

Acts 20:13-28

¹³ But going ahead to the ship, we set sail for Assos, intending to take Paul aboard there, for so he had arranged, intending himself to go by land. ¹⁴ And when he met us at Assos, we took him on board and went to Mitylene. ¹⁵ And sailing from there, we came the following day opposite Chios; the next day, we touched at Samos; and the day after that, we went to Miletus. ¹⁶ Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he might not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost. Paul Speaks to the Ephesian Elders ¹⁷ Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. ¹⁸ And when they came to him, he said to them:

"You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable

and teaching you in public and from house to house, ²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. ²⁴ But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵ And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. ²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

The life and ministry of the Apostle Paul are foundational to understanding the spread of early Christianity and the theological framework that emphasizes much of the New Testament. In Acts 20:13-38, we see a poignant moment where Paul, aware of the dangers ahead, addresses the Ephesian elders with heartfelt warnings and guidance. These verses provide a window into Paul's unwavering commitment to his mission and raise profound questions about the nature of God's will. Was Paul operating under God's permissive will, allowing for human free will and the resulting hardships, or was he fulfilling God's perfect will, aligning with a divinely ordained plan that would ultimately lead to the furtherance of the Gospel?

Furthermore, Paul's warning about "savage wolves" infiltrating the church (Acts 20:29) highlights the ever-present danger of false teachings. This theme resonates throughout the New Testament, particularly in the Book of Revelation, where the letters to the seven churches emphasize vigilance against deception. By exploring these aspects, God's permissive versus perfect will and the caution against wolves in sheep's clothing, we can gain deeper insights into the challenges faced by the early church and the timeless relevance of Paul's message. This paper aims to examine these themes, leaving readers to interpret how Paul's life exemplified adherence to God's will and the importance of guarding against false teachings.

God's perfect will, His sovereign and decreative will, represents His ultimate unchanging plan for His creation. Scriptures such as Ephesians 1:11 emphasize that God 'works all things according to the counsel of His will,' underscoring His absolute authority over history and destiny. This aspect of God's will ensures that His divine plans unfold according to His timing and design. A prime example of God's perfect will is the crucifixion of Jesus. Acts 2:23 states that Jesus was 'delivered according to God's definite plan and foreknowledge.' This illustrates that God's overarching purpose for salvation was being fulfilled even in the face of human sin.

The implications of understanding God's perfect will are profound. It reassures believers that God is actively involved in the world, guiding events toward His ultimate goals. For instance, Isaiah 46:10 declares, "I declare the end from the beginning," emphasizing God's sovereignty over time and events. Recognizing God's

perfect will encourages believers to trust His plans, even when circumstances seem chaotic or challenging. This trust is vital for maintaining faith during difficult times, reinforcing the belief that nothing can disrupt God's divine intentions. Understanding God's perfection will ultimately invite Christians to align their lives with His purposes, finding more profound meaning and fulfillment in their faith journey.

In contrast, God's permissive will refers to what He allows, even if it includes sin and suffering. This concept acknowledges that God, in His sovereignty, grants humanity the freedom to make choices that may lead to adverse outcomes. The story of Job illustrates this dynamic. In Job 1:12, God permits Satan to test Job, allowing suffering while maintaining divine control over the situation. The Israelites' request for a king in 1 Samuel 8 demonstrates God's permissive will. Although God desired to be their king, He allowed them to choose a human ruler, stating, "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me" (1 Samuel 8:7). This decision led to significant consequences, including the rise and fall of various kings. However, within this permissive framework, God ultimately orchestrated His perfect will through David, establishing a lineage leading to Jesus Christ, the true King. This example highlights how God can use human choices—even those that deviate from His perfect will—to fulfill His overarching plan for redemption.

Understanding God's permissive will is essential for grappling with evil and suffering. It reveals the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, illustrating that while God permits human actions, He remains sovereign over their outcomes. This aspect of God's will reminds us that our choices carry weight and that we are accountable for our actions. Additionally, it encourages believers to exercise discernment and wisdom in their decisions, as Proverbs 3:5-6 instructs: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your understanding." Ultimately, God's permissive will invites reflection on the nature of freedom and the importance of seeking His guidance while navigating the complexities of faith and choice in a fallen world. Examining Paul's ministry reveals instances where his actions and decisions can be interpreted through God's permissive and perfect will. In Acts 20:22-24, Paul expresses his determination to go to Jerusalem despite knowing that hardships and imprisonment await him. He states, "I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there." This raises the question of whether his choice aligns with God's perfect plan or if it is a decision permitted by God, allowing Paul the freedom to choose his path amidst potential suffering.

Suppose Paul was indeed operating within God's permissive will. In that case, it underscores the reality that God allows believers to make choices that may lead to difficult circumstances while still using those choices for His purposes. This interpretation invites readers to reflect on the tension between divine sovereignty and human agency, considering how their choices might align with or diverge from God's perfect will. Ultimately, the ambiguity of Paul's journey leaves space for personal interpretation. Readers are encouraged to explore the Scriptures and reflect on their understanding of God's will in their own lives. Was Paul's determination a demonstration of faith and courage within God's permissive will, or was he acting by a divine plan he was yet to understand fully? This inquiry into the nature of God's will invites deeper contemplation of the complexities of faith, obedience, and the choices we face in our spiritual journeys.

In Acts 20:28-31, Paul addresses the Ephesian elders with a heartfelt warning that carries profound implications for the early church and contemporary believers. He urges them to "pay careful attention" to themselves and the entire flock, emphasizing the responsibility of leaders to protect the church from spiritual dangers. Paul's warning about false teachers is particularly significant; he predicts that after his departure, "savage wolves" will come in among them, not sparing the flock (Acts 20:29). This metaphor of "wolves in sheep's clothing" (Matthew 7:15) vividly illustrates the insidious nature of false teachers, who may appear outwardly benign but harbor destructive intentions (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

A crucial point to consider is that even the enemy knows Scripture well. During Jesus' time in the wilderness, after fasting for 40 days, He was tempted by the devil, who twisted Scripture to deceive Him. This

highlights that those who profess to be Christians but are merely "Christians in name only" (CINOs) can mislead others, presenting a façade of faith while straying from true discipleship. Such individuals may have a superficial knowledge of the Bible, often using it to support their agendas rather than the truth of God's Word. The significance of Paul's warning lies in its timeless relevance. Just as the early church faced threats from within, modern believers encounter various forms of false teaching that can distort the core tenets of faith. Paul emphasizes the need for vigilance, urging the elders to be discerning and proactive in guarding against those who would lead others astray (1 Timothy 4:16). This call to vigilance is not just about identifying heresy but also about nurturing a community grounded in sound doctrine and love (Titus 1:9). Today, the church must remain alert to similar threats. With the rise of misinformation and conflicting ideologies, the danger of "wolves in sheep's clothing" manifests in various forms, from charismatic leaders who distort Scripture for personal gain (2 Peter 2:1-3) to ideologies that undermine foundational Christian beliefs.

Furthermore, the demonic realm is intimately familiar with scripture and can manipulate it to sow confusion and doubt among believers. Therefore, Christians must stand firm in their relationship with the Lord and commit to studying the Bible fervently. This diligent study equips believers to discern truth from falsehood, enabling them to recognize when they are misled or drift away from the Lord. The urgency of Paul's message resonates with the current cultural climate, where discernment is essential in navigating a landscape filled with competing narratives about truth, morality, and faith (Ephesians 4:14). These warnings find a powerful echo in the Book of Revelation, particularly in the letters to the seven churches (Revelation 2-3). Each letter addresses specific issues, including false teachings, idolatry, and moral compromise. For instance, Revelation 2:2 commends the church in Ephesus for testing those who claim to be apostles but are not, reflecting the very vigilance Paul urged. Furthermore, Revelation emphasizes the necessity of discernment in the face of spiritual deception. The messages to the churches reveal a common theme: the call to overcome and remain steadfast amidst trials (Revelation 2:10). In today's society, where the church faces pressures from secularism, relativism, and a plethora of ideologies, the message of Revelation serves as a clear and distinct call for vigilance. Believers are encouraged to evaluate teachings and practices against the truth of Scripture, ensuring their faith remains rooted in the unchanging Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Just as Paul warned the Ephesian elders, today's church must proactively guard against falsehoods threatening to infiltrate and undermine the faith community (Galatians 1:8-9).

In summary, exploring God's perfect and permissive will through Paul's ministry highlights the intricate relationship between divine sovereignty and human choice, offering profound insights into our faith journey. Paul's urgent warnings to the Ephesians serve as a reminder of false teachings, which are a constant threat, and the importance of vigilance within the church. As Christians, who seek the Lord, we are called to remain alert to various distortions of the Gospel that arise in our modern context, where misinformation and conflicting ideologies abound. By reflecting on Paul's insights and the messages in Revelation, we are encouraged to rigorously evaluate our beliefs and practices against the unchanging Word of God, ensuring our faith remains grounded in truth. This call to discernment is not merely a historical concern. Still, it is vital for our spiritual growth and communal integrity, urging us to cultivate a community grounded in sound doctrine and love. As we navigate the complexities of our spiritual lives, we must consider the implications of adhering to God's will, recognizing the necessity of remaining watchful against the "wolves in sheep's clothing" that threaten to undermine our faith. Ultimately, this reflection fosters a deeper understanding of our responsibilities as believers in an ever-changing world, empowering us to stand firm in our convictions and uphold the integrity of our faith.