

DOING THE LORD'S WORK
1 Cor. 16:5-12

Turn back to 1 Cor. 16...

Some of you will recognise this brown book that I am holding up.... It's my diary. – It helps keep my life organised: book appointments, jot down items on my 'To Do' list, plan future events, etc. – Reading a person's diary tells you a lot about their priorities, their character, their concerns.

Today we get a peek into the Apostle Paul's diary. – It's like we get to crack open the musty, stained pages of one of the most famous travel journals of all time. – Here Paul gives us a window into his itinerary, the next few scheduled stops on his journey, and the colleagues accompanying him.

I love these portions of Scripture. – You wouldn't choose to preach on it unless you were committed to expository preaching, verse-by-verse consecutively through books of the Bible, as I am. – But once you get stuck into these unusual texts, it proves very rewarding.

These are glimpses into how down-to-earth the world of the Bible really was. – It's not just a theology textbook or Christian novel or some book of abstract religious principles or sayings. –

No, Scripture was written in real life, to real people in real places, about real issues. God chose to reveal Himself to us through the flesh-and-blood stickiness of daily life. – Through letting us eavesdrop on an apostle managing everyday relationships among fallen people in imperfect churches.

Now, remember how Paul ended his great resurrection chapter: 15:58...

But HOW? – How do we make sure we're doing the Lord's work the right way, and not the wrong way? – In every age there are many who claim to be doing the Lord's work, but not in the Lord's way. –

How do we make sure that's not us? – Paul is going to show us:

Stand, Read vv. 5-12 & Pray:

Give title...

→GOSPEL: First things first, do you know this Lord? – Before you start to work for Him, you must let Him work for you. – Eph. 2:8-9...

***SIX PRINCIPLES for how the Lord's work should be done:**

1. v. 5, VISION

v. 5 – Here was Paul, probably nearing the end of his almost 3 yrs of fruitful ministry in Ephesus. – 3 yrs of busy, exhausting ministry. – YET he's not soaking in his success, basking in all the fruit he left behind, content with all he'd accomplished. –

NOT SO! – Already he’s planning his next ministry trips, plural! Picture him there on his walk home from another hot, full day of teaching & dialogue there in the Hall of Tyrannus at Ephesus:

‘Alright, next, I need to get to Macedonia (only 1,500 kms journey, by land & sea, on dangerous roads & waters!) – gotta follow-up on the churches at Philippi (Euodia & Synteché, will they ever agree?!), Thessalonica (are they still confused about the end-times? Still got that lazy busybody who wants to eat but not work?, etc.). And the Bereans, are they still more noble than the Thessalonians, searching the Scriptures? Or have they fallen behind?...’

‘Plus there may be new frontiers in that province, to push in further with the gospel and reach new cities and plant more churches?...

‘Then, another 1,000 kms or so by boat or foot, down to Corinth....’

Truly a man of gospel vision: The grass never grew under Paul’s feet. – But the shoes *on* his feet, imagine how worn they were, after all the thousands of kms he had travelled. – The man was driven, gospel-driven.

In spite of many setbacks and disappointments along the way, Paul was not afraid to make plans and resolutions. – He was a planner because he knew we are made in the image of a God who plans. –

And Paul knew that God’s sovereign plans are carried out through our human responsibility and human plans. – God doesn’t do the planning for us. – He does it *through* us. – God gives us the privilege of carrying out His eternal will through our will, our desires & our wise plans.

This is why Proverbs assumes that godly, wise people make plans:

Prov. 16:3, “Commit your works to the LORD and your plans will be established.” – Prov. 20:18, “Prepare plans by consultation, and make war by wise guidance.” (cf. 15:22) Prov. 21:5, “The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage, but everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty.”

+ Winston Churchill: “Nothing frustrated him quite like uncertain, passive leaders...

[One of the reasons for such failed leaders was] *they lacked a plan. Even if one possessed the will to act, it would not be enough without a plan. “It is better to have an ambitious plan than none at all,” he believed, and he spent large amounts of time planning in anticipation of crises while those without wise planning were overwhelmed and immobilised by events.* (pp. 57-58 in Chanksi, *Manly Dominion*)

Paul said to young Timothy, “Now you followed my teaching, conduct, purpose....” (2 Tim. 3:10).

In 2 Thess. 1:11, Paul prayed that God would “fulfil every desire for goodness”, ESV, “every resolve for good” (vv. 11-12)....

→Beloved: Do you know where you’re going? – Do you set goals & plans – for your marriage? Your family? Your role in this church?

→What is our vision as a church? – Answer: ‘Who are *you* evangelising & discipling?’ – The Great Commission, Matt. 28. – Never could we alter or improve on that as our marching orders from the King.

Sure, we have specific ways that we believe Antioch can best fulfil that Great Commission. – Specific ministries to evangelise & disciple. – Those are reflected in the annual budget, church ministries, initiatives, burdens & passions. –

But our core biblical vision remains the same, established by Christ Himself: ‘Who are you evangelising, and who are you discipling, as a part of this church body?’

→THIS is why we want a building – for NO other reason, than better to fulfil that same Great Commission!...

2. vv. 6-7, FLEXIBILITY

Inflexibility has paralysed many gifted people. – They have loads of passion & ability, but no flexibility when things don’t go according to plan. – They are so rigid that any variation from the original game plan shatters them. – Not so with Paul, our example for doing the Lord’s work:

vv. 6-7 – At least 5 clues of Paul’s flexibility here: v. 6, “perhaps...even...wherever” & v. 7, “hope...if the Lord permits.”

v. 6b, remember: ships couldn’t sail in winter in the ancient world, b/c of the storms.

Here is a focused, determined, deliberate man of vision. – Yet also a humble, flexible man submitted to the sovereignty of God. – That’s a tough balance isn’t it? – I usually feel like I’m looking at one side of that coin or the other, but not both!

That’s why Proverbs speaks as it does: Prov. 16:9, “In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines His steps”. – Prov. 19:21, “Many plans are in a man’s heart, but the counsel of the LORD will stand.” –

My plans are not sovereign; God’s are. – My plans are never guaranteed; only God’s are. – My plans should be made in pencil. – God writes in permanent marker.

‘DV’ is stamped across all our itineraries: *Deo Volente*, if God wills. Because James 4 taught us that: ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.’

Paul had said this earlier: 1 Cor. 4:19, “But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills....”

Acts 18:21, Paul said this to the Ephesian church: “I will return to you again IF God wills.”

And to the Romans in Rom. 1 & Rom. 15: “...always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you...so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God.”

As we’ve seen often on Sun PMs in Ecclesiastes, much in life is out of our control. – Life under the sun in this vain, fallen world, is full of frustrations and interruptions. – God has arranged it this way, so that we will trust Him, and learn to be flexible.

+ A little known fact is that the great missionary, David Livingstone, actually wanted to go to China. – All his life he had dreamed of being a missionary in China. – He had a large vision and great burden for China. –

BUT: the Lord sent him to Africa instead. – Here he lived & laboured & died for the African people that he so loved. – Livingstone served here willingly, unreservedly, and very fruitfully. – Because he trusted a sovereign God and was flexible. –

With Isaiah he said, “Lord, here am I, send me.” (without conditions, without Ts & Cs). – With boy Samuel he said, “Speak Lord, Your servant is listening.” – With the clay, he said, ‘Lord, You are the Potter, make me & mould me as You please.’

3. v. 6c & v.11b, SUPPORT

vv. 6c & 11b – Twice Paul uses this same word. – I.e., ‘I now I can count on you to supply all I need for the journey: food, money, companions, transport; contacts for support & accomm/hospitality at stops along the way, etc.’

→Again, how providential that this come today, same day as our 2014 Budget is being released as a church. – As leaders we’ve always been open with you. – A Budget is basically the shepherds saying to the flock,

‘Here’s our vision. Under Christ, and in obedience to His Great Commission, here’s where we’re headed. And here’s what its going to cost to get there. Like Paul with his churches, we too now we can count on you. It will involve sacrifice for us all. But what a privilege to partner in such a cause. 1 Cor. 15:58....

→I thank God for the way many of you have helped with our interns over the years also, “sending them on their way” as they serve Christ across Africa.

4. vv. 7-8, THOROUGHNESS

v. 7 – NB, the Corinthians were a touchy church. – 2 Cor. goes on to show that it gets worse, much worse, after 1 Cor. – All because of a few opponents on the inside that stir up great opposition and suspicion against Paul. – They question his motives & love for the flock, which is a very low blow.

So Paul wants to be very clear & thorough with them here: v. 5, ‘I know you wish I would come by sea, straight across the Aegean, the short-cut. But I can’t, b/c of my vision & responsibility towards Macedonia also. Yet you have a special place in my heart, and you will not just be a stopover like in Macedonia. I’m going to be camping out for a good while with you, some quality time.

I.e., ‘I don’t just want a drive-by, hit-and-run visit. I need to know how you’re really doing. Especially after you’ve received this 16-chp epistle on a whole of ethical issues and conflicts you are facing E.G. (quick review of 1 Cor.)...

Paul was under no illusions that this one letter was a cure-all or a quick fix. – Cf. chp. 4, he was their spiritual “father” in Christ. –

Paul knew that kids don’t grow up overnight. – Nor do they raise themselves! – Parenting is not for sissies. – Paul knew the Corinthian church would need extensive teaching, counselling, discipling, mentoring and “training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

Paul was thoroughly committed to thoroughness in ministry. – He wanted the work to be sound & lasting, permanent & worthwhile. – He would not tolerate superficiality and shallowness in ministry. – Paul knew that the Great Commission is not a short-term ministry or a weekend project: Matt. 28:19...

That is a long and demanding process. – Paul would not be satisfied just with handing out tracts, or holding tent crusades. – He would not even be satisfied with individual converts. – He wanted to see healthy churches established that yielded mature believers.

v. 8 – WHAT would Paul spend his last months at Ephesus doing? And then if he reached Corinth, what would he spend all winter doing there? – In both places, he would be consumed with the same things that always consumed his ministry:

Col. 1:28-29!...

I.e., doing what he did in Ephesus for 3 yrs, Acts 20: *teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews & Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ...going about preaching the kingdom ...not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God...night & day not ceasing to admonish each one with tears...*

→Paul also knew that Ephesus & Corinth needed not only his teaching, but also his *example*. – Next to Scripture, this is a leader's most powerful tool for influencing others. – Not his programs, his eloquence, his volume, or even his productivity. – Alongside his doctrine, his greatest impact will be through example:

As Paul also makes clear in Acts 20: *You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials...*

I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'.

They would be watching his life & doctrine closely. – Like all believers, they needed to see truth embodied in their leaders, truth applied & modelled, truth fleshed out & lived out.

Paul also emphasised his thorough example in 1 Thess 2 – you know we brought you not only the gospel of God, but our *lives* as well'. – And in many other places: 'You know, you saw how we lived. So follow my example. Imitate me as a imitate Christ...'

→NB, crucial aspect of thoroughness here: Paul wasn't just in Ephesus as a planner & dreamer & strategist, and a consultant for others, until he could get to Corinth. – He was also a doer, being faithful in the present, busy in the trenches of ministry. – As Christ taught, "faithful in little, faithful in much" (Lk. 16)....

5. v. 9, OPPORTUNITY

~ G. Campbell Morgan said, "If you have no opposition in the place you serve, you're serving in the wrong place."

v. 9 – "Effective", same Grk. word found in Heb. 4:12, "The word of God is living and effective," – I.e., something that is active, powerful, potent in God's hands. – That's what this open door was at Ephesus. – WHY such a powerful door?

Because of the powerful thing that would walk through that door: the word of God, that gospel, the very "power of God unto salvation" for any who'll believe (Rom. 1:16).

This lingo of 'open doors' gets abused today. – We'll come back to that in a moment. – First we must know: What does the Bible mean by "open doors"? – What did Paul mean here?

Answer: WHY was Paul in Ephesus in the first place? – The Book of Acts is clear: he went there to preach the gospel. – What were his opponents trying to prevent: his preaching of the gospel. –

Acts 14:27, Paul's missions report after 1st missionary journey: "they began to report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles." –

NOT an open door just for personal circumstances or relationships; an open door for the advance of the gospel! – Like in Acts 16:14, when God "opened" Lydia's heart to the gospel.

Col. 4:3 also makes clear what Paul means by open doors. – Turn there... Key: "a door for the word, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ..." –

Doors for the Word, the most important (and only!) open doors you should be looking for.

What was Luke's summary of Paul's "open door" at Ephesus? (as a result of Paul having use of the synagogue for 3 mos., then the lecture hall for 2 yrs.) Acts 19, "so that all the Jews & Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord ...So the word of the Lord was growing mightily & prevailing" (vv. 10, 20).

NB, 1 Cor. 16:9b – Not "BUT"; he says "and". – It's a package-deal in ministry: advance & adversaries; ministry & enemies. – Paul needed to stay in Ephesus to "utilise opportunities & neutralise opposition" (Friesen). –

+ Recall that Ephesus was a demonic stronghold for pagan idolatry in that entire region. – Ephesian life revolved around Diana's Temple, one of the 7 wonders of the world, 4x the size of the Parthenon in Athens! – There was an entire silversmith industry making replicas of Diana's Temple; plus the entire ritual prostitution and all the perversions and occult practices and evils that came with that.

Acts 19 shows how Paul's preaching had caused the light of the gospel to confront all of that darkness. – Satan would not easily relinquish one of his most strategic centres of operation. – So Paul was in big trouble. –

Cf. 1 Cor. 15:32, "I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus". – They were in a bloodthirsty rage against this preacher. – Repeat: 16:9b...

→When you do the Lord's work, expect opposition: That's the way it always was for the OT prophets. – That's the way it was for Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the wall. – Expect to face the Tobiahs & the Sanballats – it's par for the course when you minister the gospel.

That's the way it was for Jesus, for His apostles (Matt. 5:10-12), and for all His servants down through church history. – Why should it be any different or any easier for us? –

Where in Scripture do God's servants ever move *away from need?*; *God's servants always move towards need?*

Repeat: v. 9...

→Looking for a place to serve the Lord? – Look for a place with problems. – Look for a place with enemies, discouragements, difficulty & opposition. – Look for where you can be useful, where you can “abound in the Lord's work”.

→HOW do we endure such hostility in the Lord's work? – 15:31, “I die daily”. – Acts 20:24...

AN ASIDE on Guidance & Decision-Making – FOUR LESSONS on discerning God's will:

(1) *Beware of today's 'open door' theology.*

This language of “open doors” gets used today to justify everything under the sun: from men having an affair, to unmarried people living together, to children rebelling against parents, to students ditching school – all under the guise of saying, ‘The Lord opened this door for me, I had to do it!’

But as Jay Adams points out – beware of walking through every open door – it might be an elevator shaft. – Some open doors lead to an outhouse (long drop toilet), or a mine shaft! –

+ Jonah wanted to run from God, so he caught the next available ship to Tarshish. – Imagine how he could've justified that, ‘Aha, an open door, an available ship, going to Tarshish, with space for me!’...

→Watch out: This open-door theology also gets used as an excuse for laziness, as Kevin DeYoung points out in his superb book, *Just Do Something*: ‘I put my CV out to many places, and no one has contacted me. The Lord just isn't opening any doors.’ –

Maybe that's b/c you still need to knock on a lot more doors, make a lot more phone calls? – You need to “visit every potential employer in town before you blame your unemployment on God”.

(2) *Beware of using 'closed doors' as an escape or excuse.*

E.g., ‘I know I need to phone this person to talk over a tough issue, but I'm out of air time. It must be a sign, God is closing that door. So I'll just vent to them on e-mail or SMS instead,’ even though that is totally inappropriate for this situation.

OR I've heard mature believers speak about a God-given responsibility or Christian relationship in their life and say, 'Well, I can't see a way forward, I think God has road-blocked me, He's shut that door, I guess I'm leaving.'

We're creating an entire generation of Christians with no resolve or stamina anymore. – We're creating a new breed of feminised believers who believe that trouble = closed door, that difficulty = closed door!...

Contra 15:58a, "steadfast, immovable". – As Elizabeth Elliot famously put it, "Did you think God would call you to something easier?" – Often God's will is harder and more difficult for us. – Because that's how we grow, and that's how His ultimate will for us is accomplished – "our sanctification", to make us more holy, like His Son. –

Often, God's next step for us will not be warm & fuzzy (a 'feeling of peace'); it will hard & messy, but best for us & for His gospel & His glory.

+ Like Paul here, v. 9, "many adversaries" at Ephesus, yet still he stays. – Corinth, much opposition, yet still he goes. – Jerusalem, great threat to his life, yet (Acts 20-21) still he goes. – Rome, a price on his head, yet still he goes, eventually losing his head there for the gospel. (repeat 15:58?)

+ Kirbys, Onthatile, now visited some 40 different properties, yet not one has panned out yet (and after finally making an offer 2 wks ago, was turned down, but looked at 7 more properties just this past week!). – But he's not giving up! – 15:58...!

+ Adoniram Judson in Burma/Myanmar, 6 yrs before first convert. - William Carey in India, 7 yrs before first convert. – Robert Moffat in Kuruman, Northern Cape, 8 yrs before first convert.

What if any of these great missionary heroes had used today's open-door theology? – None of them would've lasted, nor their work!...

(3) *Circumstances are not road signs that reveal God's will for us.*

This crucial phrase, "the will of God", is only used in two ways in Scripture: God's secret will of decree & providence & His revealed will of obedience & Scripture. – No 3rd category of His individual, personal will that He reveals to you outside of His Word, the 'centre of His will', etc. –

NB, He *does* have a very personal will for you, but it can only be known in the side mirror, not the windscreen. – It's His unseen, silent, but perfectly wise & good providential hand in your life. – Cannot be known in advance, but can be trusted & rested in!...

Circumstances are not authoritative; they are not infallible. – Our circumstances must always be interpreted by Scripture, our only infallible guide, and our final authority and closed canon of complete revelation from God (cf. 2 Cor. 2:12, Paul walking away from an open door for the gospel, b/c of the needs of the churches).

Circumstances are not the Bible; they are the context in which we live out the Bible and advance the gospel. – As Friesen puts it, "Open doors are God-given opportunities for service, NOT specific guidance from God requiring one to enter."

(4) *Even the Apostle Paul did not normally rely on supernatural guidance.*

If anyone had a “direct line” to God (as far as guidance is concerned), it would have to be Paul: (a) Damascus Road vision; (b) Macedonian vision; (c) in Corinth, vision at night in prison to encourage;

(d) at sea on prison ship, prophecy re: safety of all passengers aboard ship; (e) plus other prophecies about him (Acts 11, 13, 20:23, 21:10-11); (f) plus 2 Cor 12, caught up to 3rd heaven!...

To use today’s lingo, surely Paul ‘moved in the supernatural’. – OR did he?! – If these revelations were so normal, then WHY doesn’t he do that here, when making major travel plans & decisions with big implications on multiple churches?! –

Who don’t we see Paul here doing what has become trendy today among Christians: rubber stamping the most mundane decisions with ‘God told me!’ (from what to wear, eat, shop, hobbies, etc.)

NB, claiming special revelation here would’ve saved Paul SO MUCH time & trouble...

INSTEAD, what do we see? – It’s in the epistles, not in Acts, that we find Paul’s *normal mode of operation, his example for our decision-making & Christian guidance today*:

Through wise human planning, vision & courage, flexibility & thoroughness, teamwork & relationships, prayer & faith, patience & obedience.

→If God wanted to guide us by remote-control & audible voice for every decision, why did He give us brains? – And why did He give so many biblical examples & principles, and whole books like Proverbs – ALL for learning how to make wise decisions?!...

6. vv. 10-12, TEAMWORK

Paul was no maverick or lone ranger, going it alone with rugged individualism. – Nor was he some superstar or celebrity that felt he was indispensable and irreplaceable. –

+ In Acts, it’s always: ‘Paul and Barnabas, Paul & Silas, Paul & Luke, Paul & Aristarchus, Paul & Mark, Paul & Timothy’. –

In Rom. 16, Paul devotes a whole chapter to greeting many friends & co-workers, a list of 24 names & 2 households.

Paul knew he needed co-workers. – And he knew that the churches needed his co-workers too:

vv. 10-11 – Paul was concerned about how they would receive young Timothy. – They were a worldly, immature, unhealthy, divided church. –

They had their factions: “I am of Paul, I’m of Apollos, I’m of Cephas” (1:12). – But there was no “I am of Timothy” club there at all. –

He didn’t feature. – Paul was concerned that they might ignore or mistreat him. – So he gives some put-offs & put-ons for how they should receive Timothy:

(-) *Negatively* (vv. 10a, 11a): Do not intimidate, frustrate, despise or dishonour him.

I.e., "...see that you put him at ease among you" (ESV). – And v. 11a, i.e., "let no one disparage, or look down on him or refuse to accept him".

WHY? – v. 10c – I.e., 'You reject Timothy, your rejecting me,' says Paul, b/c I sent him, and he is serving the same Lord as me.

(+) *Positively*: Here was another very practical way to show their support for Paul's young delegate: v. 11b...

v. 12 – Apollos had leadership qualities that Timothy lacked, and was much better known at Corinth. – He seemed like the perfect compliment to the team needed there.

So Paul had "greatly encouraged, strongly urged", pled intensely with him. – But to no avail. – Apollos disagreed; he wouldn't budge at present. – Maybe b/c of all the needs & opportunities with Paul at Ephesus? – Maybe b/c of hesitance b/c of the mess at Corinth (and his childish admirers/faction)? – Maybe other factors?...

→NB, if ever there was a time for Paul to pull out the 'God told me' card, it was now, in order to twist Apollos' arm. – And the Corinthians were used to assertive, power-hungry leaders in society. – Not so for Paul. – Paul doesn't want to play the Holy Spirit in a man's life. –

Paul is flexible (as we've seen). – He trusts a sovereign God. – He respected another man's convictions & preferences. – And so should we.

→A church must be ready to benefit from a variety of teachers. – God uses all shapes & sizes of preachers to proclaim His one gospel. – Tough Paul, tender Timothy, eloquent Apollos. –

All are mere messengers, all bringing the same message of Christ, and all should be received & respected by the church. – As long as we are fed the truth, it matters not the hand that feeds us.

CONCL. – Recap 6 Principles...

These are exciting days in the life of Antioch. – Whole new horizons opening up for us – the 3 Ms!: Madagascar, Monash, and a Meeting place of our own here!...

BUT none of this will ever be done rightly without adhering vigilantly to all six of these principles...

PRAY