

Acts 16 – God’s Will vs. Our Perception

Introduction

Paul’s intention for his second missionary journey is stated in 15:36, “...Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are.” The first part of their journey follows that plan but begins to diverge along unexpected lines.

⁶They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; ⁷and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; ⁸and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas.

[Read 16:6-8]

Q: When one looks at a map, Paul’s desire to preach in these places is very logical. The gospel would have been preached throughout the entire Turkish peninsula with no gaps. What are some of the reasons the Holy Spirit “forbade” Paul to go to these places at this time?

A1: [There are many answers and group discussion should be encouraged.] One possible answer is in the very differences of the Apostles themselves. Ever notice how different their personalities were from each other? This also made them suitable for preaching to a wide variety of people groups. Paul might not have been so suited. Or it simply wasn’t it God’s timing yet.

A2: Read 1 Peter 1:1 [Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen] Apparently Peter would minister to the very groups Paul “missed”; there was only a “gap” from Paul’s perspective, not the Holy Spirit’s. God works along multiple, parallel lines. Do we see ourselves as the **ONLY** solution?

Q: What is an application for us taken from Paul’s experience?

A: We should make our plans to the best of our ability but remain open to the Holy Spirit’s direction to amend them.

⁹A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

[Read 16:9-10]

Q: What is significant about the call to Macedonia based on the pattern of the spread of the gospel to this point?

A: This would be the first formal foray onto the European continent. It would begin to spread the Gospel to **ALL** people groups descended through the sons of Noah – Ham, Shem and Japheth.

¹¹So putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; ¹²and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days. ¹³And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled.

¹⁴A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. ¹⁵And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

¹⁶It happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling. ¹⁷Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation." ¹⁸She continued doing this for many days.

But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" And it came out at that very moment.

[Read 16:11-15]

Q: It was Paul's usual custom to begin preaching at the local synagogue. Why doesn't he do that in Philippi?

A: The Jewish community is so small that they don't have a synagogue. They regularly meet at a spot along the river. In fact, they're so small that they don't even have any male members. (10 Jewish males were required to form a synagogue.)

Q: At Pentecost, Samaria, and other places where the Gospel is first preached – what are the chief differences between those events and this one at Philippi?

A: There are no great numbers converted and there are no great external signs of the Holy Spirit. This beginning is very humble compared to those and is undertaken by a few women who simply believe the Word given through Paul. (There may be lessons concerning women's role in the church in this passage.)

Point: *Philippi would become the site of one of the early church's largest and most thriving churches. Just like Philip being led to the desert to minister to a single Ethiopian, the Holy Spirit knows how to most effectively plant the Gospel for maximum results.*

[Read 16:16-18]

Q: What is the evidence that the church at Philippi was growing?

A: More and more people were coming out to the place of prayer by the river.

Q: Why does Paul ultimately undertake to silence the demonic slave-girl?

A: As Christ demonstrated Himself, the Holy Spirit does not need nor desire the "testimony" of Satan. It confuses people who begin to ascribe legitimacy to demons, blurring the lines between light and darkness.

¹⁹But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, ²⁰and when they had brought them to the chief magistrates, they said, “These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, ²¹and are proclaiming customs which it is not lawful for us to accept or to observe, being Romans.”

²²The crowd rose up together against them, and the chief magistrates tore their robes off them and proceeded to order them to be beaten with rods. ²³When they had struck them with many blows, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to guard them securely; ²⁴and he, having received such a command, threw them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns of praise to God, and the prisoners were listening to them; ²⁶and suddenly there came a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison house were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone’s chains were unfastened. ²⁷When the jailer awoke and saw the prison doors opened, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here!”

²⁹And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, ³⁰and after he brought them out, he said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

[Read 16:19-24]

Q: Where does the line of religious tolerance often end?

A: Money -- when it begins to impinge on financial issues.

Q: What is the clue in v.20 that there is already existing racial prejudice?

A: The accusers’ statements that these men are Jews.

Q: What is the recurring accusation in v.21 that both Jesus and the Apostles constantly run into?

A: The alleged claim that their teaching contradicts, and encourages disobedience to, Roman law.

Q: New Testament Cities for \$500, Alex – The Answer: A Roman colony with all the rights and bureaucracy of a city physically located in Italy.

A: The question: What is special and different about Philippi? This city’s status meant that this was the direct authority of Rome at work within this city, not merely local officials being aroused into a frenzy by jealous Jews as so often was the case. There were legal processes and protocols to be observed that were completely overlooked in their treatment of Paul and Silas.

[Read 16:25-30]

Q: How often do we react to mistreatment or personal persecution by praising God in the midst of such circumstances?

A: [This is a rhetorical question. Encourage group discussion along these lines.]

Q: From a certain point of view, why might Paul and Silas and all the prisoners be construed as the “stupidest” people on earth?

A: The doors are all miraculously opened, the chains all fall from everyone’s limbs, and yet no one seems to recognize they’ve been freed. No one jumps up and runs out of prison!

Q: What lesson might we learn from everyone’s reaction?

A: In every circumstance, regardless of the appearance of the situation, inquire of the Lord and seek **HIS** will and guidance. From a spiritual point of view, the prisoners were **STILL** in “prison” – the “prison” of sin – and “freedom” would not be gained by running from the building as long as the messengers of true freedom – the Gospel through Paul and Silas – were in that building.

Also, have you noticed how many times throughout the Bible we are taught that just because circumstances look and feel good to us, that this does not automatically assume that they’re provided by God?

Q: Compare the reactions of the prisoners to that of the jailer. What were they both based on?

A: Both were based on the physical circumstances. The jailer, seeing the doors open and awakened at the sound of all the chains thumping to the floor believed his life was forfeit not seeing that the prisoners were still actually there. The prisoners, from their viewpoint of the same events, believed their life was forfeit if they did not attain the greater freedom of the Gospel.

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Q: What did the signs result in?

A: Belief in the message behind the signs. The repentance of the jailer and his whole household.

³¹They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” ³²And they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house.

[Read 16:31-32]

Q: How did Paul respond to the jailer’s question?

A: He gave him the “short answer”, meeting him at the point of his need, and then followed from that point with the longer, supporting answers that would lead not just to belief but discipleship.

³³And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was baptized, he and all his household. ³⁴And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having believed in God with his whole household.

[Read 16:33-34]

Q: Compare and contrast the two uses of the water.

A: The same source of water first used to tend to Paul’s and Silas’ *physical* healing subsequently provides *spiritual* healing through baptism of the jailer and his family.

Q: Compare and contrast the two uses of food.

A: Paul and Silas, after providing *spiritual* nourishment, are themselves *physically* nourished.

Point: *ALL the answers for Paul and Silas were provided through their commitment to the Gospel as a priority over their physical concerns. The ministry provided all the answers to all the parties involved. Placing the message of the Gospel first in our lives has the peculiar result of meeting all other needs along the way.*

- *What is the priority we have set for our resources, our very lives?*
- *Do we see ALL things and ALL circumstances as being devoted to the Gospel FIRST, and ourselves second?*
- *How well do we grasp that Jesus is our first and primary sustenance?*

It is very interesting to note that while imprisoned in Rome, Paul will write the letter we know as the Epistle to the Philippians and in verse 1:3-7 of that book in the near future writes to them:

*“I thank God **in all my remembrance of you**, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of **your participation in the gospel from the first day until now**. For I am confident of this very thing, that **He who began a good work in you will perfect it** until the day of Christ Jesus. For it is only right for me to feel this way about you all, because I have you in my heart, **since both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers of grace with me.**”*

*Quite an image for the Philippians, who would treasure this letter with the knowledge of the circumstances of Paul’s incarceration in their very own prison, and how it resulted in **THEIR** being freed through the Gospel.*