

Be Attentive to the Spirit of God
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It constantly amazes how God works things together to accomplish His purposes. In fact, amazing is too soft a term. I would use the word 'astound'. And there's moments when I read in scripture and I track the story that's unfolding, or other times when I'm looking at our own stories and what's happening in our lives, and I find myself at times just astounded at how God works His purposes; how He will take a wide variety of diverse circumstances and conditions and people, and He'll weave 'em together so that, at just the right moment and just the right time, He will give witness in us and through us to the reality, the mystery, the wonder, and the glory of Jesus Christ. I'm just astounded at the way He consistently does that.

Last week we looked at a story of that, an example from scripture in Acts chapters 20-28. And we saw there that the Apostle Paul was...he'd been in the ministry for some twenty years. He had managed to saturate the eastern part of the Mediterranean with the gospel; all of the strategic cities and areas had been contacted with the gospel. There were churches planted, and the gospel had taken root on the eastern end of the Mediterranean; and Paul was ready to look elsewhere. Where to look next? And the next strategic location was obviously Rome, to go there and to preach the gospel. There was a small group of Christians there. They weren't well-organized; they weren't well-established. And Paul could go there and he could communicate the gospel, get them established, and then establish a base there that he could use to jump off and spread the gospel further—out to Spain and on west. And Paul had the conviction that that was something that he needed to do. As he said in Acts chapter 19, he says, "*I must also see Rome.*" And there's a necessity, a driving necessity, to that statement. And you need to understand he's not talking here like a tourist looking at his life list and saying, 'I've seen Jerusalem, now I need to see Rome.' It's a driving desire to be there to minister.

About this same time he wrote a letter to the Roman Christians that were there in their small, decentralized congregation and struggling start of a church. He writes to them and he says, "*I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are at Rome.*" 'I wanna get there!' The odd thing, knowing that that's the most strategic direction to go, knowing that that's really what he needs to go and wanting to go there, God takes him the opposite direction. And God takes him to Jerusalem. That's an opposite direction over a great deal of distance. It's as if somebody was in Anchorage and wanted to go to Nome and was told, 'You gotta go to Juneau first.' Only it wasn't the day of airplanes and automobiles.

It wasn't just a question of direction and distance that made this kind of a confusing command and directive from God. The other thing that was confusing about this is it was dangerous. Rome was probably...I mean, excuse me, Jerusalem was probably the single most dangerous place the Apostle Paul could be. He was a wanted man! The Jews had decided that Paul...Paul was a traitor; he had turned against them. And they wanted him dead. Just in this timeframe of Acts 20-28 Paul has at least three different assassination attempts launched against him. And God sends him right to the very center...the very center of danger, Jerusalem.

When he gets there things happen pretty much the way you would have guessed they would have happened in Jerusalem. There's a riot and he's at the center of it. He's arrested. He goes through a series of trials. And he's under constant threat of death. The charges leveled against him is one—the Jews said "*We have found this man to be a real pest.*" Now, that's not gonna hold up in courts, so they add some other charges to it in front of the Roman governors. They say, "*This man stirs up dissension*" [we'll get it right, there] He stirs up dissension that everywhere he goes he causes division in an empire that is devoted to peace. And not only does he stir up dissension, he represents...in fact, he's a ringleader of this illegal religious group called the Nazarenes. And then, finally, they say, 'You know what? He came in and tried to desecrate our temple, the place you said was ours and we could protect, and we could have it our way. He came in there and tried to desecrate it.'

Things got so intense at this time that for Paul's own protective custody the Romans moved him out of Jerusalem and put him in custody up in Caesarea, where they could protect him from the Jews. And there he stayed for two years...two years, going through a series of trials, all being inconclusive, until finally, in a moment of real pressure when they're ready to send him back to Jerusalem, he finally exerted his rights as a Roman citizen and he said, "I appeal to Caesar." And in response to that the Roman governor sent him to Rome.

He went under guard with a group of prisoners in a boat. The story's quite an adventure. There's a shipwreck. They winter on an island. They eventually get to Rome. Astounding thing when they do get to Rome is Paul is allowed to rent his own quarters! He's not put in a prison cell. He's allowed to rent his own apartment and his own housing, and people are free to come and go and see him at will. The only thing is there is a consistent bodyguard. Or actually, he wasn't a body guard; he was a guard, one of the elite guard. They also guarded the Caesar, but their rotation was to come by and guard Caesar [Paul?], and there would be a guard at Paul's house round the clock. It kept him safe. It was really to keep him in custody, but in reality it was like having a professional bodyguard. For the most controversial religious figure of the time, who was under constant threat of assassination, he has an elite bodyguard around the clock. And people are comin' and goin' at will, and we're told at the end of Acts that he is able to speak of the gospel unhindered and freely. And we go through two of the most fruitful years in the Apostle Paul's ministry. Not only is he able to extend the gospel in Rome; he is able to write four of his letters that became foundational to the New Testament. And the gospel spreads up through those guards into the Roman palace, and he's able to give witness to Jesus on all levels of society.

About this time he writes a letter to the little church of Philippi. They were very concerned about him. Their leader, their founder, was in prison far away in Rome. And they're desperate about what is happening, and what's gonna happen to our churches and the movement called Christianity. What's gonna be happening? And Paul writes them from that prison, or that arrest in Rome, and he says this:

My circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel.

'The way this has all worked out—me goin' to Jerusalem, being put in jail, and finally sent to Rome as a prisoner—has worked out for the greater progress of the gospel.'

The straightest line over land was straight to Rome. The straightest line through the unseen took him through Jerusalem. That's...that, to me, is astounding when I see that unfold, and track it through those chapters. At the same time, though, when we see that sort of thing and we're astounded by it, we also know that, you know, when you're in the middle of it it's very confusing. It's very confusing; in fact, some times it can be desperately confusing. You want to go to Rome, and you know it's important and you know it's needed, and God says, 'Go to Jerusalem.' And you're not sure what, and why, and 'did I hear it right?' And it gets very confusing when you're one of the pieces in the plan that God is weaving together. And you don't know what the end is gonna be. As Paul headed for Jerusalem he had written, or he's told the people along the way, 'I don't know what's gonna be there. I do not know.' It's confusing when you're in the midst and you're one of the pieces in that plan.

And our desire as we brought this story before you last week, and we bring it back this week, is our desire is to apply it in such a way, to teach it in such a way, that we gain confidence on how to live in the middle of that plan that God has for you and I; how to go through that without desperation, even though you don't understand it. How do you live with confidence when the way through the unseen takes you to Jerusalem before you go to Rome?

Quick answer; we had it last week. Proverbs 3:5-6. And Connie referred to it earlier; it's a verse we've heard of many different times, kind of a classic wisdom statement from the Old Testament. And we can put it very simply just like this, read it straight. It says

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.

When God's leading you in these ways that you don't know exactly how all the pieces are gonna fit together, because you don't see the end yet, you have to trust Him with your heart. You can't rely on all the things you can put together in your head as to how it's all gonna fit together. You have to trust Him with your heart. You can't rely on your sense of how it all fits together. You still plan; you still go forward as best you can; but you trust Him.

But more important, I'm gonna follow up with the next statement; He says

In all your ways acknowledge Him...

...and I wanna underscore one specific word here, that word 'acknowledge'. What the writer is saying is just on practical wisdom, following this God—who would take you through Rome *after* Jerusalem—following that God, you need to acknowledge Him. Don't ignore Him. You need to pay attention to Him, because He may be turning *this* way when you want to go *that* way, and you gotta pay attention to know where He's takin' ya...or you're gonna be out here all by yourself. You gotta pay attention to Him.

But it even goes deeper than this, and I love the way it's phrased. It says, literally in the Hebrew, *"In all your ways,"* it says, *"know Him."* It doesn't say you need to know His plan. It doesn't even say you need to know the next step. It says just in all your ways be knowing Him—His heart, His purposes, His desires. Know Him. And the promise comes...

He will make your path straight.

It may not look straight on a map, but through the unseen it is straight. That's the general...that's the general, short way to state it. I'm gonna follow up now, and we're gonna take the rest of our time here to make it very specific in terms of application. 'Cause it's one thing to say that; it's another thing to say, 'Ok, what do I do?' And by the time we're done with the next ten minutes here you should walk out of here with a very specific action step. In fact, my goal is by the time you walk out of here this morning you will have a very specific thing that you will not do in order that you may do something else. Ok? That's where we're headed in paying attention to our God. So let's start in.

I wanna give you a summary statement in terms of how do we really, in all our ways, be knowing Him, acknowledging Him? And I'm gonna say the first statement is you pay attention to His Spirit. You pay attention to His Spirit. And here is one of the most amazing things about the Christian faith, one of the most amazing things Jesus made possible for us. I'm gonna quote from the Apostle Paul in a letter He wrote to the Corinthian church. And he makes this statement to the Corinthians. He says,

For who among you knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of a man which is in him?

You know the only person that really, really knows a person is his own spirit within him. That's the idea Paul's saying. And he adds on that; he builds on that statement and he says,

Even so, the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.

You know what God really feels, what His real desires are, what His purposes are, what His plans are? Nobody really knows that other than the Spirit of God. Which raises the question...how can we be knowing God if really the only One who knows Him is His own Spirit? That's the amazing statement that follows. Paul says *"Now we..."* believers who have accepted Jesus Christ and experienced what He has for us, the release of God's Spirit within us, the statement is this...

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God...

And he builds on that, and he says

...so that we may know the things freely given us by God.

We have the Spirit of God within us. We can know God at a depth and a level that is impossible...impossible except for that Spirit within us. He makes a statement at the very end of this section, and I'm just gonna quote it because it's such a wonderful statement. He says 'Listen...'

...we have the mind of Christ.

With that Spirit we're able to think like Jesus thinks. We are able to know the very, very heart of God. It's the way the Apostle Paul lived. That whole trip to Jerusalem was in response to the Spirit. Chapter 19 says 'he purposed in the spirit...' I'm goin' with a marginal reading here, which I think is better. Later on as he was making his way to Jerusalem he says to the group of believers along the way in Ephesus, he says 'Listen, I'm compelled by the Spirit. I'm goin' to Jerusalem. I don't know what's gonna happen to me there. In fact, the Spirit keeps tellin' me that it's gonna be very tough there, it's gonna be very difficult there. But I'm compelled by the Spirit.'

So that brings us to the question for us, is if being able to acknowledge God, being able to know Him in all our [His?] ways as He makes our paths straight...how is it we actually pay attention to His Spirit? And I told you I'm getting very specific today. Paying attention to that Spirit God has given us, His Spirit that enables us to know Him... Number one—absolute foundation, it all begins here, is we have to pay attention to the scriptures. It begins there. The Spirit, the Word is of the Spirit. In fact, Jesus says, *"My words are Spirit."* And if we're gonna at all understand the Spirit and know the heart of God, it begins with the scriptures and paying attention to them, and spending time in them, because the Spirit communicates to us through the word, through the scriptures. There is no way you are gonna consistently hear from the Spirit of God apart from the word of God. No way.

Now, that doesn't mean you have to become a theological scholar. Not at all. The challenge, I believe, is simply to become a consistent reader. And I always encourage people to get one of these readable study Bibles and just start with the gospel of Mark and just read it, and follow the study notes where they take you. Just be a consistent reader. That's why we spend so much time when we're together as a congregation, in preaching and in our classes, is just reading scripture and spending time in scripture. You don't have to become a great theologian. Just be a consistent reader.

And as you build that consistent reading base in scripture the challenge is, at the same time, is to pay attention to the stirrings within—those stirrings of the Spirit within, those thoughts, those ideas, those desires, those goals, those purposes, those dreams, those warnings, those promises that begin to stir within you—pay attention to those. And recognize among them which of them are of the Spirit and begin to respond to those. This isn't difficult. It really isn't. It's not that hard to detect the Spirit stirring within—if you're spending time in the word.

You usually find that the Spirit will communicate...at least the predominate pattern is He will communicate to you in at least four different ways, really consistent. And once you begin to recognize it, you see it over and over again. One is He'll consistently...the Spirit of God will express God's love for you. Heart to heart, He will let you know God loves you. Paul says the Spirit of God pours out the love of God within our hearts. The Spirit will do that. Secondly, there will be conviction. There will be times when you feel that painful awareness of wrong done, and the Spirit will do that. Paul said the Spirit will convict of right and wrong and judgment; He will do that. It's painful, but He will do that. Third, there's illumination. Paul talks about beholding the glory of Christ and being transformed from glory to glory, and it's by the Spirit. The Spirit of God enables us to see the glory and the excellence of God, and in the process most focused seeing the wonder and the glory of Jesus. When that happens, that's the Spirit of God. And then there's direction. The Spirit will tell us 'no', 'stop', 'yes', 'go', 'turn left', 'turn right', or 'just keep goin' the way you are', or just simply 'wait'. If we think we need to go to Jerusalem and...or Rome and God wants us to go to Jerusalem, the Spirit will tell us.

The most foundational of these four, the most repeated, the most needed, the one that has the most emotional impact is affection, really knowing when the Spirit tells you that you're loved by God. The one that's painful, that we resist but is very, very essential for us, is conviction. The most transforming of the three, the one that really changes the way we live, is illumination. Paul teaches that it's as we see the excellence of Jesus that we're transformed. And you know the one that we want most but need the least is direction. It's the one we go to God desperately, 'Show me!' We get frustrated because we're not told. Because at that moment God is simply trying to tell you He loves you, and that's what you really need to know in that moment. Paul never knew what was going to happen once he got to Jerusalem. He didn't see the plan. He just had the direction, and he went.

It's not hard. It takes practice. That's why we have application groups. We drill this; we work on it; we practice it. It's not hard. The biggest problem in our culture, in our time, with this...and by the way, I just wanna mention, I'm getting ahead of my self, but I'm gonna skip. The biggest difficulty we have and the thing we struggle with is the distraction of our culture. I mean, think of it. You're sitting in your living room and you have got a remote control for the TV and a gazillion cable channels—news, sports, entertainment, Discovery...you name it, it's all there. You've got another remote control that controls the DVD, and Netflix is coming in at a regular rate through the door. You've got another control for the stereo system, with a pile of DVDs. Over in the corner you've got a computer that'll put you on the internet for YouTube, MySpace, Craig's List, you name it. You've got your iPhone with so many applications to download you can't even read through the descriptions of the downloadable applications, let alone get one and use it. And then you've got a pile of books that are coming in from Amazon, and you've got a pile of hobby magazines that are coming in, and you've got the unlimited catalogs that arrive in your mail. Oh, and you've got the newspaper. It's overwhelming! And we haven't even talked about the unlimited recreational opportunities outside the door in Alaska. And I haven't even mentioned the four kids you've got running around the house.

How, in all of that, are you gonna be able to pay attention to the Spirit? I'm absolutely convinced that I cannot tell you, in our culture, to simply go out and start reading your Bible and paying attention to the stirrings within you. I'm absolutely convinced that if you're gonna go out of here today and pay attention to the Spirit you are gonna have to deliberately and diligently say 'no' to something else you're paying attention to. You have already got too much on your table demanding and getting your attention. You do.

So I'm gonna encourage you to do, in the next three minutes...we're going just a little bit over...I'm gonna encourage you right now to think of one thing you could put down, one thing you could put down in order to pick this up and read it attentively, to the word and to the Spirit. Maybe it's you could put down that iPhone and pick this up. Maybe it's you could put down that computer mouse and keyboards, shut off Craig's List, and pick this up. Maybe it's you put down the remote. Maybe it's you put down the newspaper. I just know that you will not pick this up, in this culture, this time, our age, unless you put something else down.

And so what I want you to do right now is think of what, conceivably, possibly, maybe, if you really got spiritual tomorrow morning, you might put down. And then I'm gonna encourage you just this week—try it. Put it down, and pick up the scriptures and be attentive to the Spirit.

We take very seriously as a congregation the call God has upon us to be salt, and to be light. To do that we have to be a people who follow God's plan, even when we cannot see it. I'm calling you—be attentive to the Spirit.

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Go in His grace. Amen.