

Acts 16:1-10

“Ready to Follow When the Lord Directs”

Greetings again, everyone joining us online and here in person at Open Door Chapel. In our journey through the book of Acts, last time we were together, Paul was beginning his second mission trip, this time with a new partner, Silas.

In v. 1 we read, “Paul came to Derbe. Then he went on to Lystra.” “. . . And Iconium. . .,” v. 2 adds. Remember what happened at Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium back in Acts 14? (The writer puts them in the opposite order in chapter 16 from the way chapter 14 presents them, probably because Paul’s team is coming from the opposite direction [the east] on his second journey.) In chapter 14 order, first at Iconium Paul and Barnabas announced the message of Christ, a good number of people accepted it, but others rejected it. Some opposed them so strongly that it wasn’t safe for them to stay, and they left (Acts 14:1-7). At Lystra, after Paul healed a lame man, people thought he and Barnabas were gods and began preparing to worship them. But when Paul said they weren’t gods and other people came and spoke against him and Barnabas, the locals threw stones at Paul until they thought he was dead. He somehow survived and left the next day with Barnabas (14:8-20). They went to Derbe, told the good news of Christ, and won a large number of new believers (14:21). Finally, Paul’s team went back through Lystra and Iconium to follow up on their work, strengthening the new groups of believers (14:21-23). If you had gone through all that, how eager would you be to go back to places like Lystra and Iconium and check on things? Paul and Barnabas do that.

Now in Acts 16, Paul and his team do more of the same. The new Christians in Lystra meet with him and talk. They receive the instructions the missionaries bring from the Church as a whole and receive the encouragement they have come to give. Things are looking good there. The church is being strengthened, believers are multiplying steadily (v. 5).

In v. 1b we meet “A believer named Timothy.” When Paul was being stoned in Lystra in chapter 14, we read that a group of local Christ-followers gathered around him and prayed for him. We wonder if Timothy was not one of them, though the story does not say so clearly.

About Timothy, we read (v. 1b), “His mother was Jewish and a believer.” We don’t learn Timothy’s father’s name. But in the second letter Paul later writes to Timothy which is now part of the New Testament, (II Timothy 1:5), we see that Timothy’s mother is named Eunice, and his grandmother (probably on his mother’s side) is Lois. Paul writes, “I remember your honest and true faith. It was alive first in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice. And I am certain that it is now alive in you also.”

Timothy seems to have a promising future as a worker in the church. “The believers at Lystra and Iconium said good things about Timothy” (v. 2). We continue to pray that God is raising up a Timothy, or a number of people like him, in our

church, to serve and lead the Lord's Church in the future. Who could that be? Probably only our Heavenly Father knows.

In v. 3 Paul does something that may seem surprising. He "circumcised Timothy because of the Jews who lived in that area. They all knew that Timothy's father was a Greek." Why would Paul do that? If this sounds confusing to you, you have good reason for that. In the last chapter, Paul just spent a great amount of time and energy opposing people who insisted that new male believers in Christ be circumcised (and follow all the Old Testament laws). Is he changing his mind here in actively leading his new team member to be circumcised? No. In fact, later in Galatians 2:1-4 we read about another person Paul takes with him, a Greek man named Titus. In his case, Paul and others specifically do *not* circumcise him. They believe it is not necessary because Titus is not required to follow all the Old Testament laws.

But in Timothy's case, if Paul does not circumcise him, it is very likely that many of the Jewish people whom Timothy will deal with in his future ministry will reject him as unclean because he has not gone through this ceremonial process of being committed to God. We can say that this would not be fair or right, but it is a reality which Paul and everyone can see.

"By Jewish law Timothy was a Jew, because he was the son of a Jewish mother, but because he was uncircumcised he was technically an apostate Jew" (one who did not obey the law of his own religion, Bruce, p. 304). If Paul wants to keep his connections with Jewish people in their places of worship, he cannot be seen as allowing a member of his team to disobey one of the most basic teachings of Judaism.

Timothy's being on the mission team could easily become a specific problem, for example, when they go into a Jewish synagogue. The Jews there could well not believe it is acceptable for an uncircumcised man to teach there. That would stop the Gospel of Christ from going out in this way. With that in view, Paul decides that it is better in practical terms for Timothy to be circumcised.

Besides the problem of circumcision, there is the fact that Timothy's father is a non-Jew, yet married to a Jewish woman. This is understood as disobeying the teachings of the Jewish faith. In Deuteronomy 7:3-4 we read the following about people from other nations/religions (seven nations, including the Hittites, which God promised to drive out of the land He decided to give to the Hebrew people as their homeland). It says:

Don't get married to any of them. Don't give your daughters to their sons. And don't take their daughters for your sons. If you do, those people will turn your children away from following the LORD. Then your children will serve other gods. The LORD's anger will burn against you. It will quickly destroy you.

Whatever Timothy's parents or we today may think about this, it is a problem for Jewish people whom Paul's team will be dealing with. So they are doing what Paul writes about later in I Corinthians 9:20.

To the Jews I became like a Jew. That was to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one who was under the law, even though I myself am not under the law. That was to win those under the law.

Again, after being on the winning side of the arguments in Acts 15 over whether and how strictly believers in Christ were required to follow the Old Testament Law, Paul could now make a point of going against the traditionalists by taking with him a young man who has not been circumcised. But he chooses to deal with the situation in a way that shows more humility and respect for people who have been on the losing side. He remembers that they can still be part of the Christian community moving forward.

Paul's focus is not on his rights or what he feels like doing. When he tells Timothy his thinking about this, what does Timothy say? We can imagine: "You want to do what? Oh, good one, Paul! I was thinking you were serious there for a second. Oh, you are?" It's also very possible that some people will criticize Paul for this decision, claiming that he is being inconsistent after he has fought so hard to keep the requirement of circumcision out of the Christian teachings on what is necessary for salvation.

But Paul's great concern is not about these problems. It is effectiveness in spreading the message of Christ. He is making the spreading of the Gospel his team's top priority and putting everything under it. He is not putting the Old Testament Law above the Gospel of Christ, but neither is He simply tossing it aside. In his work over the coming years, we see him again and again showing faithfulness to its customs and traditions. They are not now required in order for people to be saved, but they can be very helpful expressions of it.

This is in line with vv. 22b-23 of I Corinthians 9, where he writes, "I have become all things to all people so that in all possible ways I might save some. I do all of that because of the good news. And I want to share in its blessings."

Paul and his team do not just think about what they are within their rights to do according to the wording of the Law. Instead, they follow the *spirit* of the Law. That is, they follow the spirit of love toward the Jewish people and go out of their way to show understanding and respect toward the ones who think circumcision is so, so important. It's very likely that the missionaries have the goal of gradually leading them away from placing so high a value on the one act of circumcision and the tendency to be judgmental toward people who have not been circumcised.

Once again, the mission team does all this to make the best possible chance for the message of Christ to be received. What difficulties are you and I willing to go through in order to give the people around us the greatest opportunity to meet Jesus Christ and become His followers?

As a very small example, with Halloween coming pretty soon, as you may know, every year there is a debate among some Christians about whether it is OK to celebrate or not. Christians are people who have committed ourselves to living godly lives, as Christ taught us to do. Is it godly to lead children to dress up as demons,

dead people, monsters, or whatever and walk from home to home threatening to do something bad unless the people there give you a delicious snack (“Trick-or-Treating,” that is)? Some say it’s no problem and others that it is wrong. Still others believe it is not a problem for them, but they avoid doing it out of respect for their brothers and sisters who think it is bad.

Some people give up using Christmas trees as decorations for Christmas. Others don’t feel comfortable in seeing trees like this used to celebrate Christ’s birth because there was a custom of doing things like this in the religious life in European cultures such as Germany before Christianity came to that area. Many Christians do not worry about this because we know it has a meaning to us with no connection to any pre-Christian religion of Europe. But in order not to make a problem for their Christian brothers and sisters, some give up the custom of using Christmas trees as decorations.

Others avoid drinking alcohol altogether because some Christians believe it is against the Bible’s teachings and not what God wants His people to do. For example, I was raised in a no-alcohol family. I cannot see from the Bible’s teaching that it is necessary to avoid drinking alcohol 100%, though Ephesians 5:18 does teach, “Don’t fill yourself up with wine. . . . Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit.” So even though I came to believe that a little alcohol is OK, I did not feel that it was right to drink it, for example, when I went out to eat at a restaurant with my parents. Pushing my right to drink would have damaged my relationship with them, I believe, and that was much more important. You may think of many other examples of things which Christ-followers avoid doing not because they believe they are wrong in themselves but in order to get along well with others who do have a problem with them.

There are still other Christians who sacrifice certain things to make it easier for the Gospel of Christ to be received. They include people who accept the call of God and the church to serve as its leaders, knowing that they and other Christians may be persecuted if they do. One of them has been in the news recently. He is Pastor Jin Mingri of China (also known as Ezra Jin). He was put in prison for months beginning last year by the Chinese government for reasons that seem somewhat unclear. The U.S. President and head of the Chinese government got involved and talked about his situation in May of this year. Gladly, this led to Pastor Jin’s release, which has been in the news. However, his case is a symbol of many others in which people serving Christ are punished for it. Among them are eight other ministers from the same Zion Church network, who are still in prison. They have been willing to serve, for the sake of the Gospel, knowing that things like this happen. We can be proud of them, thankful for the freedom we have to live out our faith, pray, and do all we can to work for religious freedom for everyone.

By the way, it is likely that this is also around the time members of the Church, probably including Timothy’s home church, recognized God’s leading in his life and affirmed it. In I Timothy 4:14, Paul writes to Timothy, “Don’t fail to use the gift the Holy Spirit gave you. He gave it to you through a message from God. It was given when the elders placed their hands on you.” It may also be that it was around this time, or the same time, that Paul laid his hands on Timothy, to pass to him a special blessing of God’s Spirit for his work. In II Timothy 1:6, Paul writes to

Timothy, “That is why I remind you to help God's gift grow, just as a small spark grows into a fire. God put his gift in you when I placed my hands on you.”

Continuing the Acts 16 story, in v. 4 “Paul and his companions traveled from town to town. They reported what the apostles and elders in Jerusalem had decided. The people were supposed to obey what was in the report.” That is, the message the Church decided to send to new believers, written in Acts 15:29.

Don't eat food that has been offered to statues of gods. Don't drink blood. Don't eat the meat of animals that have been choked to death. And don't commit sexual sins. You will do well to keep away from these things. Farewell.

According to Acts 15:23b, the message was to go to “the non-Jewish believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia.” Those places are all really close together, near the church that sent out Paul and his team. Now they are going well beyond that area but giving the same directions. It seems that they understand it as teachings for all the new churches, not just a particular few.

Then in v. 6a, “Paul and his companions traveled all through the area of Phrygia and Galatia.” We can assume that they tell the message of Christ here, as they do pretty much everywhere they go. Apparently the message is believed and received by some. That's because when we get to Acts chapter 18, we see Paul traveling “from place to place in the region of Galatia and the district of Phrygia, strengthening the disciples.”

Now we come to a section which shows us a lot about how God leads His people. In v. 6b “The Holy Spirit had kept them from preaching the word in Asia Minor.” Also (v. 7b) “they tried to enter Bithynia. But the Spirit of Jesus would not let them.”

Why would God keep His people from giving His message to anyone? The writer does not know exactly or make it clear. Apparently only God knows. Maybe He already had other people there telling the Gospel? Maybe He knew that those who would hear the message would not receive it then. They would be ready later but weren't yet, so the time was not right. Could be. Possibly the Lord had other people in mind to announce His teachings in this area later. When we read the first verse in I Peter, we see that Peter is sending the letter to churches which are growing up in this same area, including Galatia, Asia, and Bythynia.

People in churches today wonder sometimes, “Why couldn't we get that pastor to lead us?” Someone may say, “If we could only get that evangelist to come and speak here, God could do such great things!” Pastor Search Committees or Mission Team leaders may feel, “We thought it would be God's will and a great blessing to many people if he/she came here. But it didn't work out. What is God doing?” But God has His plans and brings them about in His time and way. He does not always show us what He has in mind from the beginning. Sometimes we come to see it later, and other times we may only see it in heaven someday, if ever. But we are called to trust that the Lord knows what He is doing and willingly follow Him.

The missionaries in today's stories experience God as sometimes appearing mysterious to them. They can't tell what He wants them to do next just by thinking about it or trying to apply a mathematical formula. He leads them to do different things in different times and through different ways of directing them. As one Bible teacher (Lloyd Ogilvie, *Acts*, p. 239) writes, "The Spirit opens and closes doors, says no to some possibilities and makes that a part of an ultimate yes."

When I was a university student, I knew a guy named Charlie. I think he was a Christian and it's safe to believe that he prayed and asked God to guide his life, for example in deciding where to go to study. But Charlie was on the same campus as I largely because the day of registration for classes, he confused our university with another one just across the street, where he was intending to go. When he got lost and came to ours by mistake, he started looking around, got in the various lines to register for classes, and started meeting people and making friends. He thought it looked like a good place and somehow got his family and the university to agree to let him enroll there. I think Charlie had a good experience there for four years. Could that strange process have been God's way of answering a prayer for guidance? I'm not prepared to say no. Especially thinking of how much God seems to enjoy a good practical joke, it might be right in character for him to surprise someone through a happening like this.

In the Acts 16 story and our lives, God is always in charge. That is clear through all the changes and difficulties His followers go through in serving Him. His work does not begin with a church organization and its various planning committees. It may come about through them or some other more free-wheeling way, but it never happens *because* of them if it is the authentic work of God.

In v. 7b we read about Paul's team that "they tried to enter Bithynia." The verb here shows they were not just thinking about it. They did not have a vision or dream or some general sense about it as they thought and prayed and so decided not to go there. They tried but were stopped in some way. This is presented as part of God's guidance. Thank the Lord for guiding us through the circumstances and events of our lives—including the ones we like and those we don't, the ones we can expect and the ones we can't, the ones we can see clearly and the ones that leave us scratching our heads and wondering. God is very good at using them all to accomplish His goals. When things don't go as planned, let's learn to "go with what we've got" and not worry about the rest. We follow in the footsteps of our Savior and many great disciples when we do that.

After a period of waiting, seeking, and maybe feeling some frustration, the mission team finally gets a clear sense of God's direction. So the writer (Luke) says, (v. 10) "We got ready at once to leave. . . ." Notice that it says "We," not "They," or "Paul and Silas," etc., as it has been up to this point. Luke apparently has joined the group. We don't see him at the beginning of this journey when the others are being listed and he writes using the word "they" all the way to v. 8 and Troas (where they are at the end of today's reading). But now it seems that he has come in somewhere along the way, very possibly Troas. That's on the western coast of Turkey today, just across the Aegean Sea from Greece.

Even before the events of today's story, we have seen Silas being willing to drop whatever plans he had for the next part of his life and respond to the call to go with Paul. Now both Timothy and Luke have joined the team, setting aside any other commitments they may have made. And after finally receiving the green light from the Lord, the mission team wastes no time in moving forward. It is remarkable how free the early Christians in the Bible stories are. They can be open to changes of plans because their purpose is clear. They know God's larger aims with certainty, so when the shorter-term plans need to change to fit with them, Christ's disciples are ready to go with the fresh leading their Lord gives them. Paul and his team are not setting their own plans and then trying to get God to bless them. They are open to their Lord's direction and ready and willing to change whatever they have in mind when God leads them another way.

When God's people have submitted our wills to His and are ready to move whenever He gives the word, He will take responsibility for the outcome of the work we do in obedience to Him. He will find a way to bless it. The result will be humble praise to Him for His work, not pride or arrogance growing out of thinking too highly of our own plans.

From this point in the story on, for the first time, the Gospel of Christ is taken to Europe. Some of us here have benefitted fairly directly as a result of this. The message of Christ spread throughout Europe and from there to North America and eventually throughout the world. Why it was given to people of some places faster than those of others is a matter which probably God alone can understand and manage with wisdom and grace. But now we all have the Good News of salvation in Christ. It is there for us to hold with deep thanks and pass on in love and faith to everyone who has not yet received it.

In v. 10b it says, "We decided that God had called us to preach the good news there." "We decided." In other cases it's more like "God told us not to" or "circumstances stopped us." Notice again how God leads His people in this story through a combination of ways and situations. Some involve emotions more, and others thinking. Some are through closed doors, and others are through open ones. But our creative and wise God is at work guiding the whole process in today's story, and in our lives of faith, as well.

The great challenge for Christians today, just as in New Testament times, is to discover the Spirit's guidance in our lives. To do that, we do not have to possess special spiritual powers for reading the mind of God or people's minds, like reading a crystal ball. But we do need to be listening. God will find the right ways in the right times in His good plans to speak to His people in ways we can understand. But He generally gives His message to people who are paying attention and ready to take it seriously when it comes to us. He normally speaks in the clearest ways to those who have already submitted our wills to His and agreed to follow when He gives His next guidance. He will not speak in ways which conflict with His teachings in the Bible, and we need to look carefully at how He has directed His people in other situations in the past. That can help us avoid confusing our own voices or those of other people with the voice of the Holy Spirit. As we listen with open hearts and minds, God will

find a way to guide us as we serve Him from moment to moment, day to day, year to year.

Let's ask Him again to do that in our individual lives and those of our families, church, other people around us each day, the various nations we represent, and everyone in His world.

Lord, help us, like the mission team in today's story, to be ready to follow when you direct us. Show us the way to go, and give us the spirit of love for you and other people which will motivate us to walk after you in faith. Give us wisdom to know the difference between your voice and the many others competing with it. Enable us to obey your call to tell through word and deed the unchanging message of salvation in Christ. As we do, let it be true of us individually and as a church that we become "strong in the faith" (v. 5b). Whether it is "every day" (v. 5b) or at whatever pace you choose, let the number of believers in this community of faith and many more grow regularly. Lord, bring your kingdom into our lives in deeper and deeper ways—and through us into all of your world. In Christ's name we ask it, amen.

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