

Text: Acts 16:6-10

Title: “The Helper ... In Our Circumstances”

Open your Bibles to Acts 16:6. The Holy Spirit orchestrates the circumstances of our lives to enable and empower us to live out the mission of Jesus. And what an exciting adventure it is as we set our sails to catch the wind of the Spirit moving us where Jesus is working. I’m so grateful that the Holy Spirit inspired Luke to include this in the historical record of Acts. You’re going to see that sometimes even great people of faith like the Apostle Paul had trouble discerning the will of God. We’ll see how the Spirit was their Helper and is our Helper to navigate the circumstances of our lives to live out the mission of Jesus. And believe it or not, you’ll see that this story here in Acts 16 is connected to your story.

Now Paul was an apostle, but also a missionary. And Acts tells us that he traveled thousands of miles on four trips throughout the world of his day. What we have here in Acts 16 takes place on the second of those missionary expeditions. **Read Acts 16:6.**

So they reach a fork in the road and Paul has in mind that the team should turn west and cut across the province of Asia, what we know today as Turkey. Paul may have had his eye on Ephesus, the leading city in that province. But when they came to that fork in the road it says they were “kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word” there. The road is somehow blocked, so they head north. **Read Acts 16:7.**

Bithynia was an important region on the northern coast of modern-day Turkey along the Black Sea. And at another fork in the road “the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them” to go in that direction. Notice here that Luke calls the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of Jesus.” That’s a great reminder to us that the Holy Spirit is Jesus living in us and through us to accomplish His work.

So what are we to make of these two closed doors? Luke doesn’t tell us, so we can’t be dogmatic one way or another. Maybe it was an illness, or a dangerous situation they were warned about, or the road was just impassable. Paul was never one to let difficulties hold him back, but somehow the Spirit impressed on them that they were not to go to Asia or to Bithynia. Maybe the team just didn’t have peace about going that direction. Whatever it was, they didn’t see it as bad luck or fate. They took these closed doors as direction from the Holy Spirit.

Read Acts 16:8. They didn't try to kick open a closed door; they passed on by. Troas was on the western coast of modern-day Turkey. For you history buffs, Troas is associated with the ancient city of Troy, the site of the Trojan War described in Homer's epic poem *The Iliad*. So they have come about 500 miles to this point. They may have been exhausted and frustrated that things hadn't gone as they planned. What is God up to? Why so many closed doors? Well something amazing is about to happen.

Read Acts 16:9. Again, Luke doesn't give us many details, but after two dead-end streets now there's a new direction ... a vision and an invitation to come over to Macedonia.

Read Acts 16:10. So Paul awoke with a new vision of what they are to do. That is what vision is ... the unique thing that God is asking you to do next. So Paul shared the vision with the others and they agreed it was of the Lord. God had shown them His will.

I told you earlier that this story is part of your story ... the story of how you came to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul and his team had no way of knowing this, but it's one of the great turning points in history. When they set sail across the Aegean Sea and set foot in Macedonia the Gospel for the first time came to what we know today as Europe ... northern Greece and eastern Europe. The Gospel took such a foothold on the continent of Europe that it changed the course of history in those nations ... and the rest of the world. The Gospel spread from Europe to Africa, Asia, Latin America and, yes, to North America. The fact that you heard the Gospel here in the US can be traced all the way back to the decision Paul and his team made to cross over to Macedonia.

The Holy Spirit orchestrates the circumstances of our lives to enable and empower us to live out the mission of Jesus. I don't know about you, but I don't want to live a day outside of the will of God and the mission of Jesus. So how does that work?

1. STAY CONNECTED TO THE LORD IN SCRIPTURE AND PRAYER.

The basic tools you have for knowing God's will for your life are the Word of God and prayer. Just think of Paul and the missionary team. Every time a door closed or opened they saw the hand of God in it. As you devote yourself to seeking the face of God in His Word and in prayer you position yourself to be able to discern what God wants for you. Jesus said...

Matthew 7:7 “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

The time to start this is now, not when you are faced with a big decision. As you are in the pattern of listening to God in His Word and bringing everything in your life before Him in prayer it will be much easier to discern God’s will.

When your life is saturated with the Word of God and prayer it forms a boundary around the decision you make. So man, if you have a dream one night that you should leave your wife and marry the secretary at your office, you can be pretty sure that’s not a vision from God. How do you know that? It’s spelled in God’s Word. So stay connected to God in regular Bible study and prayer and you’ll more easily see how God is working in your circumstances. Next...

2. OBEY THE CLEAR DIRECTION YOU ALREADY HAVE.

Most of what we need to know about God’s will for our lives is found right here in Scripture. So start by obeying the light you already have. It says in v.7 that Paul and his team “tried to enter Bithynia.” Why? They were simply obeying the command of Jesus to be His witnesses by the power of the Spirit to the ends of the earth. Jesus commanded, “Go and make disciples of all nations,” and that’s what they were doing. Jesus said...

Matthew 6:33 - Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

If that is the passion and the pursuit of our lives, we can trust God to take care of the details. Don’t just stand around waiting for something to happen. Obey the light you already have. It’s easier to steer a moving vehicle than one that is standing still. Think about riding a bicycle, the more you’re moving the easier it is to steer. The Spirit can more easily guide you when you’re already in a lifestyle of obedience to the Lord. Next...

3. REMAIN HUMBLE BEFORE THE LORD.

Proverbs 16:9 - In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.

Hold your plans loosely. Now Paul was a Type A, hard-charging guy. He could have stubbornly said, “We’re going to Asia, no matter what,” or “We’re going to

Bithynia, no matter what.” And he would have probably done some good things, but it wouldn’t have had the power of God on it. It takes humility to admit, “I thought this was God’s will, but maybe I missed it here.” Humility allows us to accept God’s “no” or “not now” answers.

You see, a good plan isn’t always God’s plan. Going to Asia was a good plan, but not God’s plan. Going to Bithynia was a good plan, but not God’s plan. When they came to Troas they discovered God’s plan. If we’re not humble enough to listen to God we will keep running down dead-end streets, crashing against barriers that God puts up for a purpose.

I see this in our Lord Jesus. In the Garden of Gethsemane, with the crucifixion looming before Him, Jesus prayed, “Father, I’d rather not go through this, but may Your will, not my will, be done.” That’s humility. And it takes humility to do the next thing...

4. BRING OTHERS INTO THE DECISION.

So at Troas Paul has the vision of the man from Macedonia saying, “Come over and help us.” And he shared that vision with his teammates. As they discussed Paul’s vision and all the other things that had happened along the way it says in v.10 that they concluded that God was calling them to preach the Gospel there. They put two-and-two together and determined this must be God’s will.

Proverbs 24:6 - By wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory.

ILLUSTRATION – Some of you may be familiar with the name of Bill Bright. One night while he was in seminary he was studying for a Greek test. He suddenly sensed the presence of the Lord in a way he had never before. He had this strong impression that He was to spend his life fulfilling the Great Commission by winning and discipling college students for Christ all over the world. Bill Bright shared this vision with a godly seminary professor. His prof paced back and forth in his office, and then he said, “This is of God. This is of God. I want to help you. Let me think and pray about it.” Well the next day, the professor handed Bill Bright a piece of paper with three letters scribbled on it ... CCC. The prof went on to explain that God had shown him the name for Bill Bright’s vision, *Campus Crusade for Christ*. And one of history’s greatest organizations for evangelism and discipleship was born. That’s how the Holy Spirit works through others to guide us in the circumstances of life. Next...

5. BE OPEN TO PLAN C.

By worldly standards we could look at Paul and the team and think: “These guys are not very good at discerning God’s will.” Maybe Paul and the team felt like failures for having missed directions twice. Plan A and Plan B had failed. But Plan C actually ended up being God’s Plan A.

Someone once said, “Nothing can be judged good or bad until God gets through with it.” God is just as sovereign in the closed doors as He is in the open doors.

ILLUSTRATION – Since Nan and I were first married we have always had a real love for missions. And at one point we were seriously praying about whether God was calling us to pack up and go overseas. So I planned a missions conference for our church and invited a good friend who was a missionary in Africa to speak. I thought, “This will seal the deal. I’ll have my friend with me all week. We can ask him all the questions about life as a missionary and this is what God will use to call us to missions.” I tell people that we did our best to be called overseas to do missions. But after that week for some strange reason we felt God suddenly changing our focus. It was really confusing for a while, but then it began to make sense. God wanted us on the other end of the missionary pipeline, pastoring mission-minded churches, sending teams, giving sacrificially to mission causes and raising up missionaries out of our congregations. And that’s what we have been able to do, but it wasn’t what we originally thought we were supposed to do.

One day we will all see the twists and turns of our lives from God’s perspective. Years later Paul would write to some of his friends in Philippi who came to Christ because of the decision to take the Gospel to Macedonia. He was now in a Roman prison for preaching the Gospel, but he could confidently say...

Philippians 1:12 - I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.

Now what if you think you missed God’s Plan A because of some sinful or foolish choices you made, or that others made? Are you doomed to live outside of God’s will forever? Let me remind you that...

Romans 8:28 - And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

All the evidence we need for this is found in the circumstances of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. In that horrific event God was at work accomplishing His perfect will. I think we would all agree that Jesus was the victim of the most sinful choices we could imagine. What Jesus' enemies did to Him was pure evil. And yet God is powerful enough to use that evil to accomplish His perfect will ... salvation for the world. Now this doesn't excuse our sin or take away the painful consequences of those decisions. But in the mystery of God's grace He is powerful enough to take our foolish decisions and sinful choices and crush them and melt them down and forge something "good" out of it all. That's how powerful our God is. So what are we to do?

6. WHEN GOD CALLS, OBEY!

Yes, discovering God's will isn't easy. But when He does make it clear what you're supposed to do, obey. That's what Paul and his team did. It says in v.10 that after concluding that God had called them to take the Gospel to Macedonia, it says, "we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia." They didn't let two closed doors discourage them or paralyze them. They didn't form a committee and study it for months. When they discovered what God wanted "at once" they went down to the harbor and bought their tickets for Macedonia. You see, God doesn't show us His will for us just to think about it. He shows us His will so we will do it.

So maybe you're still limping from some foolish or sinful choices in your past and you wonder if God is finished with you. The Scripture shows us that nothing we have done can put us outside of God's ability to bring you back into his Plan A." So no matter what has happened, make the simple decision today to surrender to God. Let His redeeming love rewrite the painful story of your life. If you're separated from God today because you've never received Christ, you're one simple decision away from becoming a child of God. Believe. Trust Him. Surrender to Him. If you're a believer struggling to know God's "next" for you, leave it in His hands. Trust and obey.