis in Berea. There was also difficulty there which required that Paul be snuck out of town and put on a ship. He left Silas and Timothy behind to teach people in Berea and then he goes on to Athens, the site of his famous speech at the Araeopagus.

From Athens Paul goes on to Corinth. Remember, all of this takes place even though he is still not sure which way the Lord wants him to go. Guidance in uncertainty. He has some problems but they keep on moving because they feel right about going through Greece. And in Corinth everything changes, and Paul tries something different, which gives us another principle for guidance in uncertainty – *Be open to new ideas*. Until now Paul and company stay in a town until they have to leave – usually due to opposition. That changes in Corinth.

Corinth is a place where Greece comes to a narrow isthmus only three miles wide. In Paul's day there was a road along the canal here. You would unload a ship on one side, haul the cargo three miles across land to a ship on the other side, reload and sail on, saving about three days sailing time.

Due to its location Corinth is a city of several hundred thousand people. It had a temple to Apollos in the bottom on the city and up above, on the Acropolis, a temple to Venus Aphrodite, the goddess of love. About 5000 cultic prostitutes worked in this temple during the sailing season. They even had sandals that said "*Follow Me,*" and they would walk from the port up to the temple at the top of the hill.



Temple to Apollos in Corinth

It's in Corinth that Paul is accused of fomenting disharmony and is brought before the Roman governor Gallio. Having Gallio's name mentioned in the Acts text helps us to date the event in 50-51 AD. Gallio had a good reputation according to ancient sources. Gallio tells the accusers, "*If you don't bring in better evidence than this; I'm throwing you in jail.*" So Paul is set free and continues his work in Corinth.

He meets Priscilla and Aquila, fellow tentmakers in Corinth, and he stays for two years, working at his ministry and his trade. He's here for so long that when he wrote Romans he sends greetings from the people in Corinth to the Christians in Rome. One of them is Erastus. Archaeologists have discovered an inscription in Corinthian pavement with his name.

Paul's ministry is aided not only by Priscilla and Aquila, but by the conditions in Corinth itself. The god Dionysius (the god of drinking, merriment and overindulgence) was honored there in the temples and, since it's a sailor town, in the nearly 200 local bars. The town is so notorious for its overindulgence that whenever a playwright wants to say someone is from Corinth, they wrote, "*Have him enter drunk,*" in the play directions. How do you please the god of merriment and drinking? Overindulge at a feast.

Saturday night Sabbath is over and they have an agape meal (love meal), a potluck. Some people



Erastus inscription at Corinth



Roman Road going left and right

are off work early and overindulge. By the time others get there for the Lord's Table communion, some are drunk. That's why Paul says to the Corinthians, "You should not partake of the Lord's Table unworthily." He is talking about people soused out before others are able to get there for the Lord's Table.

Isn't it tragic that some well-meaning Christians, because they feel unworthy, don't partake of communion? You are worthy of communion if you feel unworthy. We all need the grace of God. The Corinthians took it just as an opportunity to overindulge. That is what made them unworthy.

Paul stays in Corinth for two years working on tents so no one would have to pay his bills, all the time teaching and preaching in a very pagan town. Upon feeling his time there was complete, he goes to Jerusalem then back to Antioch.

I'd like to remind you that through all the uncertainty of not knowing which way to go, trying left and right, Paul is always open to trying new things. In his first and second journeys he would stay in town until it was difficult to stay longer, then move on. Then he comes to a huge city, a "Megapolis" of perhaps 500,000 people. He knows he can reach far more for Christ by staying there than moving.

The whole strategy changes and he is open to a new idea. Gallio told accusers they better have a good case before bringing Paul back before him again. The town treasurer, Erastus, is on board.

Some Jewish community leaders as well. And so, applying a new method, he stays two years in Corinth.

Always stay open to new ideas when you are uncertain what to do. Many times it is in the journey of the unknown that new discoveries are made and that God affirms or reaffirms His will.

Further reading suggestions (Available through Biblical Resources Bookstore - 706-885-0363)

Desert Spirituality by Dr. James Fleming: Addressing God's Presence in Difficult Circumstances; 158 pages **\$20.00**

Explorations in Antiquity by Dr. James Fleming: Dr. Fleming's newest book with 164 pages, 414 photographs, and in-depth teaching; introductory price of **\$39.00** plus \$5.00 S&H.