

ACTS 16:9-15

ST JOHN'S, 1.5.16, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

"If you want to make God laugh, tell him your future plans." When I looked up that quotation, I was surprised to find that it was Woody Allen who originally said it! But I suspect that the apostle Paul and his friends would have said a hearty 'amen' if they'd heard him . . .

The events in today's passage from Acts happened during Paul's second missionary journey, and it wasn't exactly going to plan! If we look back to 15:36, we can see that Paul and his companions wanted to *go back and visit our brothers in every town where we preached the word of the Lord, and . . . find out how they are getting on*. That's what Paul and Silas did, in Syria, Cilicia, Derbe, and Lystra. But then we come to 16:6,7: *the Holy Spirit did not let them preach the message in the province of Asia . . . they tried to go into the province of Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So they travelled right on through Mysia and went to Troas*. And from Troas, as we've heard, they were called to go over to Macedonia and preach the gospel there. Suddenly, they're evangelising in new places, rather than encouraging and strengthening the churches they'd already planted!

GUIDANCE

We don't know how the Holy Spirit prevented Paul and his companions from preaching in Asia and Bithynia. John Stott says that it may have been that he gave them a strong, united inward impression; it may have been through outward circumstance, such as illness, opposition from

local Jews, or a legal ban; or it may have been through a prophecy.¹ It must have been very frustrating! What's clear though, is that the Lord was directing Paul's work, and leading him to new areas.

We need to realise that it may not have been obvious at the time that it was the Holy Spirit who was preventing them from carrying out their plans. As many people have pointed out, everyone has 20-20 hindsight! It's easy to look back and to see how God has been guiding us, even through frustrating outward circumstances such as illness, or bad weather, road closures or strikes. But when we're prevented from carrying out what we believe is God's calling, it may seem more like the devil's interference than God's guidance!

Coming back to Paul, Silas and Timothy in Troas, we heard that Paul *had a vision in which he saw a Macedonian standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!"* (v 9). At this point, we learn exactly how the Holy Spirit guided them! But notice that Paul told the rest of his party about his vision, and *we decided that God had called us to preach the Good News to the people in Macedonia* (v 10). The vision needed to be interpreted, not just by Paul, but by the whole company.

Where Luke suddenly starts writing 'we' rather than 'they', we can assume that he means that he's now joined Paul's party. Presumably, he met up with them while they were in Troas, and accepted an invitation to travel on with them. We don't know why Paul's party

wanted to add Luke to their group, but whatever the reason, when they left Troas, Luke was with them.

Coming back to the way in which Paul and his group were guided to go to Macedonia, someone called A T Pierson called it 'double guidance', because on the one hand it was 'prohibition and restraint', on the other hand 'permission and constraint'. They're forbidden to go in one direction, invited to go in another; one way the Spirit says 'go not', the other he calls 'come'. There are plenty of other examples of the Lord guiding people like this from throughout church history. For example, Livingstone tried to go to China, but God sent him to Africa instead. Barnado tried to go overseas, but ended up staying in London! So, when we also need to trust the Lord to guide us, and as Pierson puts it, 'rejoice equally in his restraints and constraints',² or in the times when he closes a door, as well as the times when he opens a window.

As we look at the experience of Paul and his companions, we can learn quite a lot about the ways in which the Lord guides us. There were a combination of factors, over a period of time, and in the end they all took part in the discernment of what it all meant. Somehow, they'd been barred from going into either Asia or Bithynia, and so they'd been led to Troas, whose harbour faced west to Macedonia. Then Paul received his vision, calling for help. Together, they discussed these circumstances, asking themselves and each other what it all meant. Together, they reached the conclusion that through these various experiences God was calling them to go over to Macedonia to 'help'.

The best and only 'help' they could offer, of course, was to preach the gospel there.

John Stott concludes that we can learn several things about guidance from this. Firstly, God's guidance isn't negative only but also positive (some doors close, others open). Secondly, God's guidance doesn't only come through our circumstances, but also through the way in which we think about them and interpret them. Thirdly, God doesn't only guide us individually, but also collectively: we need to share the negative and positive circumstances, and our thoughts about them, so that we can mull over them together and reach a common mind as to what the Lord is saying through all this.³ I would add that we need to beware being too dogmatic about what we think the Lord has already told us to do; as we've seen, he's quite able to send us off in one direction, but then to redirect us to do something very different, in an entirely different place.

RESULTS

In this passage, we only hear the immediate results of Paul's group's decision to go and preach the gospel in Macedonia. They travel to Philippi, where they meet a woman called Lydia, who hears their message and becomes a believer. This doesn't seem particularly significant. After all, we read reports throughout Acts of thousands of people becoming believers, in many different places.

I don't suppose that Paul and his companions realised how important was this particular conversion in this particular place. As far as they were concerned, they'd simply crossed from one province of the

Roman empire to another. But in our terms, they'd left Asia behind them, and crossed into Europe. Lydia was the first Christian in the whole continent to be converted to Christianity. Until fairly recently, Europe was the main base for missionary outreach. It was from Europe that the gospel was taken to the ends of the earth. It was from Europe that the gospel eventually fanned out to Africa, Asia, North America, Latin America and Oceania.⁴ Once again, that 20-20 hindsight helps us to see how significant, how important, how vital, was that decision to preach the Good News to the people in Macedonia.

CONCLUSION

Let's think again for a moment or two about what this passage teaches us about the ways in which the Lord guides us.

We need to be sensitive to the Lord guiding us, because, like Paul and his companions, we can't possibly know the outcome of our decisions, even decisions which seem fairly insignificant at the time. We need to be aware that there are many ways in which the Lord does guide us. He guides us through circumstances, he guides us through prophecy, he guides us through visions and dreams. But the Lord also guides us through our own thoughts and discussions with others. We aren't puppets on strings. We have minds, and the Lord expects us to use them as we interpret what he might be saying to us through our circumstances, our dreams, or any thoughts which come to us as we pray. Of course, we need to bear in mind, as someone recently tweeted, that "The voice of God will never contradict with the Word of God".⁵

There are even times when the Lord doesn't give us any specific guidance over decisions we have to make. In that case, it's fine to make our own decisions, so long as they're in line with what we know through Scripture of the Lord and his ways.

Coming back to Paul and his companions: later on this journey, Paul reached Corinth. In his first letter to the believers there, he wrote this: *God purposely chose what the world considers nonsense in order to shame the wise, and he chose what the world considers weak in order to shame the powerful. He chose what the world looks down on and despises, and thinks is nothing, in order to destroy what the world thinks is important* (1 Corinthians 1:27-28). I think today's story is an illustration of that principle. As we've seen, the continent of Europe has played a vital part in the history of the church; it's hard to overplay the significance of Paul's journey to Macedonia. But the first Christian believer there is a Gentile woman! Just as Mary Magdalene was entrusted with the privilege of being the first witness of the resurrection, so Lydia is entrusted with the privilege of being the first Christian believer in the vitally important continent of Europe. You and I may feel that we are weak, despised, of no importance in the great scheme of things; but like Mary and Lydia, we are chosen by God, and we may just find that we are as vitally important to God's plans as they were.

¹ John R W Stott, The Message of Acts, (Leicester, IVP, 1991), p 260

² A T Pierson, The Acts of the Holy Spirit, (Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1895), pp 120-122, quoted by Stott, p 261

³ Stott, p 261

⁴ A short video showing the spread of Christianity over the last 2,000 years is available here: <https://vimeo.com/113801439>

⁵ tweeted by @CrystalinaEvert on 19 September 2015