

When I entered Lewis and Clark College in the Fall of 1996, I aspired to become a judge. I’m not kidding. I thought that the best way in which I could affect society was through bringing my great wisdom to the bench of justice. Count your blessings it didn’t work out that way. Which is what this passage in Acts is about – when things don’t work out that way. God closed the door on my judicial plans when I took my first Political Science class. I received a “D.” In fact, my GPA my first semester was a 1.6 and I was put on academic probation. Now I’m your pastor. ☺ The Lord closed a lot of doors that year, and in the years to follow, but he had other doors which I did not know at the time, but which have all been for my good. Some were locked. Some were slammed. Some I ran back through once I got in. But that’s a story for another day.

Jesus had promised His disciples, according to Matthew, “I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” He also promised that they would be His witnesses, proclaiming His work and His words to people wherever they went, so that others would find life in His name and follow Him, too.

Here in Acts 16, though, we find a particular series of events where these two promises seem to conflict. That is, Paul, Silas, and Timothy want to go proclaim His work and His word to those in Asia Minor, but the Holy Spirit will not permit them to go there. Then, they see an opportunity to proclaim the good news of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection to those in Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not permit them to go there, either. Thus, though we see two promises, one of Christ’s power and authority to build His own Church, and the other the promise that they would testify, there is clearly a hierarchy of importance and authority between them. The authority of Christ to build His church is the preeminent and the a priori promise to which the other promise of human testimony submits.

**That is, the sovereignty of Christ Jesus over all things clearly supersedes the reasoned wisdom of man, our plans and our strategies.** Yet, at the same time, the

human plans, strategies, and efforts (particularly preaching and testifying to the work and word of Jesus) are also necessary in the building of the Church, though always under the sovereign plan and purposes of Christ.

Look at how we see both, in proper order, in Luke's telling of these events.

First, Paul, Silas, and Timothy made a well-reasoned, logical, and good plan. **[MAP] They passed through the Phrygian region, which is to the west of Timothy's hometown of Lystra, and through the Galatian region, which is to the north.** They concluded that a good place to preach the gospel would be to the west, towards the principal cities of Ephesus and Colossae, to Sardis, Smyrna, Thyatira, and others in Asia Minor.

**Here we see the human planning and strategies of gospel proclamation.** It seemed wise, and it was, to proclaim the gospel to such cities. However, God had a plan that they did not foresee, and they did not know. This limitation upon human reason is everywhere. We can observe much, but understand little, in comparison to what is real and true. We look into space and conclude the variation in light and density among the heavenly bodies reveal neutron stars consuming one another, but our theories of why they behave that way and what will happen when they connect are proven wrong. This is just one example of why we use the word "theory" when describing the "hows" and the "whys" of what our human minds can observe. Why does the starling move in in mesmerizing murmerations over the field, like an amorphous harmony following a melody that we cannot hear or see? It's beautiful and mysterious. There are many mysteries, because we do not, nor cannot know all things.

But God...God sees, knows, understands, and rules all things. So, while we make good plans, good strategies, and well-reasoned choices, we must recognize that God has both the authority and the right to frustrate those plans...for our good. This does not always imply that our decisions were wrong, immoral, or unjust. Rather, they may be uninformed, and based upon partial knowledge or partial valuation. That is, sometimes we don't value things rightly, even when we know rightly. Sometimes, we convince ourselves that God would rather us serve in

Hawaii than Siberia. I mean, let's be honest, that has little to do with wisdom, but a lot to do with comfort.

There is something to be said, quickly, about how this truth shatters the common misconception in America of the gospel. In either ignorance of God or in defiance of Him, the American gospel has become a gospel of following your dreams and being good so that God will make all *your dreams* come true. Of course, this has nothing to do with the God of the Bible or of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which proclaims rather that God is worthy of our greatest affections and in the death and resurrection of Christ remakes our dreams to be what they are supposed to be.

So, when the Holy Spirit refuses to allow them to go where they desired to go, they immediately sought to go a different route which seemed wise to them. **They desired to go north to Bithynia.** Now, why would they do that? Well, they had already been south and east, the Spirit refused to allow them to go west, so north was the way to go. The logical conclusion was to go into Bithynia, most likely heading to either Nicaea, which was the city of royal residence of the Bithynian kings and the most significant city of the area, or to Sinope, which was the greatest city on the Black Sea at the time. It was also a Roman colony with a long history. In fact, the Greek philosopher, Diogenes, one of the founders of Cynicism, was from Sinope.

**However, the Spirit also forbid them to go there and preach the gospel. It is intriguing, and quite extraordinary, that the Spirit forbids the preaching of the Word of God in certain places.** We usually think that God wants everyone at every time to hear the gospel, but this clearly shows that God has priorities and plans which do not necessitate such a view. The implication of His forbidding the preaching of His message to the west or to the northern peoples shows that He had a greater purpose at this time for Macedonia. Now, this does not mean that Asia Minor or Bithynia were left out ultimately, for it is clear that Paul made it back to Asia and had an extensive ministry there, particularly in Ephesus, which was so extensive that Luke later describes it in superlative terms: “all the Jews and Greek who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.” (19:10)

Now, it is unclear exactly *how* the Spirit of the Lord prevented them from going into Asia or Bithynia at the time. Was it as simple as unpassable mountains? Or, did they receive a prophetic word not to preach? Maybe there were violent threats or political events. Or, and what I have concluded, is that the Lord had plans for Luke. You see, it is in Troas, the team having been forced to the coast between Mysia and Bithynia, where Luke joins the team. You can tell this by the simple fact that in the book of Acts Luke uses the first person plural “we” here in verse 10. Before, he had been describing what happened to Paul, Silas, and Timothy. But in v10 he includes himself in the story. He does this until Paul and Silas are arrested in v17, where he describes their story of which he was not a part, since he was not arrested.

Therefore, if Paul, Silas, and Timothy had not been forced to Troas, they would never have met Luke, the writer of the gospel of Luke and this present book of Acts. So, consider how frustrated the team may have been, having been forced from one good plan to another until they reached the town of Troas and met this doctor, of whom they had no clue even then would play such a major part in human history.

So, by the time Luke writes the book of Acts it is clear that the apostles understood that the frustrations of their plans and strategies, which seemed insignificant at the time, were actually the guidance and sovereignty of God Himself. Eventually, due to the vision mentioned in v9, which I will get to in a moment, they will understand even more that God had a plan for Macedonia, the first church planted in Europe.

**Before we move on in the story, I think that there is an important theological point which Luke alludes to here.** He equates the “Holy Spirit” in the first prevention of their plans with “the Spirit of Jesus” in the forbidding of their second plan. What this shows us is that the work of the Holy Spirit is the work of the exalted Christ. There is such an interdependent relationship in God, the Father/Son/Holy Spirit, that their purposes and works are always united. Jesus told his disciples that if they saw him they had seen the Father, that the Spirit would testify of Him, and that He could do nothing that He didn’t see His father doing. These are all terms of union.

Therefore, Jesus continues to take an active role in the story, as He promised, “I will build My Church.” He builds His church by continuing to direct the progress of the gospel through the Spirit who he “received from the Father” (2:33) and whom he “poured out” upon his disciples at Pentecost. This interdependent relationship is also seen in the letters of Paul, where Paul refers to “the Spirit of the Christ” in Romans 8:9-10 and “the Spirit of Jesus Christ” to the Philipinas (1:19), the very church which will be founded because of the forbidding work of the Spirit of Jesus here in Acts 16.

You see, God had a plan for Philippi. **When God prevents the preaching of the Word in one place, it is because He has a different place to which He has ordained the preaching, hearing, and believing of the gospel of Jesus Christ.** There is never a time when no preaching is His purpose. It is simply an issue of where.

**Now, whatever means that God used to prevent the team from going to Asia or Bithynia, we know that he used a different means to get the team to the particular place which he wanted them to go:** a vision. Now, while we may all want a vision to know exactly what God wants, let us be careful. First, God was not very particular, even in this vision. Macedonia is huge. It is a region, not a city. Therefore, Paul, Silas, and Timothy still had to make reasonable plans and strategies based upon what they knew. They went to Philippi for a reason: it was a principal city and a Roman colony, Luke tells us. So, we see both divine sovereignty and human planning involved in this evangelistic work.

**Secondly, while numerous visions are mentioned in the book of Acts, they are very rare and they are ALWAYS unlooked for.** That is, nobody who receives a vision was asking God for a vision. Thus, we should not conclude from the book of Acts that we are to ask God for visions, or that we should expect them, and especially that we should demand them before we act to preach the gospel through reasonable plans and strategies.

We should not seek dreams, though God gives them, nor should we “take our stand on visions” as Paul instructed the Colossians later. We have the Scriptures, which are enough to plan and act upon. However, neither should we reject them and

necessarily godless, for God clearly uses them at times to particularize Scriptural commands. Though He does use them to particularize His Scriptural promises, He does not ever alter His Word through them. Visions and dreams must never contradict the Word.

Note that this vision only gave a particular (and not even too particular) place to the preaching of the Word, not the particular “word” or “message” from God. The apostles already knew the message was God’s gospel of Jesus Christ and was clearly the help which the man in the dream was clearly requesting.

Thirdly, visions in the book of Acts are surprising, particular, and always concerning the Word of God’s expansion through the preaching of the gospel and its implications. **Consider the visions of Acts:** Paul saw the Lord on the road to Damascus, transforming him from an enemy of the gospel to its leading proponent. Regarding the same event, Ananias received a vision whereby God told him to particularly go to Saul, “for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” (Acts 9:15-16)

Next, Cornelius received a vision regarding Peter, who would tell him that the gospel of God’s mercy in Jesus was for Gentiles, too. Then, Peter, receiving a vision regarding the same particularization of the gospel for the Gentiles, was that the implications of God’s cleansing through faith in Jesus was also for the nations. Then, Paul receives this vision for Macedonia, who needed “help”, the life of God through faith in Jesus, which is what he proclaimed in Philippi. Then, in chapter 18, Paul will receive a vision to encourage him to continue preaching boldly because Jesus had many people in the city.

As you can see, every vision in the book of Acts is concerning the furthering of the gospel, was particular, and came surprisingly.

So, God sovereignly intervened against the plans of the team. He forbid them to go west. Then he forbid them to go north. **[MAP] Thirdly, he gave Paul a vision to point them to Macedonia.**

Here, however, see again that the Lord has also ordained wise human reasoning to accomplish the building of His church. **While God is sovereign, He never builds His kingdom apart from the preaching of the gospel and the participation of His servants in doing so.**

When God sent Paul the vision, how did the team respond? Do you see the end of verse 10? Luke says, “concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.” What is missing in this English translation, “concluding”, is the communal emphasis of the word. It is a plural compound word, “to cause to walk + together” indicating that they all, together, upon hearing the vision, put the pieces together, so to speak. That is, they reasoned together and concluded together that the meaning of the vision was that God wanted them to proclaim the good news (the help) to the Macedonians.

Note that though Paul had the vision, he did not assume to interpret a course of action alone, but rather to communicate the vision to his team and then work together to decide a course of action. So, while God intervenes dramatically and extraordinarily, this truth does not eliminate the necessity and expectation of wise reasoning together regarding God’s revelation. We need one another. We need wisdom. We need to think well and reason well.

**From this point on, they make their own decisions, based upon what God had revealed, but with the freedom of how to accomplish what the vision had portrayed.** So, while God did particularly forbid them from entering Asia or Bithynia, they continued to make plans according to their own reason. When God wanted things done differently, He intervened with a vision. Then, they were to again make plans according to their own reason and wisdom.

This pattern helps us understand how to obey the will of God. When decisions need to be made, we evaluate them according to the revelation of God in the Scripture. Is it good? Is it wise? Is it for the glory of God, or my own honor, etc.? Is it being done in the manner which God has told us? We must make reasonable, wise, moral decisions based upon what God has revealed in His Word. For example, if I have three job offers, I must evaluate whether or not they are each within the realm of

God-honoring work. Is one of them immoral or involved in immoral goals, for example? I must evaluate whether or not they would give me ample opportunity to build the kingdom of God? Does one of them not permit me to speak about Christ? Of course, there are other issues, too, right? How much does it pay? Does it require moving? What about the school systems for my kids, etc.? However, what we see in this pattern of Acts is that if the Scripture allows it, and it follows that I am seeking God's glory in any of these options, then I should choose the option that seems the wisest to me, knowing that I am free to do any of them. I should attempt an action.

If, however, God has different plans, He will intervene in the particulars to make it clear. Either He will make it clear through negative guidance; He will not permit me to go a certain direction (the job offer is altered or removed). Or, He will intrude unexpectedly through positive guidance, such as a vision, remembering that this is very rare. If that should happen, I should include others to help me understand and make then act upon it.

I know that many of you struggle with whether or not a particular decision is God's will. This shows us that there is great freedom to operate in God's will in many different decisions. If God wants something else, He will make it abundantly clear. Notice that the team here didn't question whether or not they were doing God's will. They reasoned and acted upon what God had revealed. When He didn't reveal particulars, they chose the wisest course of action. If God then intervened, they adjusted their course of action accordingly.

Look how they did it. In Troas, following the intrusion of God into their plans through a vision, they "headed straight to Samothrace." That was an island in the Aegean Sea, between Troas and Macedonia. It was a trip of about 150 miles. Luke, a lover of the sea, is always very descriptive about sea travel.

Then, having come to port in Neapolis, in Macedonia, they head to Philippi. Why? Why didn't they immediately begin their work in Neapolis? Because Philippi was the "principal city" and the "Roman colony." You see, they had the freedom, according to God's sovereign guidance, to choose which city to work in within

Macedonia. They reasoned that Philippi would be the best choice. It was a Roman colony, greatly influential, a major urban crossroad on the Ignatian Way, a traderoute that connected directly to Rome. We will see later why Paul and the team may have selected Philippi, but for now we recognize only that they chose it within the parameters revealed by God for them.

**So, what difference does this historical story make to us?**

Look at this dream, or “thing seen during the night”, about a man in Macedonia. I’m assuming that he was recognizable because of his clothes. What is interesting are the particulars which Luke mentions. First, he was standing up, indicating urgency and severity. This is followed by the verb “parakletos”, which is a military term used of soldiers encouraging one another and coming to one another’s aid in battle. IT is the same verb used of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, called alongside to aid in the time of battle to encourage us to keep going. This man in the vision was calling them alongside, which is followed by the content of his plea, “Come to help us!” Again, this word “help” is a military term of coming to one’s aid.

So, what we see in this vision is that there were Macedonians who recognized, with great severity and urgency that they needed help and aid. Their situation was dire, as if they were surrounded by enemies, the weight of violent death pressing in upon them as they called for help.

In other words, God was calling them to repentance, and the weight and urgency of their guilt before God was upon them. God Himself was the threat. As R.C. Sproul has said, “In the gospel we are saved by God, *from* God, for God.”

**The proclamation of the gospel finds root to produce fruit in those who have such an attitude.** To those who feel the weight and danger of their plight before God, the guilt of their sins, the weightiness of their wickedness in the presence of a wholly holy God, makes the gospel truly good news. Without such conviction, the gospel is foolishness to the self-righteous, who see no need for a rescuer, but only a teacher or sage. Jesus once told the Pharisees, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” In other words, when a person believes that they are well,

they don't seek out a doctor. When people think they are guiltless, they don't seek out forgiveness. When people think they are free, they don't seek out a rescuer. Only those who know that they are guilty, helpless, and desperate will ever respond to the claim of the absolute sovereignty of Jesus in the gospel. Until then, they don't see the need for Him as their Savior or as their Master.

The Macedonians were under such weight, crying out "Come rescue us!" Therefore, God was sending his men with his message of hope. There is a Helper for our guilt. There is a Rescuer and Reconciler who will mediate our case before God. He is our only hope: His name is Jesus.

Maybe you are the Macedonian man. You know today the weight of your sins. Your failures are always before you, taunting you, and you know that you deserve God's punishment for ruining His creation. You have ruined yourself. You have ruined others. What God made and gave to you, you spit on and threw away in your arrogance.

But now the weight of His wrath is heavy upon you. You feel the hound of heaven breathing down your neck. He is coming, and He's bring Hell with him. So, here you stand, urgently and passionately, crying out, "Come help me!"

My friends, there is One who can rescue you from God's wrath. There is One who can restore what you have lost and destroyed. There is one worthy of your submission and your worship. How? How can He save you? Because He was ruined in your place. He was crushed for your sins! The punishment that you deserved? He stepped in and took for you! The door of life was slammed on Him and only the door of God's wrath was open. Your helper is your substitute, the proxy that bears up God's furious wrath against you in His death on the cross.

Yet He did not stay dead! When He had paid down your debt against God, God raised Him from the dead to give you the newness of life and hope of eternal life. Come to Him, entrust yourself to Him. He has the authority to make you flourish, to restore and renew your ruin. He lives to rule over all things, and He is building His

family even now, adding sinners who repent to His holy house. You are welcome if you come in such weakness and dependence. He is your only hope.

And some of you, who belong to Christ Jesus already, feel like your dreams have died. That they are dead and buried, and you weep and you cry out to God in your frustration. Don't forget your living Savior, raised from the dead! God will wring the life out of these little deaths, too, and what you cannot see is His working in the wings to make you wonder at His beauty. Seek Him through His Word. Believe it! Act upon it. As you share in His sufferings, remember that you will share in His glory. Until then, persevere in prayer, and persevere together, knowing that what He has promised, He will perform.

And on that day when you see Him face to face, you will understand why some doors were closed and others opened, and you will rejoice at the beauty of it all.