

#106

February 16th, 2020

Doors: Open or Closed?

Acts 16:1-10 (CEB)

¹ Paul reached Derbe, and then Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy. He was the son of a believing Jewish woman and a Greek father. ² The brothers and sisters in Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. ³ Paul wanted to take Timothy with him, so he circumcised him. This was because of the Jews who lived in those areas, for they all knew Timothy's father was Greek. ⁴ As Paul and his companions traveled through the cities, they instructed Gentile believers to keep the regulations put in place by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. ⁵ So the churches were strengthened in the faith and every day their numbers flourished.

⁶ Paul and his companions traveled throughout the regions of Phrygia and Galatia because the Holy Spirit kept them from speaking the word in the province of Asia. ⁷ When they approached the province of Mysia, they tried to enter the province of Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus wouldn't let them. ⁸ Passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas instead. ⁹ A vision of a man from Macedonia came to Paul during the night. He stood urging Paul, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" ¹⁰ Immediately after he saw the vision, we prepared to leave for the province of Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

Have you prayed for the right things and it never happened? Maybe you are still praying for things to happen that are not selfish, not material and are the right things, but your prayer is not answered. Have you tried to do ministry and it did not grow or even get started? Have you reached out with the gospel and had no success? Have you had an experience of closed doors? Do not be discouraged, but be encouraged. God is at work. Praise God that He protects, guides and corrects us. He is God and His plan is always better, even if it does not look like it at the moment. Ultimately, it is about what God wants, not what we want, even when we think our desires and ambitions are noble and pure.

Last week we ended Acts 15 with a most tragic event. Two great pillars of God's church, who were two great evangelists, companions and friends, broke up. Just the thought that Paul and Barnabas will not be traveling together and never have another conversation breaks my heart.

I can identify with the prophet, Samuel, in the Old Testament. Samuel had the honor of making Saul King. Samuel was like a father to Saul. Saul had been given clear instructions to destroy everything in a battle against the Amalakites. Instead, he disobeyed and saved the fattest sheep and cattle.

Samuel was given the difficult task of announcing that God had torn the kingdom from away from Saul. Samuel never spoke to Saul again. Samuel grieved constantly. Finally, God said: "Stop crying over Saul. You have mourned long enough. Now get

up, fill your horn with oil and go anoint a son of Jesse to be a king for me.” (1 Sam 16:1). So enough crying about the severe break up between Barnabas and Paul. It is time to move forward.

We pick up today with Chapter 16 where Paul starts his second missionary journey by returning to Derbe and Lystra. Remember Lystra was not all that friendly. They had stoned Paul and dragged his body out of the city. These were the last two stops on the first journey. This would be his 4th time of entering the city of Lystra. Paul was fearless. He was determined to encourage the new followers of Jesus.

I remember once I came to church and was so disappointed that certain people had not come. I was hoping they would be in church because I prayed for them. I invited them. I thought they would come in answer to my prayer, but they did not. I was so sad. God spoke to me through another person. She said: “You are sad because a few did not come. See how many did come. Rejoice in those who are here.” It helped me enormously to have a change in my heart and mind.

Paul went back for those who had accepted Christ. He wanted to strengthen their faith. It says every day their numbers flourished. No doubt, he, himself, was encouraged.



Upon arrival in Lystra, Paul found a young man named Timothy who was a disciple. Timothy was the son of a Jewish woman and a Greek father. In other words, he was of mixed race.

His mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois, were faithful believers. There is a hint from the choice of Greek words that Timothy's father was deceased. We do not know anything else about him.

We do know from a letter which Paul later wrote to Timothy that Timothy grew up deeply influenced by Eunice and Lois. At this point I want to encourage all moms and grandmas to continue to pour out your faith into your children and grandchildren. Timothy would not be the Timothy we know if not for Eunice and Lois. They had accepted the faith in Christ from Paul during his first journey. Eunice poured her love and her faith into young Timothy.

When considering great mothers, I think of Susana Wesley. 9 of her 19 children died in infancy. She would spend at least one hour each week with each of the surviving child inquiring about their souls. We know that she was one who prayed. She started a Bible study in her kitchen on Sunday afternoons which grew to over 200 in attendance. She said: "There are two things to do about the gospel. Believe it and behave it." She did both. John and Charles would not have been the men of such a strong faith if not for their mother who believed and lived what she believed. I remind myself and I encourage everyone to ensure that your children have faith. The seeds of faith we plant will not be taken away.

There is a lot of truth in the saying: The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.

There is something even more which inspires me and challenges me. We presume Eunice was a widow. We do not know if Timothy had siblings. Think for a moment of the decision Eunice had to make. Here are Paul and Silas. She clearly knew what kind of life they are living as missionaries and evangelists. She knows that Paul was stoned in her town. Guess what Paul is asking. Paul invites Timothy to join him into an unknown dangerous journey to preach the gospel. She had a decision to make. Can she let her son to be gone?

If we truly believe and trust God, we know that all we have is not ours. Even our own life belongs to him. Even the kids we have are a gift from God. How many times are we selfish and we want our way and for us? Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we say: "Thy will be done." We sing the hymn, "Have Thine Own Way Lord." We probably mean it, but to live it is quite another thing.

We want God's will and then discover that involves our children, our finances, our choices, our dreams. For Timothy's mother it probably meant that she would have no income and no protection. We hear not a word of objection from her. She knows there are doors that God opens. Timothy also has a big decision to make. They both knew, not only what is good, but what is right. Maybe all of us can ask today: Are all good choices the right choices? I believe there is a difference.

“Paul wanted to take Timothy with him, so he circumcised him. This was because of the Jews who lived in those areas, for they all knew Timothy’s father was Greek”.

I had to read and reread this verse. What? Didn’t we just have a major church council meeting in Jerusalem. We decided and celebrate that circumcision is not a requirement to be saved. Here we have a grown up young man, Timothy, and Paul is doing what?

As much as it is questionable to me I can see why he did so. Paul had a cultural dilemma. Timothy was a Jew because his mother was Jewish. Therefore, Timothy was a Jew but he was an uncircumcised Jew which meant he was breaking God’s covenant. Therefore, he was banned from fellowship with Jews. He was considered worse than a Gentile

The church council in Jerusalem freed the Gentiles from Jewish laws. The decision did not free the Jews from the Jewish way of life.

It is not that Timothy was not saved. He did not do it for salvation. He did it for the Jews who lived there. We know that Paul went to synagogues to preach. Paul was trying to avoid as much unnecessary conflict as he could. If Timothy was not circumcised, then he would not be given opportunity to minister in the synagogue and probably neither could Paul. I think Paul was thus being strategic. He was trying to remove obstacles for people who need to hear the gospel.

So here we go. Paul, Silas and Timothy are traveling and encouraging the churches to stay strong in their faith. They read the letter from the Jerusalem council and churches continued to grow in faith and in numbers.

~~Plan A~~

~~Plan B~~

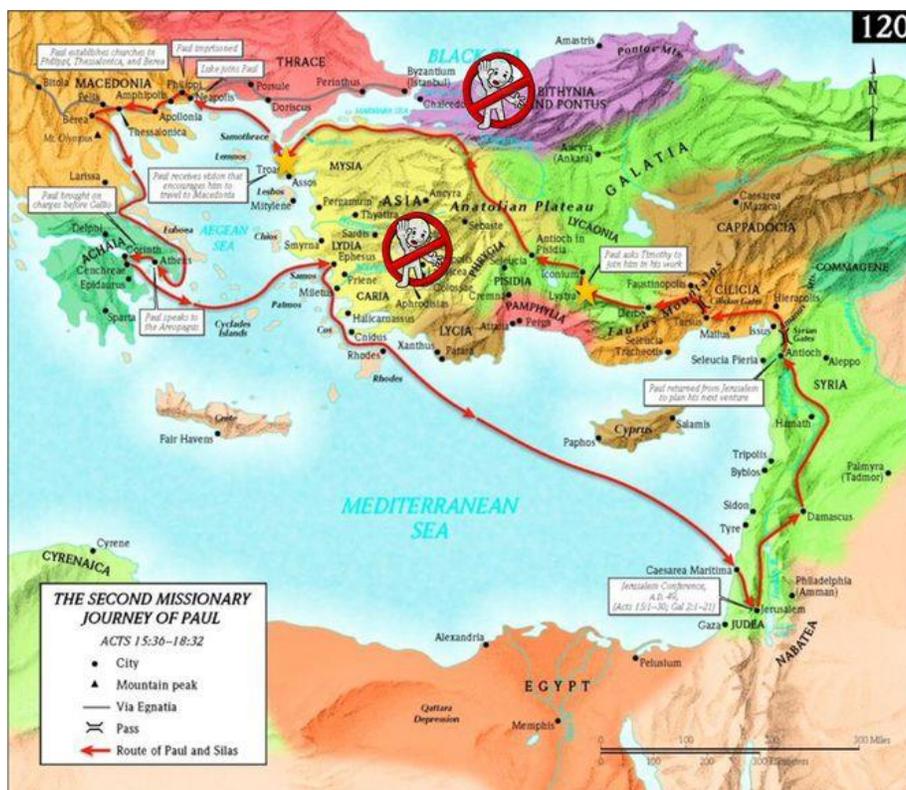
Plan C

“Paul and his companions traveled throughout the regions of Phrygia and Galatia because the Holy Spirit kept them from speaking the word in the province of Asia”. I wish I could find the explanation. The good news of Jesus Christ is for all people everywhere. Why would God not want the Words of God preached there? Maybe they simply were not able. Maybe it was because of sickness, because of divine intervention

or because legal issues? Maybe God wanted someone else to do that task. We know someone else did, indeed, go there because of the seven churches listed in the book of Revelation are in Asia.

It was a good idea, but it was not the right idea. God closed the doors for them to go there. So the team made plan B.

“When they approached the province of Mysia, they tried to enter the province of Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus wouldn’t let them”. Seriously? What do we do when the doors keep closing? What would you do in this situation? Go home and say it did not work out? One thing they did not do: They did not quit. At the same time they did not bang their heads on the closed door!



Lithuania was the last country in Europe to call itself a Christian nation and become part of the Holy Roman Empire. As you can see from this map the result of Paul and his team listening to the Holy Spirit is that Europe received, for the first time, the message of God’s grace.

Determination is a good quality but determination easily degenerates into stubbornness. If Paul had surrendered to stubbornness, he would have pressed on into Asia.

God also saved Paul from relying too much on his own wisdom. Determination must always be softened with humility to accept the answer “no.”

At one moment in my life I thought I wanted to be a teacher. There is nothing wrong with being a teacher. It simply was not right for me. At age of 16, I thought I found the right guy for my life. There was nothing wrong with that guy. He was not right for me. I was very determined to move to Norway when I was 18. Praise God, He closed the doors but opened other ones. I know it is very discouraging to direct your steps, plan, seek and invest in something only to find out that doors are closed.



We plan and we have good intentions, but the doors are closed. It is difficult to be ok with closed doors. It is even harder not to be discouraged. We continue to trust and even praise God for it means He has another plan and He is actually guiding us His way.

One more lesson: Paul did not assume that He knew God’s plan. The assumption that we have understood God rightly the first time can be dangerous. Being convinced that we have complete understanding of God’s will right from the beginning is arrogance.

More than once Jesus changed direction or priorities. A woman who had been bleeding for twelve years interrupted his journey and he stopped and healed her (Matt. 9:20-22). Jesus wanted to take his disciples away to a quiet place to rest, but the crowds ran round the end of the lake to hear more of his teaching and Jesus not only spoke to them he fed them all (Mark 6:30-44).

Do not go ahead of God or the Holy Spirit. You follow God: Not lead.

After a period of seeking God's direction, a vision of a man from Macedonia came to Paul during the night. He stood urging Paul, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!". In God's timing, in His way, He will lead to where we need to go. Sometimes doors are closed. Sometimes two or more doors in the row are closed, but opportunities will open. They might not be the ones you plan or even wanted, but we do trust God and His plan. It is a matter of His will or ours?

It says, immediately after he saw the vision, we prepared to leave for the province of Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

A significant shift happens at the end of this passage. For the first time Luke uses the word "we". Up to this point Luke talks about "them". Luke, the writer of Acts, was Gentile physician. Did he come from Asia where the group was preaching and become a Christian? Paul had medical issues so it was good to have doctor join the team.

The verse ends with, "Concluding that God has called us to preach the Gospel to them." When we realize what God has done through Jesus Christ, the logical conclusion is that God is calling you and me to preach the Word of God to everyone everywhere.

As we come to the Table of Communion, let us put our complete trust in God in all things. Let us have faith that we all are accepted to come as we are. We can know that our sins are forgiven. Let us have patience when God closes doors. Let us fully trust in God that the other doors will open in His time and His way. It is in Him that we live, move and have our being.