

ACTS 16:9-15

ST JOHN'S, 26.5.19, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

“The big news is that I believe God has called me to return to live in Thailand.” That’s the opening sentence of a newsletter which David Fewster sent to his family and friends in September 2016. As we know, David followed that call, and has spent the last nearly 2½ years in Thailand, running a language school and beginning to plant a church.

Why am I telling you this? Because in May 2016, I preached on this same passage from Acts, and shortly afterwards, David came to see me, to tell me that God had spoken to him through what I said that morning.

I’ll come back to David later. As we think again about this passage, though, let’s remember that the same God who called Paul and his companions, called David back to Thailand. And the same God calls every one of us, if only we’ll open our spiritual ears to hear him speak.

GUIDANCE

Coming back to our passage, Paul’s second missionary journey wasn’t exactly going to plan! He and his companions had set out to visit the people who’d come to Christ during his first missionary journey (Acts 15:36). They visited young churches in Syria, Cilicia, Derbe and Lystra. But in 16:6,7, the Holy Spirit suddenly sends them off in another direction. Instead of encouraging and strengthening the churches they’d previously planted, they’re sent to evangelise new places!

We can learn quite a lot about the ways in which the Lord guides us from the experience of Paul and his companions in this situation. Firstly, the Holy Spirit prevented them from going into Asia or Bithynia. We don’t know how that happened. 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 may not have been obvious at the time that it was the Holy Spirit who was preventing them from carrying out their plans. Hindsight helps us to see how God has been guiding us, even through frustrating outward circumstances, such as illness, bad weather, road closures or strikes. If we’re seeking to follow what we believe God is calling us to do, obstacles in our way may seem more like the devil’s interference than God’s guidance. For Paul and his companions, hindsight enabled them to see that the Holy Spirit had been at work in preventing them from continuing with their original plans. We need to trust the Lord to guide us, whether he’s closing doors or opening windows.

Secondly, Paul received the vision of *a man of Macedonia . . . saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”* (v 9). Despite the *immediately* of verse 10, Paul didn’t simply jump onto the next ship across the Aegean Sea. Luke tells us, *we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.* So before heading for Macedonia, Paul told the rest of his party about his vision, so that they could interpret it together, prayerfully discussing the circumstances and asking themselves and each other what it all meant.

Together, they reached the conclusion that through these various circumstances, God was calling them to go over to Macedonia to 'help'.

In David's newsletter, he explains that before that morning in church in May 2016, he was already considering the possibility that the Lord was calling him back to Thailand. Some Thai friends had first suggested it, and David felt that the Lord had given him the outline of what he was to do back there. David had shared his thoughts with some other friends, who'd responded positively to the idea.

In describing the impact of my sermon, David writes this:

'What came to me . . . was the fact that although it was Paul who saw the vision, *we concluded that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.* And this was exactly what my friends had concluded. They were the 'we', confirming the vision/call.

When I came home after that service it struck me forcibly that back in January I had had a 'Macedonian call' from friends in Thailand; people said in effect, 'Come and help us.'

There were still some issues which David felt had to be resolved before he could go, but God dealt with them over the following months, and he left for Thailand in January 2017.

RESULTS

Coming back to Paul and his companions, in this passage, we only hear the immediate results of their 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. 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.² Once again, 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 has tweeted, that, "The voice of God will never contradict with the Word of God".³

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 chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are* (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 short video showing the spread of Christianity over the last 2,000 years is available here: <https://vimeo.com/113801439>

³ tweeted by @CrystalinaEvert on 19 September 2015