

“COME OVER TO MACEDONIA AND HELP US”

Acts 15:36-16:40

Key Verse: 16:9

“During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’”

In the last passage we learned that we are saved by God’s grace alone. It is the work of God who sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ to die and rise again. When we simply believe this gospel we are saved. So we have nothing to boast about except the marvelous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. This grace makes us thankful, beautiful and compassionate. When the early Christians stood on this grace alone, there was peace between Jew and Gentile and world mission work advanced. At this time in our nation’s history, we only pray that God, by his grace alone, may make North America a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

In today’s passage Paul and Barnabas have such a sharp disagreement that they part company. After this, we hear no more about Barnabas in Acts. Rather, Luke follows the ministry of Paul, beginning with his second mission journey, which eventually takes him to Philippi, a Roman colony. How did he get there? God led him through a vision. In Philippi, several exciting conversions take place and a church is formed. It is a great work of God. We learn that God is sovereign in world mission work. God has his own plan for world mission. We can be useful to God when we learn how to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit to fulfill God’s plan. Lord, help each of us to do so.

First, Paul and Barnabas separate (15:36-41).

One day, Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” Barnabas agreed. He wanted to take Mark along. But Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them on the first journey. Paul was a spiritual general. He committed himself to God’s holy mission with a life-giving spirit. He expected his coworkers to do the same. He wanted the mission team to be fully dedicated to God. Barnabas was a man of great shepherd heart. He embraced those who needed help—like a mother nurtures her weak child with more love and care. Both Paul and Barnabas might have thought they were right. Paul could rebuke Barnabas for being humanistic. Barnabas could rebuke Paul for lacking compassion. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and went to Cyprus. Paul chose Silas and left. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Sometimes church leaders disagree. It must have been painful and disconcerting. Yet, God used it for good. God blessed Paul’s ministry abundantly to spread the gospel to the whole world. At the same time, God blessed Barnabas’ shepherd heart for Mark. Mark must have realized how terrible was his sin of unfaithfulness. He must have shed many tears. This led him to the cross, where he met Jesus who died for his sins and rose again. Later, he wrote Mark’s gospel, which reveals Jesus’ power to change weak people into strong people; to change fearful people into courageous men of faith. Mark became useful to God and to Paul (2Ti 4:11). Romans 8:28 says, “And we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Second, Paul chooses Timothy and trains him (16:1-5).

Paul and his newly formed mission team went to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived. Timothy had made a genuine commitment to Christ and was struggling to obey the word of God. At this time, he was a young man, perhaps a teenager. His mother was a Jewess and a believer and his father was a Greek. Timothy could understand both Jews and Greeks; he might have spoken both Hebrew and Greek. He had a good reputation as a faithful and trustworthy man. When Paul saw him, his heart was moved. To Paul, he looked like great leadership material. Paul wanted to take him along on the journey.

However, before doing so, Paul circumcised Timothy. It was to prevent unnecessary controversy. If Timothy remained uncircumcised, the local Jews could accuse Paul of dishonoring the law. To keep his ministry focused on the gospel alone, Paul circumcised Timothy. It was also for Timothy's own good. Considering the relationship between Paul and Timothy, it was likely a test of faith and obedience for Timothy. Timothy submitted willingly. It was the beginning of a deep spiritual relationship through which Paul trained Timothy as a great servant of God. Later, Timothy shepherded the large church at Ephesus (1Ti 1:3). Timothy served God with a life-giving spirit, practicing the principles of gospel faith he had learned from Paul. Young men who want to grow as spiritual leaders must learn humble obedience, like Timothy.

Paul, Silas and Timothy traveled from town to town and shared the decision reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. They told them how the Council had affirmed that people are saved by the grace of God alone. This was really good news to the local churches. They were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

Third, God leads Paul through a vision (6-10).

After the mission team had visited all the churches that were pioneered on the first mission journey, a question arose. Where should they go next? They did not sit down, head on fist, elbow on knee, like a Greek philosopher in the sculpture, "The Thinker." Rather, they actively tried to go somewhere. First, they tried to go into Asia, but the Holy Spirit kept them from doing so. Then, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. Despite their great effort, all the doors were closing. It might have been discouraging. Here we must realize that sometimes, God leads his people by closing doors. It is to prevent us from going in a wrong direction. Did Paul retreat? No! Paul pressed on by faith. They came to Troas. Then during the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Their direction became crystal clear. They got ready at once, went down to the dock in the middle of the night, and caught the first ship to Macedonia.

Here we learn that in doing gospel work, we must carefully follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes, mission fields or opportunities that look good to us are not God's leading. So he closes the door. When this happens, we must accept it without being discouraged. We must persevere to find God's leading. Then, when we find it, we must follow it immediately by faith. Mother Barry was once an active Christian student worker in Mississippi. But she knew that God has given us the world mission command to obey. She sought God's leading. So she applied to a mission board, requesting to go to China or Korea as a missionary. She was chosen to go to Korea, accepted this as God's leading, and left. Then God led her to fulfill his great vision.

There was an Englishman named Rowland Bingham (1872-1942). At age 15, he accepted Christ as his Savior. From that time, he sincerely tried to obey Christ. He witnessed to family and friends, overcoming shyness. While working in his mother's store, he had a prick of conscience for selling tobacco to young

people whom he also taught the Bible to. Yet tobacco sales was a main source of income to his poor mother. As he prayed about how to resolve this, he read about an opportunity in Canada. Sensing the Holy Spirit's leading, he moved there. In Canada, he met a great preacher, John Salmon, and became his assistant. One Sunday after church, he met a godly woman whose son was going to Sudan as a missionary. He was shocked to find that 90 million people in Sudan had not heard the gospel, and that there was not one Christian there. The woman challenged him, "Are you prepared to join my son in his mission if God so calls you?" He could not forget these words. He heard God calling him to Sudan and began to make plans to go there immediately. It was the beginning of the Sudan Interior Mission. He faced many difficulties over the next fifty years, but always sought God's leading. Gradually, God pioneered much of Africa.

God gave Dr. Lee a vision and prayer topic for Russia which he shared at the World Mission Report in 1985. Then several Korean students accepted it and began to pray earnestly. One by one, they found open doors and went into Russia as student missionaries. Now Russia UBF is not only established, it is sending missionaries to other nations.

God gave Mother Barry a vision for Muslim countries, North Korea and China, which she shared at the World Mission Report 2002. As we have prayed, God is opening doors and working beyond our expectations. In Central Asia, the "back door" to the Muslim world is open. In the Middle East, doors are opening even for Americans. In North Korea, the door seems to be cracking open. In China, the door is open. Almost anyone can go as an English teacher, like second-generation Missionary Abraham Lee. Muslims are calling, "Come over to the Middle East and help us." Do we hear them? North Koreans are calling, "Come over to North Korea and help us." Do we hear them? Chinese are calling, "Come over to China and help us." Do we hear them? If so, we must search for a way until God leads us through it.

Fourth, a woman named Lydia accepts Paul's message (11-15).

In verse 10, the pronouns "we" and "us" begin to appear. At this point, Luke joins Paul's company. They sailed from Troas to Samothrace, to Neapolis, and then went inland to Philippi. Philippi, named after the father of Alexander the Great, was a Roman colony and a leading city of that district of Macedonia. God was taking them closer to Rome. They say that many retired Roman army officers lived in Philippi. There were not many Jews there, and apparently there was no synagogue. On the Sabbath they went outside the city gate to the river, expecting to find a place of prayer. Paul did not begin at a sports stadium or a theater, but a place of prayer.

However, at the place of prayer, there were no men. Paul's vision was of a man of Macedonia. But only women were there. Paul might have shrugged his shoulders. But by now, he had learned to expect anything. So he began to share the gospel with them. One of those listening was Lydia. She was a worshiper of God. It is amazing to know that there was a worshiper of God in Philippi. She was also a good businesswoman. As she listened to Paul's message, the Lord opened her heart. She could understand that God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. She could understand that Jesus' resurrection opened the way to God and his kingdom. She realized that God was offering her eternal life and the kingdom of God. She shouted, "Amen! Amen! I believe." She was a woman who loved the truth. She was also a woman of integrity. When she accepted Christ as Lord, she really meant it. She and her household were baptized. Then she opened her home. It was the first house church in Philippi. It supported Paul continually. One person is very important in the work of God. God wants to lead us to those like Lydia.

Fifth, "Be joyful always, pray continually..." (16-40).

One day when they were going to the place of prayer, a slave girl met them. She was possessed by a spirit that could predict the future. Her owners used her to make a great deal of money through fortune-telling. But the poor girl was suffering greatly under the torment of the demon. She cried out again and again, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved." At first, Paul ignored her. Perhaps he thought that healing her might distract from preaching the gospel. But Paul was a shepherd. Her spiritual agony deeply troubled him. One day he said, "In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!" At that moment the spirit left her. To the poor slave girl, it was the moment of liberation. She was free from the torment of demons. She must have rejoiced greatly. But to her owners, it was a moment of losing their income source. They were so upset that they stirred up Roman pride and had Paul and Silas arrested, stripped, beaten, severely flogged and put into a maximum security prison cell. It was the most lawless and unjust treatment.

How did Paul and Silas react? Look at verse 25. "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them." There is no hint of discouragement in them. There is no sorrow, no despair. They were praying and singing hymns to God. They were joyful. They thanked God for his work in Philippi. They knew that God was in control. They committed everything to God and had a worship service in the prison cell. This pleased God greatly. So God sent an earthquake and opened all the prison doors. They could have walked out to freedom. But they did not. They remained in the prison. The jailer, bound by a Roman oath, had to forfeit his life for any prisoner who escaped during his duty. Seeing the open doors, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself. But Paul called out, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here." Paul did not save himself when he had the chance. Instead, he saved the jailer. The jailer saw God through Paul and Silas. He rushed in trembling before them and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." The jailer and his whole household believed and were baptized. They were saved that very night.

Here we learn that God helps his servants, even in the darkest situations, when they do not lose heart but joyfully and prayerfully depend on him. When we please God, he can use any difficult situation for his own glory and the saving of souls. Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." In very difficult and dark situations we must "be joyful always, pray continually."

The next day the magistrates ordered that Paul and Silas be released. They could have crawled out of the prison and crept away quietly. But they did not. Paul revealed that they were Roman citizens who had been unjustly treated and demanded an escort. This shocked the magistrates and they tried hard to appease Paul and Silas. Paul did this to protect the growing church in Philippi. The magistrates would think twice about mistreating a church member in the future.

In this passage we learn that God has his own plan for world mission work. He leads his people through the Holy Spirit to accomplish this plan. We must seek God earnestly and go through the doors he opens to us until we see his vision. We also learn that God's great vision is realized one person at a time. In Philippi, it was realized through Lydia and a jailer. One person whom God leads us to is really important in God's great vision. May God help us to pay attention to the open doors that he has set before us until we can see his great vision. May God help us care for one person at a time to realize his vision.