

I'VE GOT FOUR TICKETS TO PHILIPPI

ACTS 16:6-15 JULY 22, 2020

In most fantasy movies, the heroes find themselves on some sort of quest. Usually it's to deliver their realm from the powers of darkness. The travelers know the end goal, but aren't always sure about how they'll get there. They certainly don't know all of the twists and turns they'll encounter. But, knowing that they *must* go, they hit the road, covering as much ground as they can between each new obstacle. In the 1988 classic, *Willow*, before the team leaves the comforts of home on their adventure they meet with a sorcerer, hoping to get some guidance through his divination. He declares, "I will consult the bones!" And he throws out some supposedly magic bones which should tell them what to do. Quietly, the sorcerer turns to Willow and says, "The bones tell me nothing." But, the quest must continue. There's work to be done, lives to save, movie tickets to sell.

From reading God's Book we know that the Christian life is a journey. It's a quest we're on. It's part of a global rescue mission. We don't have to move blindly. We're given constant support in the forms of Scripture and the indwelling Holy Spirit, the example of those who have gone before us, assistance from our spiritual family. But, that doesn't mean we can anticipate each leg of the trip, each turn ahead or what roadblocks we might face. In fact, often we find ourselves wondering what God is up to, or whether He's directing us at all. Are we making progress? Am I making the right decisions in life and in my service to the Lord?

Though so much has been supplied for us, the way is not always clear. That's to be expected, because it's a life of *faith* after all. We can take comfort from a passage like the one before us tonight. Where even an *apostle* finds himself not sure of what God is going to do next or of what God wants *him* to do next.

Along the way, we also get a front row seat to *providence*. Providence is the way God brings about His specific desires for the earth and the people in it. In this set of verses, we see its power and peculiarity as God accomplishes what *He* wants.

Tonight, in one of these displays of God's providential dealings, we find that the things He wants are often not the things *we'd* think of, left on our own, which is why, as Christians, we must continue forward, making ourselves available to His maneuvering, but commit to being *led* by the Holy Spirit in the spiritual work we set out on.

We begin in verse 6, with Paul, Silas and Timothy heading west from Syria, through Gentile territory.

Acts 16:6-7 - ⁶They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia; they had been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. ⁷When they came to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.

Paul tried to go south, God said "No." Then they tried to go north. God said "No" again. What an amazing thing to read: "God, we want to go preach the Gospel in Asia or Bithynia." And the Lord said, "No. You are *forbidden* to do that." Why would God block someone from doing a good thing?

We love traits like entrepreneurship, innovation and initiative. And, sometimes, in the Christian life we tend to think, "As long as my *motivation* is good and my plan is for a Godly goal, then I should do this thing I want to do. I've got a passion for *this* kind of ministry and so I should do it."

But Acts 16 boldly counters that idea and instead shows us that there are *some* good things, some *Godly* things that God *does not want you to do right now*. That doesn't mean they aren't worth doing. It doesn't mean God doesn't maybe want *someone else* to do them. But, for *your* life, God has a particular timing in a particular set of tasks that have been prepared beforehand for you to walk in, not only so that you can grow in your relationship with your Savior, but also so you can bring Him great glory *and* so He can work great things *through* you. It is *His* plan that we're to be putting into motion, not our own. When God's people are out of sync with that, the result is never good.

This isn't something specific to Paul. We remember how David had it in his heart to build a permanent house for the Lord. "I'm going to build a temple!" And even though other believers around him thought it was a great idea, the Lord didn't. God said, "No. That's not your job to do."¹

So, Paul is out on this trip, has a goal in mind, but each time he tries to pivot he's blocked. The fact that God didn't just give Paul a specific leading, the way He had to Philip back in chapter 8, gives us something to think about. Even Apostles, missionaries, writers of Scripture, leaders in the church - no matter the caliber of Christian - we all must walk by faith. There's no magical level of 'enlightenment' that unlocks power or understanding the way that is sometimes portrayed in movies or is suggested in religions like Buddhism or Scientology. The fact of the matter is that Paul *the Apostle* did not know where to go next. He only knew that the Spirit was vetoing his ideas, *but* he was obedient enough to allow his ideas to be vetoed. That's an important aspect of this story. We know that God has a plan. We know He is working it out providentially. We know that He has given us a free will and we're able to do things like further God's work, hasten His coming *or* quench the Spirit and tear things down. We also know that God's ways are not our ways. Putting it altogether we want to be the kind of people who are regularly stirring up God's gifts in our lives and looking for opportunities to do the Lord's work. We should be asking God to put burdens on our hearts for specific people or areas of service, *but*, in the end, we must be people who are submitted to leading. If God says go, we should go and if God says no we should obey.

Since we know the rest of the tale, we can see that God was providentially working out a special plan. But, Paul didn't know it. In the moment, the Lord kept saying to him, "No. No. No." Some scholars try to suggest that the reason why God said "no" was because, once things happened in Philippi, there would be *more* exposure to the Gospel in Asia Minor. God, they say, was just moving pieces around the board in order to get the greatest number of conversions. But that's just more human reasoning. The truth is: We cannot predict providence. But we can participate in it.

Acts 16:8 - ⁸Passing by Mysia they went down to Troas.

The team keeps moving west (the Spirit won't let them go anywhere else), but now they've run into the sea. The Lord is still keeping them in the dark, day after day. I'm sure with each movement Paul and company felt the way we often feel when making decisions: "Is this the right way to go? I want to serve the Lord, but it seems like I'm not getting a clear direction." In such a situation, I find it helpful to notice that Paul doesn't give up and head home. He's still made it his business to be about the Lord's business. He keeps inching forward as the Lord allows. And he's willing to *wait* without complaint.

Finally, after who knows how many days of waiting and wondering, a signal flare is seen in the night sky.

¹ 2 Samuel 7:1-17

Acts 16:9 - ⁹During the night Paul had a vision in which a Macedonian man was standing and pleading with him, “Cross over to Macedonia and help us!”

Macedonia was in Greece. Of course, Paul wasn't *unwilling* to head to Europe, it just hadn't been part of his plan. But now he's had a dream that seemed to be giving the direction they needed.

Acts 16:10 - ¹⁰After he had seen the vision, we immediately made efforts to set out for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Recently I saw a video of a service at a prominent church up in northern California, where some of the leaders (who tell their people they are apostles) said they had a prophetic vision in which they were carrying out a “prophetic act” that would be “very, very historic.” And, because of this vision, they decided to carry out the act, which was to bring a wizard's staff on stage and copy the scene from *The Fellowship of the Ring* where Gandalf stands against the Balrog deep in the mines of Moria and declares “You shall not pass.” A little strange, if you ask me.

Let's notice a few things about Paul's vision and their response: First of all, though they acted quickly, we can see that they *did* discuss and evaluate the content of what Paul had seen. It says they “*concluded* that God had called [them] to preach.” Second, we know they had been carefully waiting on the Lord, listening for direction, seeking His will. Asking God what He wanted them to do, not trying to find whatever was trendy or culturally popular or something that would make a good video or a good headline.

Notice this also: The Macedonian man said, “Come over here and *help* us.” In response, they made plans to go and *preach* the Gospel to them.

The Gospel *helps* in all the most significant ways. That's not to say we don't need to be a part of compassion ministries but, on *this* trip, they wouldn't be establishing any soup kitchens or building any houses. The help the Macedonians needed was salvation.

But, notice this also: Obviously God had a specific work in mind, yet He still only gave a general vision. He shows them the region, but not the town, not the person or situation they'd encounter.

It's true that sometimes God gives detailed instructions. We think of Philip: “Go down *this* road and then hang out.” Then, “go join *that* chariot.” And we thank God for that kind of specific leading. But often the course of our life will not have those sorts of spiritual bullet points. Instead, we are to walk by faith, operate in grace, and (as we're going) wait for God to guide.

Something important happens in verse 10: Dr. Luke shows up in the story! “*We* immediately made efforts...concluding that God had called *us* to preach the Gospel.”

We don't know much about Luke, other than that he was a physician and the writer of both this book and the Gospel. He would be a faithful and longtime companion of Paul. And, as a man who was constantly being beaten and afflicted with health issues, I'm sure it was very helpful to have a doctor on the team. Whether the fellows all knew each other from Antioch or not, we don't know. But it's clear that God was working out His providence to get these guys working together. And that's a partnership we still benefit from today.

It doesn't *seem* like Paul had planned to bring a physician on the road with him. But God, it seems, was thinking, "Oh, you're going to need a doctor. And I've got one prepared and positioned in Troas who can not only tend your many wounds, but is also one of the finest historians around. *And* he's a gifted evangelist."

Before setting sail in verse 11 one more thing to consider: It says, "We made efforts to set out for Macedonia." These weren't the kind of guys who just "let go and let God." They weren't the kind of guys who said, "Well, I have a *vision* for ministry and now it's someone else's job to carry it out." That happens sometimes in the church. They put their hands to the plow and, once they felt God's leading, did what they could to move forward in it themselves.

Acts 16:11 - ¹¹From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, the next day to Neapolis,

The language indicates that the wind was with them, carrying them swiftly from Asia to Europe. In fact, it will take them more than twice as long to make this trip on the way back. "Ok! The Lord is leading. He's showed us the way. He's built up the team. He's put a booster on our sails!" That makes the arrival in verses 12 and 13 all the more startling.

Acts 16:12-13 - ¹²and from there to Philippi, a Roman colony and a leading city of the district of Macedonia. We stayed in that city for several days. ¹³On the Sabbath day we went outside the city gate by the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and spoke to the women gathered there.

So, all this build up but then nothing happens. What's going on? They get there, there's no synagogue, meaning there weren't even 10 believing Jewish men in the city. They hang around for a few days and it seems there's nothing to do. Where's the 'man' from the vision? Where's the work? I thought we were about to strike oil here?

In *Willow*, the team goes through a major effort to get to the castle at Tir Asleen. *If they can just get there*, everything will be right as rain. They finally arrive to discover the castle defeated and deserted. Quite a let down. And so the quest continued.

Paul and the guys finally get to the weekend and head out to the river where some Jews *might* be meeting. Now, what must've seemed in the moment like a letdown we know was God's providence. He had a particular plan for Philippi, and it was going to happen on *Saturday*. And it wasn't going to happen in a dramatic way in the city square, but through a casual conversation by the riverbank. Language scholars point out that the term used for "spoke to the women" isn't the one you'd use for preaching or lecture, but for friendly conversation.

This shows us another aspect of how to participate in providence. Don't cling to preconceived ideas about how ministry should go. We wouldn't have predicted that a heavenly vision would connect to such an ordinary interaction. But that was God's plan. But if Paul had said, "No, we're gonna go talk to the governor." Or, "We're gonna stay in the plaza until a bunch of people show up." Well, then they would've missed out on God's plan for a specific lady and her family, who we meet in verse 14.

Acts 16:14 - ¹⁴A God-fearing woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, was listening. The Lord opened her heart to respond to what Paul was saying.

You've got to smile when you see God doing things. He tells Paul he's not allowed to preach in Asia Minor, because He wants Paul to go to Greece so he can talk to...*a woman from Asia Minor!* Lydia was from Thyatira but had set up shop in Philippi. In looking at her conversion we can notice a few things. First, look at what God will do in His effort to reach one lost lamb. Of course, *others* would be saved in this visit. But that day God had brought all these different elements together so that one woman could hear the Gospel and be saved. Then through her, others. Then through them, others.

Let's also notice the process of her conversion. This is important. There are some Christian traditions or systems of theology that say that God's grace is *irresistible*. That He has predetermined who will be saved and who will not and there's nothing that you can do about it, other than be *forced* into salvation. On the other hand, it is heretical to say that salvation is of *man's* initiative. That man goes to God of his own accord and says, "I realized on my own I need salvation, will You save me?" And then God says, "Well, let's see what I can do for you."

So what do we see here? We see the Biblical process of salvation. You have a woman, Lydia, a hell-doomed sinner. We don't know her whole story, but at some point she recognized that God must exist. Whether through the testimony of creation or exposure to Scripture, she *responded* to whatever revelation she had and became a "God-fearer," a Gentile who followed the God of Israel.

God, in His providence, orchestrated an innumerable series of events so that He could get a preacher of the Gospel in front of her. And then, through what we call *prevenient grace*, God opened her heart, He freed her will, so that once she heard the Gospel she was able to *respond* to it, one way or another. Notice, God did not "outfit her heart with belief." God didn't put belief in her heart, He *opened* her heart so that she was able to respond. You see, the work of salvation is all God's. It's *His* initiative, not ours. *But*, God does not *force* His grace on anyone. He invites us and frees our wills so that we are free to choose. And, in this case, Lydia made the choice to believe on Jesus Christ and she was saved. She accepted the invitation and received the free gift of salvation.

What if she had chosen otherwise? We'll see examples of that later in Acts. People like Felix who had the same kinds of conversations with Paul, felt the draw of God who was knocking at the door of their hearts, but then chose to shut Him out, to their own hurt.

God is so gracious that He gives us a genuinely free will to choose. And He is so powerful that He can accomplish His will *even when people refuse Him*. When His servants are in line with what He wants, when we're submitted to Him and committed to being led *and* to making progress, then we see these wonderful things happening where the right person is at the right place at the right time for an eternal difference to be made.

Acts 16:15 - ¹⁵After she and her household were baptized, she urged us, "If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house." And she persuaded us.

Lydia is a great saleslady and we see she had a heart for hospitality. In her case, she wasn't directed by God to leave her business or renounce her work. Instead, she'd serve the church and other Christians with what God had given her. From what we can tell, she would continue as a seller of purple. Matthew Henry once wrote: "Religion does not call us *from* our business in the world, but directs us *in* it." And now, she too, is part of the active providence of God. Now, because people were committed to doing God's work, but were also willing to be led in what He wanted, you not only had a small team of missionaries, you had a permanent home base in this new city.

We could not have strategized this. We could not have predicted what God wanted Paul to do. Luckily, when it comes to living out the Christian life and being a part of providence, we don't have to predict it. Instead, we participate in it by being led by God the Holy Spirit. Allowing Him to have His way. And therefore making ourselves available for His grand and gracious purposes.