

WHEN GOD LEADS

Acts 16:1-10

In the last chapter, we saw a brewing controversy develop between two of the pillars of the church. Paul and Barnabas had a falling out. It became so divisive that they split and each went his own way. I've been through divisions with Christians and I can attest it isn't a pleasant prospect. It feels bad. And it doesn't feel as though the Lord is leading.

Yet as we begin this chapter, we will see some unmistakable signs that the Lord has not gone on vacation and that He is still actively leading His church.

GOD LEADS LEADERS

And he came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium.

Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. (Acts 16:1-3).

While Barnabas had chosen to go in the direction of the island of Cyprus, Paul determined to take the overland route into Anatolia, visiting the churches they had planted and strengthening them. In this manner, he came to Derbe and Lystra. It was there that he recruited a young man named Timothy.

Timothy was only half Jewish. His mother was a Jew while his father was a Greek. This meant his upbringing had been mixed. It meant he had not been circumcised and so therefore could not be considered a Jew. It also meant he had received some godly instruction in the home during his youth. Paul alludes to that instruction in a letter to Timothy.

For I am mindful of the sincere faith within you, which first dwelt in your grandmother Lois, and your mother Eunice, and I am sure that it is in you as well. (2 Timothy 1:5).

Timothy had a godly mother and a godly grandmother. This had given him a heritage of faith. He had become a believer in the God of glory.

Timothy had become a disciple. This was what you called a believer; a Christian. Somewhere along the line, he had heard the gospel of how Jesus was born and lived and died and rose again in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. Timothy had heard the message and had believed and had become a disciple.

We often think of Timothy as a disciple of Paul's and there may be some truth to this relationship. But in a larger sense, Timothy was recruited, not to become a disciple of Paul's but because he was already a disciple and he was to be Paul's co-laborer.

However there was something that might prove a stumbling block to the ministry. It was the fact that Timothy was uncircumcised. That did not matter in the case of those Gentiles who accompanied Paul. They were expected to be uncircumcised. But Timothy was half Jewish. His situation would raise unneeded questions. And so, Paul takes him and circumcises him.

Paul had resisted circumcising Titus, a Greek, because to do so would have been to act contrary to the gospel of grace. It would have made it look as though circumcision was necessary to salvation.

But not even Titus who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised.

But it was because of the false brethren who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage.

But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you. (Galatians 2:3-5).

Titus was used by Paul as a test case. He served as Paul's proof that a Christian can be filled with the Spirit and yet not be circumcised. Paul and his companions were firm in their stand against the pressure of those who tried to make circumcision a requirement of Christianity. This was not an issue on which they could compromise. The truth of the gospel was at stake. If Titus were to submit to the rite of circumcision, then this action would make it seem as though circumcision was a necessary part of salvation.

Salvation through faith alone is at stake. Paul's gospel is on trial. Paul was not unmovable because his personal reputation might be at stake or because he simply wanted to have his own way. He refused to yield because the truth of the gospel was in the balance.

On the other hand, Timothy's circumcision did not take place because anyone was denying the validity of Timothy's relationship with God. His circumcision would serve to

eliminate the attention of people to his particular situation. Paul wanted nothing that would detract the attention of people from the gospel.

GOD LEADS WITH A MESSAGE

Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees, which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. ⁵ So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily. (Acts 16:4-5).

What were the “decrees” that Paul and Silas were delivering to the churches? They were the decrees that had been determined at the Jerusalem council back in Acts 15. These were some of the essentials that had been decided upon by the entire church. They were things that were used to unite the church.

We live in a day of denominational divide. There are churches of all sorts of names and backgrounds and that often seems troubling. But we ought to know that there is a lot more that unites Christians than divides them.

Notice the results of this message. The results are described in verse 5. They are twofold. First, the church was being strengthened in the faith. Secondly, the church was increasing in number daily. I believe that when the first is taking place, the second will follow naturally.

GOD SOMETIMES LEADS BY CLOSING DOORS

⁶ And they passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; ⁷ and when they had come to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them; ⁸ and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. (Acts 16:6-8).

Paul and Silas had already experienced some open doors. There had been open doors on the first missionary journey as church after church was planted. There had been open doors on this second missionary journey.

- It was an open door when Paul and Silas received the support of their home church in Acts 15:40).

- It was an open door when they were able to strengthen the churches that had been established (15:41).
- It was an open door when they recruited Timothy (16:1-3).

But now there is a closed door. The closed door is the door to Asia. Paul and Silas had been *forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia*. This reference to Asia speaks of the Roman province of Asia. This was the area of southwestern Anatolia. It was the area in which lay the seven cities that would host the seven churches of Revelation 2-3. Paul and Silas had already seen this area as fertile ground for the gospel. They had plans to start churches in this area, but the Holy Spirit said, “Not now.”

There is a lesson here. It is that today’s closed door might be open tomorrow. God sometimes closes a door only temporarily.

Can I tell you the rest of the story? There eventually was an open door in this area. Indeed, there would be seven open doors in this area. How do I know that? Because the book of Revelation is addressed to seven churches that were eventually planted in this area.

I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name. (Revelation 3:8).

This was written to the church at Philadelphia. There was an open door placed before this church. It was open because God had opened it. Paul came to this area and the door was closed, but a few years later there is a church here with an open door.

In the summer of 2004, Paula and I had opportunity to visit the site of the ancient city of Philadelphia. I was interested to see what was the situation there. What I found was a little disheartening. There is no longer a church there. The city in which the church once resided is almost completely Muslim. There is a lesson. The lesson is that, while God sometimes closes a door temporarily, He also sometimes opens a door temporarily. A closed door is no guarantee that the door will stay closed and an open door is no guarantee that the door will stay open.

We don’t like to hear about closed doors. But they are a real part of life. An unexpected and debilitating illness; the loss of a job; family problems; the onset of discouragement or depression -- closed doors can take on a variety of forms. The good news is that we worship One who is able to work all things together for good. That is seen in this account. Paul was thinking of winning the land of Anatolia; God was thinking of

winning all of Europe. He had temporarily closed this door only so that Paul and his missionary team would go through a better door.

GOD LEADS THROUGH NEEDS

And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a certain man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. (Acts 16:9-10).

Notice in verse 10 that there is a change in pronouns. We have been reading what Paul and Silas and Timothy have been doing.

- And they passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region (verse 5).
- When they had come to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia (verse 7).
- The Spirit of Jesus did not permit them (verse 8).
- They came down to Troas. (Acts 16:6-8).

Suddenly there is a change. Do you see it? It is in verse 10 when Luke says, *Immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.* Luke has changed to the first person plural. "They" has become "We."

What happened? We are not told. We don't know if Luke had become a believer. We don't know if he joined Paul for professional reasons -- he is called the "beloved physician" in Colossians 4:14. Perhaps he came along to care for the medical needs of Paul and the rest of the team. Or perhaps he just happened to be traveling in the same direction and chose to accompany Paul and his companions for a time.

Paul and his mission company had been traveling through Anatolia in search of a place to do ministry, but the doors had been closed. In one way or another, the Holy Spirit had made it evident that this was not the place for their ministry. That had to be disheartening.

It is at such a time that Paul has a vision. It comes in the middle of the night. It is a man of Macedonia. This was the land to the north of Greece. This man of Macedonia was asking for help.

There is a lesson here. It is that God often leads us through needs. He makes known to us a need and that knowledge is a call to action.

How do we determine what is the will of God? How do we come to see God's leading? I think that God uses several different means.

We rarely see a giant hand come down from the sky and point us in a certain direction. So how does God direct us when we pray for such direction? Let me suggest several ways:

1. Through His Word.

If you are contemplating doing something and that thing is forbidden in the Bible, then God is "leading" you NOT to do it. That seems like an obvious one, but I include it because of the times I've heard people say that they thought that God was leading them to do that which was clearly against what the Bible taught.

2. Through Spiritual Leaders.

Proverbs 11:14 says, "*Where there is no guidance, the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory.*" We all tend to suffer from spiritual myopia. We all have our own blind spots. The advantage of several spiritual counselors is that they can sometimes see with a better perspective that which we are missing.

3. Through Circumstances.

In 1 Corinthians 16:9-10, Paul says, "*I shall remain in Ephesus until Pentecost; for a wide door for effective service has opened to me.*" It seems that a portion of his decision-making was determined by the way the Lord had revealed Himself through the open door of circumstances. Along these same lines, Paul and his companions reported "*all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles*" (Acts 14:27). They viewed those acts of circumstances as God having opened a door for them.

If you ever are on a boat or a ship coming into Port Everglades, you will see two towers, each with a large sign. If it is dark, there are corresponding lights on the towers. As you pilot the vessel through the channel, you must line up these two lights so that they appear as one. Move to the right or left and you run the risk of running up onto rocks or a sandbar.

We have three such lights that guide our navigation in our spiritual life. These lights serve to guide us. The first light is the Word; if that one is green you can proceed. The second light is leaders; if that one is green you can proceed. The third one is what God is

speaking to your heart personally. But you can't just skip the first two lights and go on just the third one.