

TITLE: Getting God's Guidance

TEXT: Acts 13:1-12

INTRODUCTION

Do you remember back to the days before Apple Maps and Google Maps? This really wasn't that long ago! There was a time even before Garmen and Tom-Tom GPS's, before Map Quest, and even before cell phones to "phone a friend" when you needed actual maps to get where you needed to go! How did we ever survive? More accurately I should say, "How did YOU ever survive?" I have to admit by the time I could drive, I already had a Garmen GPS in my car. But there was a time when every glove box in America had a map! And if you were going to go on vacation, you better have prepared directions! I remember going with my mom and dad as a kid to the local AAA to map out our vacation. These were essential documents that always sat within reach.

I'm sure *you* have a few stories when you weren't as prepared as you should have been. ***Perhaps you can recall a time when your lack of directions got you in a load of trouble.*** I remember back to when I was dating Emma. I was taking her home for the first to meet my family. We were driving from Columbia, SC straight up to Cleveland, OH. I had driven the same route many times before, *so I didn't need to input the directions on my GPS* - I knew where I was going! Sure enough, as Emma and I were enjoying some wonderful conversation, I began noticing signs and scenery I didn't recall before. However, I didn't think much of it. So we kept driving (Yes, I do blame my wife for her amazing powers of distraction!) We eventually passed a giant cross, one I knew I'd never seen before. At that point I knew something wasn't right. We booted up my Garmin GPS and it showed us an hour off course! We were somehow in TN, a state we weren't even supposed to cross through! I didn't have my watch vibrating or my phone dinging to let me know I'd made a wrong turn. Because of this, we were two hours late for dinner, and Emma got an early witness of my lack of spatial skills with directions.

We all want clear guidance. We love to know where we're going and how to get there. If we don't know either of these, anxiety sets in. So it's no surprise that when we don't know what God wants us to do, we begin to feel anxious and uneasy. We begin to live in this constant state of "Did I miss something?! Did I miss God's will for my life? Will I even know His guidance when I see it?" Some people even fall into a crippled state they can't get out of. They not only don't sense God's direction; they feel they missed out on His will for their life...so what's the point in continuing?

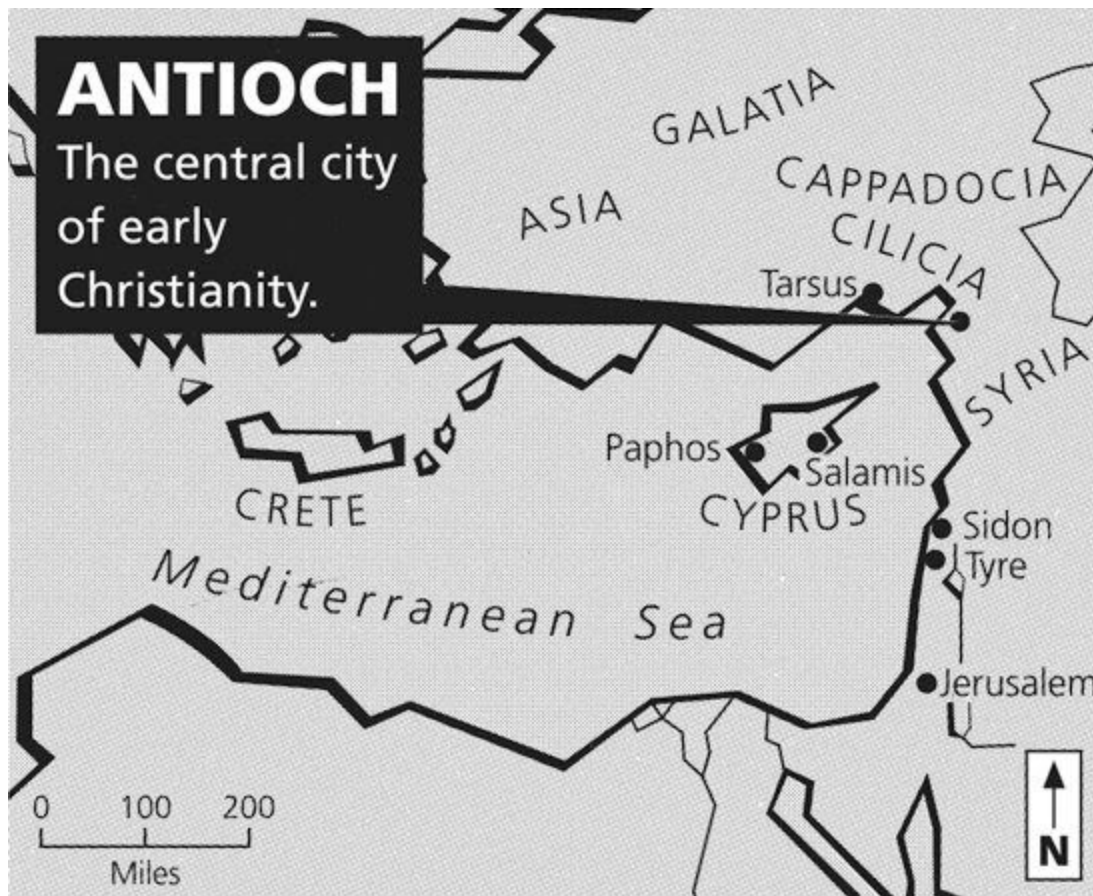
This may or may not be you, but one thing our Christian culture has made BIG DEAL out of is FINDING GOD'S CALLING / GOD'S WILL / GOD'S GUIDANCE. So many books have been written about this subject, yet it doesn't always seem to easily transfer to our own life situations. We do believe that God wants to personally guide our lives (see see this exemplified in the Bible - God specifically and personally led many people). Who's to say He won't continue doing that today?

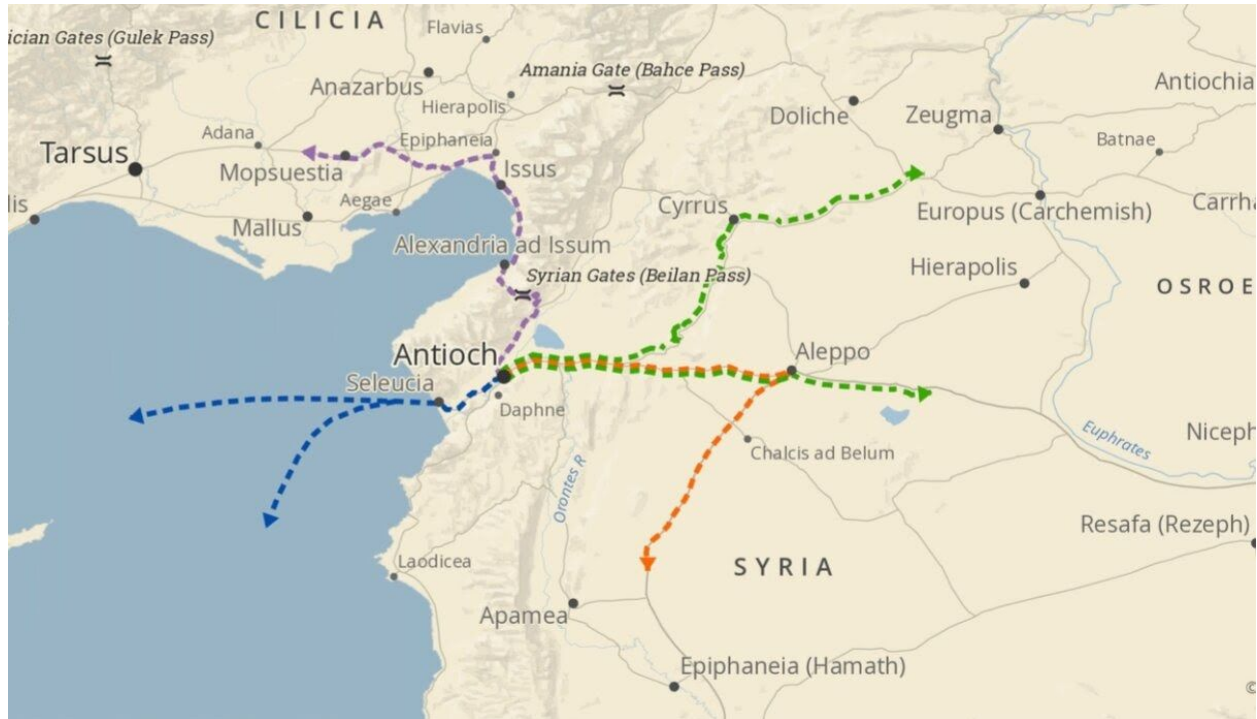
But HOW do we get that guidance? This morning we are going to go through Acts 13:1-12 to look for clues on God's guidance. What I have to say today is not life-shattering, but they are ***proven principles*** from God's Word. ***We will see four principles for getting God's guidance.***

BODY

As we come into our text for today, we see that the disciples are in need of guidance. We have already seen that the ground work has been laid for the Gospel to continue its outward expansion. The Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles in chapter 10, the Church at Antioch was launched in chapter 11, and continued persecution forced the Gospel to advance further in chapter 12. ***But just how far was the Gospel to go?*** If you remember back to Acts 1:8, we learned the setup for the book and also the purpose of Christ's mission: ***"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."*** We see that most of this has already been fulfilled; only the last part remains: ***"To the ends of the earth."***

Now we see in Acts 13:1 the disciples were in Antioch. It makes sense that Antioch would be the place where the Gospel would best be launched out from. The first reason is because it is now the **central city** in early Christianity. Remember that Paul and Barnabas have already spent an entire year here. It was in this city, separate from the overwhelming influence of Judaism, that **Christianity built its own identity**. It was here that the believers were first called Christians. Secondly, Antioch was a **major trade city**. Therefore, it had major trade routes for travel in every direction, including quick access to nearby Seleucia for access to the Mediterranean Sea. **So it makes sense that here the disciples began to consider how God might want to fulfill the remaining part of his promise: "To the ends of the earth."**

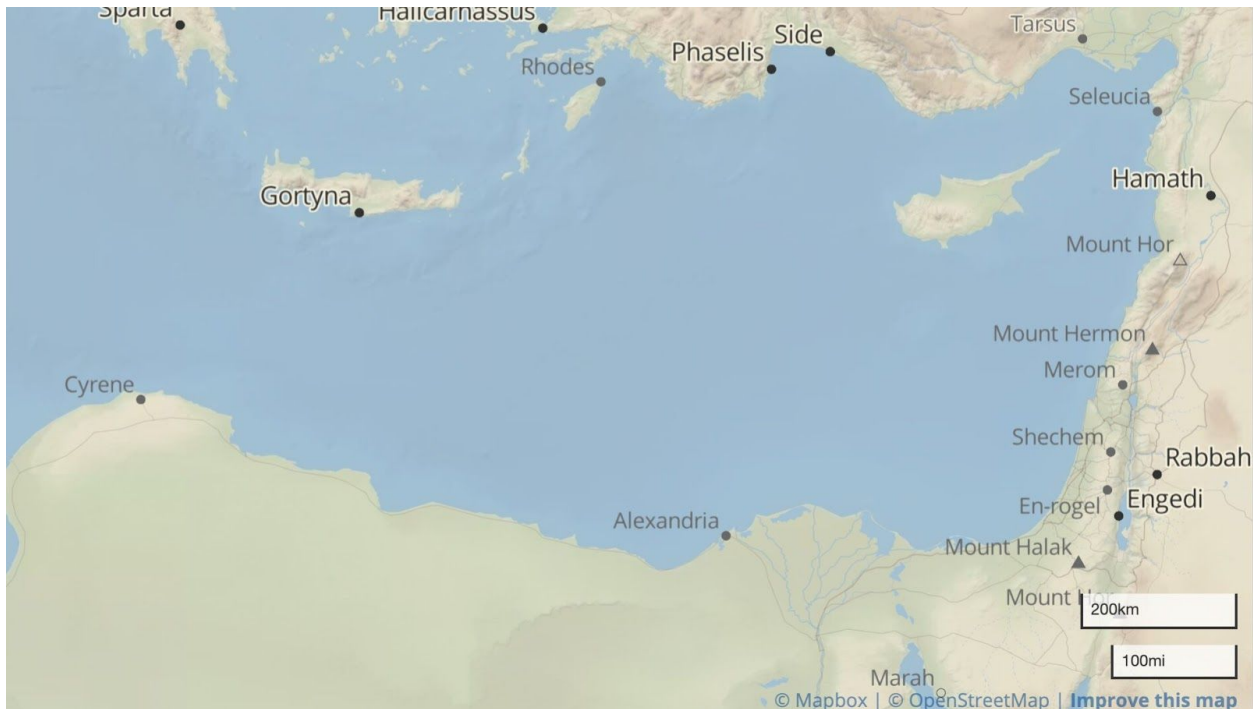




Background

Acts 13:1 picks up with a list of five highly influential men, known here as prophets and teachers. These were the leaders of the Church in Antioch. They are **Barnabas** (Son of Encouragement), **Simeon**, whose name means “black,” so he was most likely darker-skinned and of African descent; **Lucius of Cyrene**, who was from Northern Africa, quite far from Antioch. There was also **Manaen**, who was a lifelong friend of Herod Antipas, not Herod Agrippa, who just killed James, the apostle. Rather, Herod Antipas was responsible for the death of John the Baptist. Clearly Manean held considerable influence among the Romans via this connection. And lastly of course **Paul**, a lifelong Pharisee now converted for Christ.

Already, before they move to the ends of the world, they themselves were already composed of just that! I personally am encouraged by the men represented here, whose stories of how the Gospel came to them we will never know. ***The multi-ethnic nature of this group confirms this Gospel of Jesus is for all the world!*** This alone should have encouraged and inspired them to see their representative makeup continued among others!



But how are they to know what to do next? Obviously they knew Jesus commanded they preach the Gospel to the whole world. They felt they were ready for the next move. Do they just simply precede? But where? When? ***In this situation, it was clear to them that God's guidance was needed.***

POINT #1

Continuing to Acts 13:2 we see God's guidance meeting them in a specific way. It says the Holy Spirit said ***"Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."*** This is some very clear guidance! Now we don't know for certain if this was an audible voice. It could have been that multiple events occurred that made it evident the Holy Spirit was leading them. Either way, it was now clear to them what was next: ***Paul and Barnabas were to be set apart as missionaries of a new work.***

But notice at the beginning of v.2 what these five men were doing: ***worshipping and fasting.*** "Worshipping" here literally means "ministering to the Lord." It was a Greek word at the time used for offering public service to the state - here these believers were offering service to the Lord as their

normal way of life. Regarding fasting, Jesus said that after He ascended to Heaven, His disciples would do this.

That they were worshipping and fasting indicates the church was in a ***mood of particular expectancy and openness to the Lord's leading***. This is what led them to a time *of intense devotion when normal human activities like eating were suspended and times of worship were extended - they believed this would make God's guidance clearer to them.*

This leads us to our first principle for getting God's guidance: **God's guidance is clearer when we are nearer to God. (v.2) You could say "Our discernment of God's guidance is heightened during periods of heightened devotion."**

- Discernment increases as devotion increases.
- This is true in two senses. First, as we mature in our devotion to God over the course of our lives, we experience a similar maturing of our discernment abilities (aka, our ability to hear and know God's will for our lives). But it's also true that we can have special seasons of heightened devotion to God when we especially want to know His will. This could be due to a big decision, a challenging setback, or purely a desire to accelerate our relationship with God.

Examples

- I think of how Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness for 40 days to fast and pray while being tempted by Satan. He was led into this period of ***heightened devotion*** for the sake of preparing Him for his public ministry.
- We also know that Jesus the night before He chose His twelve disciples went out to a mountain to pray all night (Luke 6:12).
- I think of how Queen Esther called a fast for three days and nights for all the Jews before she went in to request the King's favor to save her people from annihilation.

- These are examples of times when God's people committed themselves to heightened devotion in order to increase their discernment of God's will and to receive God's blessing.

There are specific times in a believer's life when they are prompted by the Spirit to heighten their devotion for the sake of either receiving God's blessing or heightening their discernment of His will.

Perhaps the best advice I could give you today is to not make an important decision if you are not walking closely with God. If you truly believe that God has a will for your life and that He wants to reveal that will to you, you must be walking with Him. ***This is so important because the biggest obstacle we face in decision-making is our own will.*** We always see what we want. We can easily become convinced that our will is best! But what does God's Word say? Romans 12:2 says, ***“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”***

There is another “will” at play here - God's will! When we walk close with God, what we discover is an aligning of our will with God's will. For this reason, we don't usually need an audible voice of God telling us what we should do. ***God often reveals His will as our hearts conform to His will.***

But it may still be true that God is calling you into a season of heightened devotion to Him. Do you have an important decision before you? Does God's will seem fuzzy? Maybe now is the time to do what the disciples do here: Worship and fast. Maybe now is a time to set aside extended times for worship, Bible study, and prayer.

POINT #2

Moving along in our text to Acts 13:3, we see that after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on Paul and Barnabas and sent them off. This verse can easily be overlooked but it contains a key point regarding guidance. It says they laid their hands on them and sent them off. ***It wasn't just the Holy Spirit who sent them, it was also the church who sent them!*** The

Holy Spirit revealed His will but the church confirmed that will by their agreement, which is represented in their laying on of hands and their sending, or commissioning of, Paul and Barnabas.

We saw in Acts 6:6 that the Apostles laid their hands on the deacons for the ministry they would perform. In 2 Timothy 1:6 we know that Paul commissioned and affirmed Timothy's gifting for ministry through the laying on of his hands. It doesn't mean these gifts came because hands were laid on them, but the confirmation of these gifts was acknowledged in the laying on of hands. Similarly, they were acknowledging and setting these men apart for God's work by the laying on of their hands. It was a sign of their agreement that this was indeed the will of God for these men. The church's praying and sending was their confirmation that this was good and right.

This leads us to our next principle for getting God's guidance: **God's guidance is confirmed by the church. (v.3)** God doesn't want us making decisions alone. I've heard it said before that "a self-deciding man is a delusional man." This is because we are highly biased by our own desires and thoughts. Our judgments of ourselves are similar to looking at a multi-curved piece of glass at a carnival - it always distorts reality! Proverbs 12:15 says, *"The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice."* In other words, making decisions by ourselves is foolish. Rather, wisdom is found, and distortions are removed, when we seek the wisdom of others. Proverbs 15:22 says, *"Without counsel, plans fail, but with many advisors they succeed."*

This is especially the case with the church. **God uses the church to further interpret the Holy Spirit's guidance in people's lives. God uses the church to discern spiritual gifting in people, to consider next steps for missionaries, to discern timing for when to act, and to help others make important decisions.** Sometimes these decisions need to come to church leadership; other times they can be helped along by other lay people in the church.

This includes community groups! No one here likely knows you better than your community group. Maybe you need to start with them. Bring to them

your dilemma. Ask them for prayer and shared wisdom. **God intends for us to heed the counsel of the church in our decisions.** Disregarding the discerning voice of the church is similar to driving through warning signs only to find the road missing ahead of you. God calls us to take advantage of and trust the voice of others, and especially the church, in our decision-making. God uses the church to help us get God's guidance.

POINT #3

Going on to Acts 13:4, we see that Paul and Barnabas, having been directed by the Holy Spirit, go down to Seleucia, and from there sailed to Cyprus. Wait just a second: **How did they know to go here?** What made them certain that God was leading them to the island of Cyprus? Did the Holy Spirit give specific and clear details on what Paul's and Barnabas' mission was? No! All we learn is *who* the Holy Spirit has this special assignment for. But where to?! There is no other clear information given here directly from the Holy Spirit for further direction. Obviously it was clear enough to Paul and Barnabas that God was commissioning them for missionary work, but that was all they knew at this time.



You can see on this map the full journey taken by Paul and Barnabas. Did the Holy Spirit give them this map before they ventured out? Of course not! This is because of principle #3: ***God's guidance rarely comes in full measure. (v.4-5)*** God hardly ever gives us the full blueprint concerning His will. Instead we usually get just the next step. I'm sure you have amusingly found this true in your life. Why is this the case? --> You see, ***God gives us enough guidance to obey Him but not so much that we abandon Him.***

- God wants to keep us in a position of faith and neediness! If God laid out the entire plan, we would be tempted to trust more in the plan than in the God who gave us the plan! The focus becomes our own ability to fulfill the plan than on God's ability to fulfill the plan.

Story: I remember back when God spoke to me at the University of Toledo on the last day of the semester regarding my future. Phone rang with no one to answer, but I saw a beautiful sunset through which God spoke to me, "If I could paint such a beautiful scene in the sky, surely you can trust me with the direction I'm calling you to." All I knew was that this decision was to leave UT and go home. The image God gave me through this entire time was that of a long, dark tunnel. I surely couldn't see where it led, but in my hand was a candle that shed just enough light to know the next step.

- God spoke to Abraham in a similar way: ***"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation."***

I'm sure most people here are following God in something that they don't know how it's going to end. ***Our comfort is not found in knowing the end. Instead our comfort is found in the God of the plan!*** He intends to take care of you! He promises to provide for you. As my friend used to say, "If it's God's will, it's God's bill."

- Proverbs 3:5-6: ***"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths."***

Now it's true our comfort comes from the God of the plan, but our comfort also comes from obeying God in what we do know. What has He revealed to you? Are you working to follow through on all he has revealed to you? ***When you don't know how it ends tomorrow, choose to obey what you can today. You can be confident that if you've obeyed all He's said so far, then you can be certain, He will reveal the next step in due time.***

This requires us to keep our spiritual eyes peeled for God's next leading. Now God doesn't always reveal His will in a purely spiritual way. He uses our experiences, connections, and various circumstances to help discern His will. For instance, we know that Barnabas is from the island of Cyprus. He had many connections there, including family. It just made sense to start their ministry by going there! When God's will is not vividly clear, walk by faith in what you do know. ***You can have great peace in this!***

If God didn't want them to go Cyprus, He would have made that clear. This is exactly what God did with the Macedonian Call in Acts 16. Here it says in v.6: ***And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.*** If the direction you're taking is so opposite of what God wants, then He'll make that evident.

What's most important through all of this is your simple obedience and your willingness to walk by faith. ***I think the biggest reason we fail to experience more of God's good plans in our life is because we fail to believe He will bring about a better end.*** If God is good, His plans are good. If God is worthy of being trusted, surely we can trust His leading along the way.

And sometimes that leading leads right into persecution, as we see happening in our passage...

POINT #4

Picking up in Acts 13:5, it says, ***“When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. When they had gone through the whole island as far***

as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a man of intelligence, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and sought to hear the word of God. But Elymas the magician (for that is the meaning of his name) opposed them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.”

We are introduced here to opposition in the form of a man named Bar-Jesus, which literally means “Son of Jesus.” He’s clearly trying to use this fake title to deceitfully misguide people away from the Gospel. In addition to his title, he is also a magician who’s using his supposed supernatural ability to persuade people to a Gospel perversion.

Bar-Jesus becomes an issue for Paul and Barnabas when they attempt leading the proconsul to faith in Jesus. Now the proconsul was like the Roman governor over the island. The conversion of such a high person of influence would be a giant leap forward for the Gospel. Bar-Jesus likely opposed this so much because of this reason and also because up to this point he likely served alongside the proconsul for wisdom and advice. Now Paul and Barnabas came to disrupt this arrangement for him.

Thus Paul and Barnabas faced opposition in bringing the Gospel to this key leader. And isn’t it true that anytime we passionately follow God’s will we too will face opposition? When the powers of the Gospel move out, the powers of darkness are right ready to move in! And this was just the beginning of the opposition faced along their missionary journey. When God first called Paul to ministry, He said in Acts 9:16, *“For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”* Paul knew that following God’s will would not be a peaceful journey!

We also need to come to a point of acknowledging this as well. The New Testament is clear that doing God’s will is sometimes similar to taking the calvary road to the cross! 2 Timothy 3:12 says, “Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” 1 Peter 4:12-13 says, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings.” And I’m sure that Paul and

Barnabas also knew that opposition awaited them and would only increase as they ventured out.

But when the opposition comes for you, are you going to call into question God's leading? Our last principle for today is: *God's guidance is not held in question by opposition. (v.6-12)* When the storms set in, they are not a clear sign that the wrong way has been taken. It could just be confirmation that we most definitely are going in God's will and in the direction Satan hates!

The question is how you will respond to the struggles and persecutions that arise on behalf of your decision? We are naturally drawn to mapping out the safest and easiest path for our lives. We don't want to intentionally rock the boat if it's in our power. Yet the Gospel message repeatedly states that godliness is met by opposition.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion today, our passage gives us a clear negative result for the person who doesn't submit to God's way to get God's guidance. Bar-Jesus is called out by Paul for blocking the straight ways of the Lord. God had a clear path laid out for the accomplishment of His will. Paul and Barnabas were faithful to discern God's way and to walk in it. However, Bar-Jesus was quick to block it. As a result, through the word of Paul, God blinded him.

This simple example goes to show what happens to anyone who doesn't seek after God's way: spiritual blindness! Such a person won't know God's way and won't have God's guidance. Instead, I desire for each of you to submit to God's way for your life. Draw nearer to Him that His guidance might become clearer. Seek the confirmation of God's will in the body of believers, the church. Choose to live by faith and obedience to what God has revealed of His will. And don't automatically question God's will because of opposition.

When we choose to live in this way, God will guide us. He won't leave us in the dark. He won't leave us spiritually blind. You can be certain that if God

guided His Son to the cross to cover your sins, you can be certain He will guide you to accomplish His will.

CLOSING PRAYER