

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

**[*The Paradox*]**

God's will and our Response is a paradox. It is a paradox where God is 100% in control and yet we are still 100% actively engaged. Logically, both of these things can't be true, but realistically they both are.

For example, imagine a whitewater kayaker in the rapids of the Colorado River. Two things are true at the same time: the strong current and whitewater rapids of the river are in charge of where that kayaker is going, **and** the kayaker is actively engaged in the process.

That image helps us understand what's happening on the shores of a different river. In our reading from the Book of Acts today, the Apostle Paul meets a woman named Lydia beside a river in the city of Philippi. It's a place she doesn't belong, and a place he hadn't planned to go. But like that kayaker, Paul and Lydia were not in control. And like that kayaker, they were both actively engaged.

That paradox, that double-sided truth is essential in our life of faith, where God is in control, and you and I are actively engaged.

**[*God is in Control*]**

Let's take a look now at the first half of this paradox. The truth that God is in control.

This truth can be shown both from both Paul's perspective and from Lydia's perspective.

To start with, earlier in the Book of Acts, we learn that Paul wants to go into the Roman province of Asia, Lydia's home turf (which is the western side of modern Turkey), but the Holy Spirit won't let him.

Then he wants to go to Bithynia (located along the southwestern coast of the Black Sea), and the Spirit of Jesus says no. So instead, Paul ends up in Philippi against his own travel plans.

On top of all of that, he can't even do what he always does when entering a new mission field—go visit the synagogue and start there—because Philippi has no synagogue, so he ends up like a fish out of water at a women's riverside prayer meeting.

A prayer meeting where the most unlikely attendee is present, Lydia.

Lydia is likely a freed slave, likely a widow, and likely a businesswoman.

She is from the Asia Minor province of Thyatira but currently, she is living in this European Macedonian city of Philippi, which is a long way from where she belongs.

Plus, when the Gospel is preached, even then she is not in charge of what's going on. The text says that “The **Lord** opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul” (Ac 16:14).

Luther in his explanation of the 3<sup>rd</sup> article of the Apostle's Creed puts it this way: “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him.” God is in control of your journey of faith.

As Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:8–9). God is in control of your journey of faith.

You aren't in control of your journey. You aren't in charge of your own salvation or of your own spiritual development. Like Lydia, like Paul, you have been caught up and swept away by baptismal waters. You are riding on the back of a mighty current; the River of God is taking you exactly where God wants you to go.

But in this paradox, of God being in control and you being actively engaged, what would it look like if you **weren't** actively engaged. If the only truth was that God is in control.

You would live a life of passive faith. A life with no active engagement or participation. A life with no support because you would have faith without hope or trust.

In the mighty current and rapids of the Colorado River, you would be driven along in a kayak with no paddle. Slamming and smashing into the cliff walls and boulders as you are driven downstream by the mighty current.

The outcome of no active engagement is that your faith would be shipwrecked, smashed to pieces by living a life without hope or trust.

***[We are Actively Engaged]***

But we **are** actively engaged! Let's move now from the first half of this paradox to the second half of this paradox. What does it mean to be actively engaged?

In Acts 16 alone, Paul gets stripped, beaten, and thrown into prison because of his preaching. God is absolutely in control and Paul is actively engaged in what is going on.

Paul is preaching the gospel. Paul is making decisions about how to follow the will of God. After Paul had seen the vision of the Macedonian man saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us," Paul, **immediately** sought to go on into Macedonia (Ac 16:9-10). Then, after arriving in Macedonia at the city of Philippi, Paul, was engaged in active evangelism among the people of that city.

Likewise, when Lydia receives God's Word, she is baptized and her whole household is baptized with her.

After that Lydia's response is to say to Paul and his traveling companions, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." (Ac 16:15). And at Lydia's insistence and active engagement, she prevailed upon the apostles to stay and make her home into possibly the first European church recorded in the Bible.

Continuing Luther's explanation of the Apostle's Creed, Luther explains in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Article that Jesus did what he did so "that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness." Luther imagines the Christian life to be full of active engagement and participation.

Likewise, just after Paul writes to the Ephesians and says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph 2:8-9), that same Paul continues in the next verse: For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works—**to be actively engaged**—to do good works, which, **by the way**, God prepared beforehand that we might walk in them (Eph 2:10).

You see, God is in control and you are actively engaged.

But what would it look like if you only had the second side of this paradox? If God was **not** in control and you only had a life of active engagement with no passive faith.

You would live a life of struggle, constantly fighting to strengthen and maintain your faith. Constantly focused on what **you** need to do to direct and push your faith forward. It would be a life of exhaustion and pointless, fruitless, effort with no movement.

It would be like trying to paddle a kayak in the parking lot of Scheels Sporting Goods. Through hard work and effort, you might slowly scrape along the asphalt, but most likely, after several minutes of trying with little to no movement, you'd ruin your paddle or tip over.

The outcome of God not being in control would be that you would paddle your faith to death or you would tip over and land on the reality of your efforts not being good enough.

**[*God's Will and My Response*]**

Whether you separate out God's control or you separate out your active engagement the result is the same, you crash and fail. The paradox is broken, but so are you.

Instead, maintain the paradox. God is in control and you are actively engaged.

As you engage in God's Words he controls your path and puts you on the river of life where he strengthens your faith by placing opportunities to witness and opportunities to practice showing love to your neighbor. To keep you active and engaged.

God's will drives you to actively respond in faith. We hold on to the tension of admitting God is in control and actively believing, trusting, and hoping in God.

We are like a whitewater kayaker, completely carried by the surge and direction of the river, and completely engaged in the process, paddling furiously, wet head to toe, and having the ride of our life.

The story of Paul and Lydia makes it perfectly clear: we are on a great adventure. We are on a whitewater rapid ride, it's scary, it's fun, and God's baptismal river is taking us right where God wants us to go.

Through the mighty river of baptism, you have been given faith. It is God's will for you to have the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. It is God's will that controls and drives you to actively respond in faith and trust in his words.

**God** is in control. And **you** are actively engaged. Amen.

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“Now may the God of peace... equip you with everything good that you may do his will, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.” (Heb 13:20-21)

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