

Captives to the Spirit

May 18, 2021 Scott Gunn

And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me. — Acts 20:22-23

Paul's faith is extraordinary. He has committed to travel to Jerusalem, not knowing what will unfold, even as he expects to be imprisoned. But, as he says, he is a captive to the Spirit. He realizes that he must follow God's call.

If we took seriously the prompting of the Holy Spirit, we would probably get into trouble, too. Really the only question we should be asking at key moments in our lives is: what is God's call to me? How can I be faithful to what I believe God is asking me to do? It's easy to say and hard to do. For one thing, it's not always clear — at least to me — when God is calling me and when I have devised a rationale that is calling me. Often, I can tell the difference, but at times it's not easy. That's why I rely on steadfast prayer and on fellow pilgrims. A good friend or a trusted colleague can be the one who tells me, "You really need to do this, because it sounds like God is calling you." Or, "I think you need to listen again, because this doesn't sound like it's God at work."

Then, even when we know what God calls us to do, we might be tempted to decide that we shouldn't embark on a particular course because it will be unpleasant, or costly, or even dangerous. That's where we need to follow Paul's example. He knows that once we have determined with certainty where God is calling us, we can entirely confident that God will equip us for that to which we have been called. It really is that simple.

I've been thinking about this topic quite a bit lately. So often when Christians are in the news, it's because people are insisting on their personal liberties or their freedom from responsibility to care for others. We focus on our needs and preferences rather than God's call. But that's not how the scriptures speak of us and our faith.

Our responsibility is to love God and love our neighbors. We would do well to ask how we are called to love, not to insist on our own rights with respect to our neighbors. We ought to follow the example of Paul and gladly accept God's call, even if it proves difficult for us. We become captives to the Spirit.

To do all this, we do three things. First, we must be open to the actual work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Second, we have to accept that call, trusting that God will equip us. Third, we must get busy doing it. None of this is complicated. The path, as Paul shows us, is clear. However, just because something is uncomplicated does not mean it will be easy. And that gets us back to our need to trust God's call to us. I don't always get this right, but when I have managed to answer the call, it has always been a blessing. Every time.