

Acts

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. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. (Acts 2:42 ESV)

Come Over To Macedonia

November 5th, 2023

Acts 16:6-15

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Acts 16.

Our passage today helps us to answer one of the most frequently asked questions in the church. The question is this: How can I discern where God is leading me?

I confess, as we vision and plan for the future of this congregation, I often find myself wrestling through this question. It's disorienting when doors close that you thought for sure would stay open. It's hard to decide which way to turn when there are so many plausible options. "Where are You leading us, God?" I've prayed that prayer many times over the last three years.

In our text today, we find a powerful example of God's guidance in the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul. The lessons in this example are lessons that each and every one of us need to learn. To that end, look with me to Acts 16 verses 6-15. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷ And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. ⁸ So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. ⁹ And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

¹¹ So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. ¹³ And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. ¹⁴ One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. ¹⁵ And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us. (Acts 16:6-15 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

We see very clearly in this passage that the Apostle Paul – as gifted and as brilliant as he is – is a man under authority. When Jesus says stop, he stops. When Jesus says go, he goes. Paul is on a missionary journey but he understands that the mission is not *his* mission. The mission belongs to Jesus.

I want you to see that because, while the Apostle Paul is dead, the mission is still very much alive! Therefore, what we have before us is not simply an account of a missionary assignment that started and ended 2,000 years ago. No, the assignment that Paul received is fundamentally the same assignment that WE have received. Jesus said:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18b-20 ESV)

We’ve all heard this 100 times and yet we have all forgotten this 100 times, so let me say this again as clear as I can: If you are a Christian, then that is fundamental assignment that dictates your life here on earth. We have one life to live and, when it comes to an end and we stand before King Jesus, he won’t give a rip about how much money we accumulated or how many stamps we have in our passport, or how many accolades we accumulated in our career. On that day, we will stand before the Saviour who died so that we could live, and we will give an account for how we used this life that he bought with his blood. Did we go and make disciples? Or did we make a cosy plan to spend 90 years living for ourselves? We are all going to give an answer to the King.

If we believe that – if we take Jesus at His word – then that reality should shape *every other aspect* of our lives. It should inform the way that we fill our schedules, the way that we view our money, the way that we raise our children, the place that we choose to live and the career that we choose to pursue. *Every element of your life* should be viewed through this overarching mission: How does this further my mission of making disciples for Jesus?

In one way, that singular overarching focus brings a sweet simplicity to life. A lot of time-wasting, meaningless things very quickly get cleared off of our schedules when we get our priorities in order.

But in another way, however, that singular overarching focus still leaves us with some perplexing questions. How do we know where God wants us to be? How do we maximize this time that we have? When should we move? When should we stay? We have our marching orders, but how do we follow God's guidance in this mission? I want to draw your attention to four lessons in this passage.

Following God's Guidance In Ministry

First:

1. Do the work that God has already called you to do

We might still be seeking some clarity in the *where* and the *how* of our mission, but the *what* has been spelled out clearly. Go. Make disciples. Baptize them. Teach them to observe all that I have commanded. That is the work that we have all been called to – including Paul.

Which is why, if you look again at this passage, you will see that Paul doesn't waste any time sitting around wondering what he *ought* to be doing. He *knows* what he's called to do! Therefore, no matter where Paul found himself, he gave himself to the task of making disciples of Jesus.

In these brief verses we find him travelling and ministering through Phrygia and Galatia, and then he tries to move towards Asia, but God says no, so he moves to Bithynia, but God says no, so he moves to Troas and then God directs him to the region of Macedonia and so Paul goes there and

marches into Philippi and preaches there. We are talking about hundreds and even *thousands* of kilometers that were travelled in this short span of time. Paul knew that obedience required *action*.

Listen: Far too often we seem to give ourselves permission to sit around and twiddle our thumbs while we *wait for God to speak*. Brothers and sisters, He's spoken! His will for our lives is not a mystery! So, let's get moving with the assignment! It is *so much easier* to steer a car that is in motion!

Are you in school? Great! As you work hard in your studies take every opportunity to tell your classmates and your teachers about the hope that is ours in Jesus. That's why God has you there.

Are you a stay-at-home mom? Great! As you look after the responsibilities in the home, take every opportunity to make disciples of your children. And then, get out into your neighbourhood and tell every neighbour who will listen about the hope that is ours in Jesus. That's why God has you there.

Are you a police officer? Are you a mechanic? Are you a tradesman? As you do your job to the glory of God, look for opportunities to make disciples of your coworkers.

Are you retired? That's amazing! There are very few people in the history of the WORLD that have had that luxury! You have an opportunity now to give your life to this assignment like never before!

Listen: Don't waste your life! Don't sit around wondering, "I wonder what God would have *me* do?" He has already given you your assignment, and – can I tell you something? – it is the most glorious assignment ON THE PLANET! In a world full of people who are perishing in their sin, you have been entrusted with the good news that *brings dead people to life*! Do the work.

Second, if you want to follow God's guidance in ministry:

2. Keep moving when He closes the door

Has God ever closed the door on something that you thought was a good opportunity? Has there ever been a time when you thought *for sure* that you had a great, godly plan lined up only to see it shut down at the last minute? Paul experienced that too. Look with me again at verses 6-7:

And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, **having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.** ⁷ And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, **but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.** (Acts 16:6-7 ESV)

If you're an inquisitive person, then this passage raises a number of questions, doesn't it? For starters, I would like to know *how* the Holy Spirit closed these doors. Did Paul receive a vision? Did someone speak a prophetic word? Did the heavens open as an audible voice declared "Not this way, Paul!"

Unfortunately, as we look at these verses, Luke never answers this question. And I can't help but wonder if that wasn't intentional. The reality is, God closes doors in countless ways. Sometimes He uses the miraculous, but other times he uses the mundane. One time, Paul wanted to press ahead but God closed the door with sickness. We see that in Galatians 4:13.

You know **it was because of a bodily ailment** that I preached the gospel to you at first (Galatians 4:13 ESV)

Other times, God closed the door on Paul's plans by allowing a violent mob to stone Paul. Other times, he sent the temple police. Other times, he sent bad sailing conditions and shipwrecks. As G. Campbell Morgan explains:

Here is the revelation of the fact that the Spirit guides, not by flaming visions always, not by words articulate in human ears; but by circumstances, by common place things, by difficult things, by dark things, by disappointing things. The Spirit guides and molds and fashions all the pathway.¹

What I want you to see this morning is that – when doors closed in your life because of seemingly unfortunate circumstances – God was working. When you sought that new position, but you were turned down, the Spirit was guiding. When you were too sick to enroll in that program, the Spirit was guiding. When you were choosing between two good options and felt a strange pull on your heart in a particular direction, the Spirit was guiding.

¹ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 375.

When I was coming out of highschool, I had enrolled to go to Hillsong college in Australia. Amanda was going to go too and work as a nanny. Just as we were finalizing the details, I ran into massive, unexpected car expenses that derailed our plans. Instead, I wound up interning at First Baptist Church where God would absolutely transform my life. The door that closed – Hillsong – is currently all over the news for scandal and corruption. When my mechanic gave me the bill for my car, no part of me was thanking the Lord. As it turns out, that bill saved me from disaster and led me to where I am today.

That being said, it's not always easy to understand why God is closing doors – particularly in the moment. I suspect Paul was perplexed as God forbid him from going and preaching to the lost people in Asia and Bithynia. Those doors that God closed were doors that would have led to GOOD opportunities!

And yet, we're reminded here that God closes the door on good opportunities so as to move us to BETTER opportunities.

He didn't want Paul in Asia just yet. On Paul's third missionary journey, God swung that door wide open, but at this stage the timing wasn't right.

And He didn't want Paul in Bithynia either. Paul likely didn't know it at the time, but God had sent others to evangelize Bithynia. Listen to the group that the letter of 1 Peter is addressed to:

To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, **and Bithynia**, (1 Peter 1:1b ESV)

God *did* have a plan for the Bithynians, but that plan didn't include Paul. So, God closed the door, and then He sent Paul to exactly the place where Paul needed to be.

Has God closed some doors in your life? Has He thwarted some of the plans that you were really excited about?

Have you ever heard the advice, "When God closes a door, break through a window"? That's BAD advice. When God closes a door, KEEP MOVING! He knows what He's doing.

It might not feel good, but it IS good. Because HE is good, and He sees the whole board – including the parts that are beyond your view. The “no” that you hear today is paving the way for the better “yes” that is coming tomorrow. Keep moving.

That leads us to our third lesson. After those doors close:

3. Seek counsel when discerning direction

Look with me at verses 9-10:

And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”¹⁰ And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, **concluding** that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. (Acts 16:9-10 ESV)

This is the first time in the book of Acts that the word “we” is used in the narrative because this is the point in the story where Luke joins Paul on the mission. So Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke – here referred to as “we” – came together after Paul’s vision and concluded that God was calling the team to Macedonia.

In other words, Paul received the vision, but he didn’t simply march down and order the team to pack their bags. He shared the vision with the group and – as a team – they concluded that God really was calling them to move on.

Be wary of the person who declares, “The Lord has told me that we should do so-and-so” but who is unwilling to discern that guidance with the team. Charles Spurgeon tells a story about how a man came to him one Sunday after the service and declared, “The Holy Spirit has told me that I am to preach in this pulpit this Thursday evening!” To which Spurgeon replied, “Strange! I would have expected Him to also share that information with me.” Because discernment is a team sport.

We see the same principle in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians when he gives instruction on how the church should respond to prophetic words. He explains:

Let two or three prophets speak, and **let the others weigh what is said**. (1 Corinthians 14:29 ESV)

WEIGH what is said. Don't just receive it as authority. Sometimes people have weird dreams because they ate bad pizza. Sometimes people think that they have a word from the Lord, but they're actually being deceived by *demons*. That happens. As we're told in 1 John:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but **test the spirits** to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. (1 John 4:1 ESV)

Here's a simple application for us today: If you feel that God is calling you to do something, invite your brothers and sisters into that discernment process before you take the leap. If the decision is from God, trust that He will make that clear to the whole team. Learn the art of questioning your certainties because:

The heart is deceitful above all things,
and desperately sick;
who can understand it? (Jeremiah 17:9 ESV)

Young people, before you embark on your next enormous life decision, take some time to listen to the Lord and invite others into that process. I can't tell you how many people I met at Bible college who skipped this step and wound up paying the price. They hated their courses, and they quickly discovered they had no desire to serve in the church, and they sank into tens of thousands of student debt because they jumped into a degree program on a whim. I'm sure that if they had asked anyone from their home church, they would have gotten some helpful counsel.

Without counsel plans fail,
but with many advisers they succeed. (Proverbs 15:22 ESV)

Even the Apostle Paul – after receiving a vision from the Lord – sought counsel as he discerned the direction that God was leading.

That bring us now to our final lesson from this text. As you follow God's guidance in ministry:

4. Trust that He will use ordinary means to do extraordinary things

Lost in the mix of closed doors, miraculous visions and long journeys is the fact that Paul's missional approach is remarkably ordinary. Look again at verse 13:

And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. (Acts 16:13 ESV)

God told Paul to travel to Macedonia, so Paul travelled to Macedonia. When he arrived in the city of Philippi, he did what he always did – he looked for a Jewish assembly where he would be given a platform to teach from the Scriptures. It appears that there was very little Jewish presence in Philippi because there was no synagogue to visit. As one commentator explains:

In Jewish law, a congregation was made up of ten men. Wherever there were ten male heads of households who could be in regular attendance, a synagogue was to be formed. Failing this, a place of prayer under the open sky and near a river or the sea was to be arranged for.²

So, after travelling some 400+ kilometers to Philippi, Paul finds himself standing before a small group of women gathered together by the riverside. Stop and think about that for a moment. God kept Paul from ministering in Asia and Bithynia – two incredible missional opportunities – and insisted instead that Paul come here. After the long and exhausting trip, Paul – who has preached in packed synagogues and overflowing streets – finds himself leading a Bible study with a handful of women. Humanly speaking, someone looking in might say, “See! This was the wrong decision! You passed up on BIG ministry opportunities! All for *this*? What a waste!”

But God doesn't think the way that we think. He brought the most gifted teacher and evangelist on the planet over 400 kms because he had a plan for one of the women in that group. The text says:

One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. **The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.** (Acts 16:14 ESV)

One of the details that moved me deeply in my preparation this week was the way that Jesus pursued Lydia. He closed all the other doors that Paul tried to push through so as to bring him here, to this small group of women huddled together by the river. The good shepherd leaves the 99

² Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (John - Acts)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 9, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), 460.

to find the 1. As Lydia heard about Jesus, her heart was miraculously opened. The story concludes:

And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us. (Acts 16:15 ESV)

As Paul opened the word and preached to that small gathering one woman was saved. Through that woman, an entire family was saved. That home became the base of operations for the church in Philippi, and that church became arguably the most encouraging and beloved assembly in the Apostle Paul’s ministry. The church grew! The city changed! God was on the move! But it all started with an ordinary act of faithfulness. G. Campbell Morgan reminds us:

The opened heart of one woman in a great city is foothold for God, and if it but be yielded to Him, from that vantage ground, from that base of operations, He can proceed to wonderful victories.³

Can I challenge you this morning? It may just be that God has closed doors and led you to the place where you find yourself today because there is someone there that He has set apart for salvation. There might just be a Lydia on your street. Or in your workplace. Or in your class.

What a tragedy it would have been if Paul had looked at that small group of women and said, “What a waste of my time! I’m the APOSTLE PAUL! This can’t be where I’m meant to be! I must press forward to bigger opportunities!” What a tragedy it would have been if Paul had looked past the mission field right in front of him.

And how tragic it would be for you to look past the mission field right in front of you. That classroom full of kids eager to be taught the word of God – is that opportunity beneath you? Those co-workers – that neighbourhood – those in-laws – what if one of them is a Lydia? What if one of them is just waiting for the good news to be proclaimed? What if God has a plan to open their heart, and to change a family, a neighbourhood, an *entire city* through them? What if all the closed doors – all the missed opportunities – were orchestrated by God to bring you – a disciple-maker and an ambassador of Jesus – to that person who is ready to hear and believe?!

³ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Acts Of The Apostles* (New York, NY: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924), 382.

You won't know until you take that ordinary step of obedience. Open your mouth and trust God to do extraordinary things! You and I are here today because somebody did that for us.

As I close, I want to speak to those of you who might be on the other side of that equation this morning. God closed doors on the Apostle Paul, and He sent visions, and He led Paul across the Mediterranean world because He has a plan for Lydia. When she heard the invitation, her heart was immediately opened to the reality of her heavenly Father who sent His Son Jesus to save her.

God does that. He pursues His people. He brings us to the place where we can be exposed to the Word and then He opens our eyes so that we can finally see Him in all His glory! He enables us to finally see ourselves for who we really are. We are made in the image of God, but we are distorted by the curse of sin. We are more guilty, and more broken than we ever understood, and we live in a world that is in active rebellion against the God who made us. But:

God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16 ESV)

He has made a way for rebels and sinners to become sons and daughters. Let me tell you the way home. God sent His Son, Jesus, to live for us the obedient life that we could not live. Then, at the cross, this perfectly obedient Son took upon himself the guilt and the sin of all of the disobedient rebels – people like you and me – so that the price could be paid once and for all. Justice was served for our sin at the cross. Now, if we confess that we are sinners, and if we believe in our hearts that Jesus died to pay the price for our sin, we will receive forgiveness. We will receive a new heart that wants the right things. We will receive the Holy Spirit Who will change us from the inside out to look more and more like who we were made to be.

Salvation is an extraordinary miracle! Only God can do it! And He does it through ordinary means. That's what happened to Lydia, and her life was never the same. That's what happened to me. And perhaps, that's what's happening to you this morning. I want to invite you to pray with me now.