

Reading:

Timothy Joins Paul and Silas

16 Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. ² The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. ³ Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴ As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. ⁵ So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

Paul's Vision of the Man of Macedonia

⁶ Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Lydia's Conversion in Philippi

¹¹ From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. ¹² From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district^[a] of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

¹³ On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. ¹⁵ When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

Teaching:

I wonder have any of you seen the funny episode of Father Ted, where Dougal is on a plane and he's had the chance like a child used to do, to see into the cockpit. There's a big red button in front of him that says, "Do not press" and yet his mind is fixated on it, he's so taken by the sign that he just has to press the button. The repercussions of pressing the button are catastrophic and yet the button and temptation push Dougal to do something. It's that whole thing of refusing to do something that you really want to do.

You know something? Many of us want to be directed by God's Holy Spirit in different aspects of our lives, but I wonder how many of us are willing to accept when God says 'Don't go there, or don't get involved in that, or don't touch that'. How many of us are content when God says, don't accept that job, don't enter into that relationship, don't allow that friendship back into your life. How many of us are open to God's restrictions?

I'm sure you can relate to this, that for all of us, if we were to live our lives again there would be some things that we have done that we would definitely undo if we had the chance. I wonder how things would have worked out if we had just listened to the leading as well as the restrictions of the Holy Spirit? How different may some of the circumstances of our lives have been if we had just not pushed that button? This is the issue with Paul and his new team.

Let's just look at the start of chapter 16 again verse 1, 'Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek'. So as a recap, Paul and Barnabas completed their first missionary journey in Acts 14. And then last week in chapter 15 we heard Alan preach about a personal falling out between Paul and Barnabas. So they split and now Barnabas takes John Mark with him as they head to Cyprus. And Paul is heading as far north taking Silas. So now they are on their second missionary journey. Instead of Barnabas it's now Silas. Luke is telling us that Timothy will become Paul's favourite companion, and as we know their relationship would become invaluable.

So now let's pick up the story as they begin their journey – verse 6 *“Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”*

So they've been kept by the Holy Spirit to go into both Asia and also Bithynia. If you were living in that time and travelling with Paul, I wonder what your conversation would be like with him? Why did he want to go to these places? I think it's important to have a look at a map at this stage. Because if you look at Jerusalem you will see that immediately west is Cyprus; that's where Barnabas goes. But Paul goes north heading towards the Black Sea. Paul knew that it was an incredibly important place to go because this was the region known as Nicaea. It had enormous strategic importance, and the Gospel needed to be there. In fact for those of you that know your prayer books, in 325 AD there was going to be a special council in which a gathering of the wider Church would define its first doctrines, and out of that came the Nicene Creed which we declare as a Statement of Faith at Holy Communion. So it was an incredibly important place in God's eyes. But Paul wasn't called to take the Gospel there. That would be for Peter to do. So why did Paul want to go there?

Was it because he was still reeling from his fallout with Barnabas? Was it to get as far away as possible from the situation he has just been in? I wonder for each of us, when we face a sharp disagreement with someone the first thing we want to do is get as far away from them as you possibly can. Or maybe something is said in church that annoys you, so you decide to pick up sticks and move on to somewhere else, but then guess what happens at the next church? You are going to get your feelings hurt and so what do you do then? Do you just keep moving? You see Satan knows how to push our buttons. When we make decisions, when our hearts are hurting or we are emotional, our judgments are clouded. This week I spoke to someone that within the space of 24 hours had done a number of things as a reaction to a disagreement that actually in haste he regretted doing. In those moments of hurt, we need to slow down and listen to the Holy Spirit to hear what he wants us to do. I wonder was that what happened to Paul's judgments? Because Barnabas was trustworthy, godly and loyal, and yet Paul makes a decision that seems to come from a place of feeling wounded. What was driving Paul's decision?

We all have a massive lesson to learn from this, because as Paul is pushing his way up the map, the Holy Spirit says STOP. We don't exactly know how he was stopped from going any further, but something made him think. Was he traveling the right steps that God had placed before him? Remember Psalm 37:23 'The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him'. I think it's important to say that the Lord will make firm your steps but he will also make firm our stops if we listen to him. If we decide to make steps forward, the only way we can be sure they are correct for us is if we delight in God, if we include him in every decision. Are you doing that with your life today?

There are many times that the Holy Spirit will tell us that the direction we are going is not his will for our lives, but are we listening to these words and are we willing to obey them?

Think of how much it must have taken for the great Paul to realise he was wrong. How much humility does it take to go back to your team and tell them that you were wrong, that it's not what the Holy Spirit actually wants. It takes humility to admit that you are wrong. So for each of us, are we sensitive enough to the Holy Spirit so that when God says STOP we obey his will. Here's what God says to the Psalmist in Psalm 32:8-10 'I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.⁹ Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you.¹⁰ Many are the woes of the wicked, but the Lord's unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in him'.

Think about the mule. They have that image of being stubborn – stubborn as a mule. They need a bit of a kick to get them going. How many people do you know who are like that, they are unwilling to change their path. And God has to kick them to get them going. If God puts something on your heart then don't be like the mule and sit and hesitate. Do it. We have followed Peter so much in the book of Acts and we have seen how Peter when he is called to see the man at the door to visit Cornelius he does it without hesitating. If God tells you to go, then don't hesitate. Go. Don't be like the mule.

And then there's the horse. Do you know of people who are like a horse and they get ahead of God. God says to them, here's my plan, wait upon me. But before the words are out they are already on their way. God has to go, wooah, and pull the reins. God has to try and slow them down. So where's the balance. Well those verses in the Psalms give us the answer. God says, 'I will counsel you with my loving eye on you'. Do any of you remember that look that you would get from your parents. You know that look when there was nothing they needed to say to you, you just knew what the look meant. Shouldn't the Lord just be able to look at us, and we are gazing at him that we just know that what we are doing isn't right, or that needs to change, and we correct our lives. God says, 'I will counsel you with my loving eye on you'. But in order to know that look we have got to be paying attention.

There's times with my wonderful dog Spud that he is gazing at me, wherever I move in the room his head moves so he can see what I am going to do next. That's what we need to do with God. We need to make time where we gaze and watch for his counsel. In our small group this week as we studied the topic

of praying, we discussed how we need to pause and rejoice, and gaze on the beauty of the Lord before we start moving into asking. And it's the same with our daily lives, we need to find the time to simply gaze upon the Lord and to see what his plans are. So where is that time in your daily routine to do that currently, or is it too full that God hasn't the chance to give any direction.

So God forbids Paul to go into Asia. Does that mean that God is not going to let his Word reach the people there? No. God is going to send other people. God is going to send the Gospel when the Gospel needs to go there. You see not every good thing is a God thing. That doesn't mean they don't need to be done, but it might be that they don't need to be done here. Ephesians 2:10 says, 'For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do'. God already has a plan for what he wants me and you to do. The things that I am supposed to do, God has all the resources ready for that to happen. And the things that I am not supposed to be doing, it will feel like pulling teeth – it will be so difficult.

You know I had this about a month ago, in relation to a missionary partnership that I brought with me to this parish. It was my strong links with the South American Mission Society. And from the moment I arrived 4 years ago I was so keen to get it up and running. In fact we even had Cristobal Ceron over from Chile to speak. But I realised that God has that planted in my heart for what he wants to do in me. He didn't mean it for this parish. And there was me trying to force it into this parish. I kept fighting and fighting to get someone here to take it on and run with it and I couldn't understand why it wasn't gaining any traction. It was because I wasn't listening to God about where he was taking partnerships in this church family. And so in the past month I have written to SAMS and explained that we as a Church will not be pursuing at this time that partnership because it's not where God is taking us. That's very tough to admit when I am wrong. It's very humbling. But God has already created the resources for us as a parish to enter into the areas of ministry that he wants us to engage in. Therefore we need to release those things that whilst they might seem good, are not where God is taking us. We need as Paul was told to do, to STOP.

Also he's been teaching me that there are many things that I personally am not meant to be doing in this church, and so I need to be humble and learn to stop getting involved in those things, and pray that God will reveal in all of your hearts those things that you need to do rather than expect me to do.

I think we have got to be people who come in prayer and ask those honest questions of the Lord such as, Lord are we doing this because it's what we've

always done, am I doing it because that is the expectation? Lord are we being stubborn like the mule or are we like the horse running ahead? Are we brave enough to pray to the Lord that if there are things that we should not be involved with, as individuals or as a church, that we will stop them right now and we will follow the lead of the Holy Spirit. It's more important that we are in God's will rather than do what we've always done. We've got to ask the question that Paul needed to ask, Lord am I trying to go to Bithynia rather than Macedonia? So is God's restrictions as welcoming and sweet as his provisions? Are you willing to accept the red light as much as the green light?

And so as we finish, we see for the first time Luke using the word 'we'. Verse 10 ¹⁰ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. ¹¹ From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. ¹² From there we travelled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days'.

So Luke is saying 'we'. It's the first time that he includes himself – it's Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke. And Paul has to tell his team that he's got the direction wrong, and they need to head to Macedonia. And that reminds me that in our church, we are working together. It's not meant to be down to me alone. Never get caught in the model of the Rector having to be the answer to everything. That just won't work. I'm not in charge here – it's got to be the Holy Spirit. There's going to be times where I will feel determined that as a Church we need to go to Bithynia, but through the conviction of the Holy Spirit on some of you, you will have to come to me and say, don't go there Jonny, it's not from the Lord, we need to go to Macedonia. And I need to be humble enough to say that I was wrong.

For each of us in this church family, and in our own families, are we ready to accept if God says that the job opportunity is not right for you, if God tells you that this relationship is not his will are you humble enough to accept that, if God convicts you to stop putting all that money into your nest egg but actually give it to his mission are you humble enough to obey him? Are you humble enough to say to God, I'm not only willing to follow your leading Lord, but I'm going to also follow your restrictions. The sooner we learn the lesson of stopping, the more peace will come in to our lives, and the more leading of the Holy Spirit will come into our churches.

Let's pray