

God's GPS

Acts 16:1-10

Main Point: *God guides His servants by mysteriously opening/closing “spiritual doors” of opportunity, all for the sake of the gospel.*

Introduction: Good morning! Please open your bibles to Acts 16. If you are new to the Bible, you can find Acts 15 following the gospel accounts (Matt., Mark, Luke, John)...

Orienting the Text: Where we are in the story

A brief reminder on where we are in the story of Acts so far. After the Lord Jesus is resurrected back to life, He appears to His disciples and other followers for 40 days, teaching them about the kingdom of God. They ask the burning question that any faithful first century Jew would ask (one that many are still asking today): is now the time that you are restoring the kingdom to Israel? Jesus answers the question by redirecting them to the wider purposes God has for them: they will receive power of the promised Holy Spirit, and when they do, they will be witnesses of Jesus's kingship for not only Israel, but for Samaritans, and eventually the ends of the earth (Gentile people).

And so Luke has taken us on a geographical journey, from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria (Philip), and now to Gentiles. What began with the conversion of a single Gentile under Peter (Cornelius) has now become a full-blown mission with the church in Antioch, and the sending out of Paul & Barnabas. Paul & Barnabas have just completed their first major missionary journey and returned to Antioch for a time of rest and spiritual refreshment.

Exposition of Acts 16:1-10:

Timothy joins Paul's missionary team

We pick the story up where we left off with Pastor Michael's message last week, when Paul and Barnabas part ways over a dispute about the role of John Mark on the mission team. Paul decides to take a new companion, Silas, with him as he revisits the previous areas he ministered in and started churches, in order to clarify the gospel for them by passing on the letter from the Jerusalem council. Along the way, they pick up a new companion: young Timothy, who eventually becomes a major leader in the church.

Acts 16:1-3 - Why did Paul want to circumcise him? As we have learned the last few weeks from our study in Acts 15, circumcision was THE big issue in that day, and was causing potential division amongst the church. Since Timothy's father was Greek, Timothy's capacity to minister in mixed settings would be potentially hindered by the fact that he wasn't circumcised – ala, a full member of the Jewish community. Mixed marriages were frowned upon by most Jewish communities, making Timothy suspect. Since the priority of Paul, in every circumstance, is the advancement of the gospel, Timothy undergoes this procedure. While it seems like minor details here, what Luke is reminding us about is not only the tensions that existed in these early Christian communities, but the fact that in every circumstance, the key issue for Paul and these early Christian leaders was always first and foremost: what is best for the gospel? What is the best, most effective way to promote the interests of Jesus Christ? Now, we'll see how this principle works out in terms of God's guidance in the next section, but I want to point out how Luke continuously reminds us that the major priority in the Christian life is how to best exalt Christ, and help others see Him in us and through our actions and behaviors. How can we best witness to the truth, goodness, beauty, sufficiency, and glory of the Lord Jesus? What stumbling blocks, distractions, and even cultural preferences might need to be removed in order to provide better opportunities for Christ to be seen by all. Now, as they revisit previous places of ministry, watch how the Lord uses this to strengthen His churches...

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Acts 16:4-5 - As we have seen, whenever Luke informs us about how much the church is growing/prospering, it often means that there is a significant transition in the narrative coming; that the story is about to take a new turn as one chapter closes, and another begins. In the next section, we are going to see that this is exactly what happens. Let's read on...

Paul's team makes unsuccessful attempts at entering Asia

Acts 16:6-8 - Okay, we have some things to unpack here. First, geography. When Luke makes a reference to "Asia", it's not the continent that we call "Asia" today. This area is Asia Minor, which is basically modern-day Turkey. You'll see on the map where Paul intends to go. Next, he tries to go north to Bithynia. Both times, God sovereignly closes the door. With the first closed door, Luke simply says they were "forbidden" to by the Holy Spirit to preach the word there. Now, later on in Acts, the door will be opened to Asia, but here for whatever reason, the Holy Spirit puts a halt to their travel plans. So Paul goes elsewhere, seeking opportunities more north. However, this second closed door Paul ascribes not to the Holy Spirit, but to the Spirit of Jesus.

Now, at first glance, it appears as if Luke is just splitting theological hairs: for the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit of Jesus, are essentially, one and the same. God is triune: Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit as a helper and guide for people. Through the Spirit's agency, that Christ can simultaneously be reigning at the right hand of the Father and indwell Christian believers. So why does Luke specify the Spirit of Jesus here?

I think the reason is that he wants to convey to us that the Lord Jesus is still guiding the mission. As we have seen throughout Acts. Jesus, having been resurrected and ascended to the right hand of the Father, has been "raised to reign", meaning He is now governing the course of the church to expand His kingdom. The kingdom is not here in its fullness yet; and won't be until we have the Living Jesus's visible, bodily, return – but there are unseen dimensions of the kingdom operative in the present moment, as the Living Jesus guides and shepherds His people to bring the gospel to places and peoples who have not yet heard. So, by superintending the circumstances of Paul and his companions, Luke shows us how the Living Jesus is not a passive King/Ruler/Messiah but is intricately involved in the very details of our lives, opening/closing doors for the sake of the spread of the gospel.

The vision from Macedonia in Troas

So, Paul eventually ends up in Troas. If you look on the map, you will see that Troas is port city, bridging the way between east towards Asia, and west towards Macedonia – which we know today as the continent of Europe. The interesting thing to note here is that Luke doesn't describe any ministry activity from the team. Some scholars suggest that, at this point, Paul decides since he can't go east, he'll just go west, which the vision he receives would confirm. That's certainly possible. However, I think there might be a little more to it than that. My suggestion is that in coming to Troas, everyone was tired from travelling, weary from all the Holy Spirit shutdowns and closed doors, and they were getting some rest, and taking time to prayerfully seek the Lord's direction. At a human level, I'm sure experiencing continued shut doors was frustrating for the team – especially Paul. Think about: he gets this amazing call from the Living Jesus Himself; waits 13 years for it to come to fruition; finally, he is sent out from Antioch with Barnabas, where they complete this incredibly fruitful missionary journey. Then they have the big show down with these false Christian Jewish teachers and win the battle. Then a conflict divides them, and Paul ventures out with Silas and forms a new team. And now, Paul sees a needy mission field in Asia minor, which is the next logical place (geographically speaking) for them to travel to. People need Jesus, and Paul's totally committed to naming Christ there.

And yet – the Holy Spirit blocks the way. Purposely blocks the way. Why? Doesn't God want people to be saved? Doesn't He realize that eternity is at stake – why does God seem to be going so slow, and taking His own sweet time? Have you ever had thoughts like that? Or been in a situation where it seems like God just isn't showing up or opening doors in the way you think He could or should? I wonder if this was a discouraging experience for Paul – to see so many harvest fields ripe and ready for the gospel, and to be continuously told by

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the Holy Spirit to wait. I think the time in Troas was a time of waiting for Paul and continued stripping away of his natural tendency to just charge ahead. But look at what happens next...

Acts 16:9-10 - The Lord shows up in an unexpected way. Paul has a dream, and in the dream, he hears the voice of one crying out to him to come to Macedonia. Now, it's quite possible that Macedonia was on Paul's heart as a place to reach sometime in the future; for, again, the next logical place to go for him would have been Asia Minor. But God had other plans; bigger plans, for Paul and for the future of this continent. For in heeding the Macedonian call to go there and to "help" the people, European Christianity was born. In 500 years, on this continent, Protestantism would be born, and so many of our ancestral roots in this congregation stem from that period. The first missionaries that would go back into parts of Asia Minor and further east to the continent of Asia; south to the continent of Africa, and eventually, to the continent of North America. Much of our spiritual history as Europeans, Protestants, evangelicals, and just plain ol' Americans, stem back to this moment when Paul and his friends were tired, weary, and just waiting on the Lord for what the next step would be in the evangelization of the world.

One last thing to note: look at the reaction of Paul's companions. Luke says: immediately *we* sought to go to Macedonia! Did you notice the subtle change in pronouns there? So far, Luke's narrative has been in the third person, singular, or plural. But now it's in the first person plural, meaning that Luke has quietly inserted himself into the narrative. We don't know where or how Luke becomes a Christian and joins up with Paul; but there it is – Acts will now be recorded as history, and personal testimony directly from Luke himself.

Main Point: *God guides His servants by mysteriously opening/closing "spiritual doors" of opportunity, all for the sake of the gospel.*

Application: Steps for Following God's GPS

So let's unpack this text a little more by drawing out some practical lessons on how God guides His people, and you and me in particular.

- 1) What's your motive?
- 2) Discern how the Spirit may be opening/closing doors
- 3) "work (for the Lord) while you wait (on the Lord)"
- 4) Be ready to move (immediately!) when God moves

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Exposition of Acts 16:1-10

Timothy joins Paul

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Acts 16:4-5

Paul attempts to enter Asia

Acts 16:6-8

The Macedonian Vision

Acts 16:9-10

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Questions for Reflection:

- 1) How have you experienced God's guidance in your life?
- 2) Why did the Spirit keep Paul from going to Asia?
- 3) What did the man from Macedonia need help with? Why is this important for understanding the wider plans God has for history?
- 4) How might God be leading you to “help someone in Macedonia”? (i.e. unreached neighbors, friends or family)