

THE MACEDONIAN CALL

Acts 15:36-16:40

Key Verse: 16:9

During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

This passage teaches us how God opened the door of faith to Europe for the first time. Paul and his journey team wanted to preach the gospel in the province of Asia. But the Holy Spirit led them to Macedonia. It was another historic moment for the church. There are many spiritual lessons we can learn—from how the journey team traveled to Philippi and from what happened in the city. May God help us to open our hearts as we listen to his words!

First, a sharp disagreement (15:36-41). Look at verse 36. *Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing."* Sometime after the first missionary journey, Paul suggested Barnabas a second trip. His purpose was to visit and strengthen the churches they had established in the first journey. Barnabas agreed and wanted to take John Mark with them. But Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the first mission (38). They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and headed to Syria and Cilicia (39-41). We learn that even great servants of God may disagree with each other on some matters. So who was right, Paul or Barnabas? I think this is a wrong question to ask. Instead, we should think about why they disagreed. To Paul, his top priority was the mission of preaching the gospel. He did not want to jeopardize the mission by taking Mark who had been unreliable. On the other hand, Barnabas wanted to give him a second chance. He believed that Mark could be restored from his failure, if he were given another opportunity. Some people argue that Barnabas favored him because Mark was his cousin (Col 4:10). I don't think this was the case. After all, Barnabas did the same to Paul. After Paul's dramatic conversion, believers were reluctant to accept him into their community, because he had severely persecuted the church. He was responsible in killing Stephen. He arrested many believers and put them in prison. He was on his way to Damascus to do the same to the Christians there when the Lord appeared to him. Given his notoriety, no one wanted to accept him after his conversion. But Barnabas accepted him as his brother. He introduced him to the apostles in Jerusalem, vouching for him (9:27). That was not all. When Paul was in his hometown Tarsus, Barnabas traveled all the way there to search for him. He brought him to Antioch and made him his coworker for the Lord (11:25-26). In sum, Barnabas was instrumental in raising Paul to be the greatest evangelist in history.

This is the last account of Barnabas in Luke's narrative, as the historian followed and recorded the work of the Holy Spirit through Paul. But this is not the last account of John Mark. His name is mentioned several times later. In a letter to Philemon, Paul called Mark "my fellow worker" (24). From his prison in Rome, Paul also wrote to

Timothy: “Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry” (2Ti 4:11). Mark was also St. Peter’s disciple. Peter called him “my son” (1Pe 5:13). Above all, Mark wrote an action-filled gospel for us so that we may study the life and mission of our Lord Jesus. Thanks to Barnabas, Mark overcame his failure and grew to be a great servant of God. We learn that our past failure does not have to define our future as long as we have servants like Barnabas with us.

Second, Timothy joins the mission team (16:1-5). Look at verse 1. *Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek.* Paul wanted to take Timothy along on the journey. Timothy was young and timid (2Ti 1:7), but Paul saw potential in him because the most important quality for a gospel worker is reliability, that is, faithfulness (2Ti 2:2). Timothy had made a commitment to Christ. With his bi-racial background, he could understand both Jews and Greeks. Most likely he spoke two languages—both Hebrew and Greek. Most of all, he had a good reputation as a faithful and trustworthy man. *The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him* (2).

Before taking him along on the journey, Paul circumcised Timothy. At first glance, this sounds strange. Did Paul go against the verdict of the Jerusalem Council on the issue of circumcision? That would make no sense, given his conviction on the issue. In Galatians 2, Paul says that he did not give in to the demand of the circumcision party. He refused to circumcise Titus (Gal 2:1-5). Was Paul inconsistent? Actually, the two cases were very different. Timothy was already a disciple of Jesus. Everyone knew that he was saved by the grace of God. Then why did Paul circumcise him? It was to help him to overcome cultural barriers to serve the Lord effectively. In other words, it was to help Timothy to keep his ministry focused on the gospel alone. He said in 1 Corinthians 9:20, “To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews.” It was also an opportunity for Paul to train Timothy. It was a test of faith and obedience for Timothy. Timothy submitted willingly. It was the beginning of a deep spiritual relationship. With Paul as his shepherd and a spiritual father, Timothy grew to be a pastor of the church at Ephesus (1Ti 1:3). Timothy served God with a life-giving spirit, practicing the principles of gospel faith he had learned from Paul.

Paul, Silas and Timothy traveled from town to town and delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. They told them how the Council had affirmed that people are saved by the grace of God alone. They were happy to hear the news. The churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers (5).

Third, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (6-10). Look at verse 6. *Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.* After they visited all the churches that had been established during the first mission journey, a question arose. Where should they go next? They tried to continue their work in the province of Asia. Why? They had witnessed how many people in the region opened their hearts to the gospel. They knew there were still many more people who needed to hear the good news. But the Holy Spirit kept them from preaching there. So they tried to

enter Bithynia in the north, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to (7). All the doors seemed to be closing. Now what does it mean that the Holy Spirit kept them from preaching? We know that the Spirit does not usually hold up a stop sign. His guidance is often a gentle nudge or a whisper. Perhaps each time they began their trip, they discovered that Romans blocked the road for a bridge repair. One thing we can say for sure is that Paul was very sensitive to the Holy Spirit.

We learn that, in order to obey the Lord, we must be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes mission fields or opportunities look good to us. So we try to force our own will. But God often closes the door. When this happens, we must accept it without being discouraged. We should continue to pray for his guidance, and follow it by faith. Philip in Acts 8 is a good example. He had a very successful ministry in Samaria when God told him to go to the desert road. It didn't make sense for him to abandon a large ministry and go to the desert. But Philip obeyed the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He went there and studied the Bible with one man—an Ethiopian eunuch.

But someone may ask, “How can you tell if what you plan to do is the will of God or your own desire?” This is a good question. The answer is that we need God's help. First, we want to make sure our plan is in harmony with the word of God. We can hear the voice of God when we study the Bible with an open and honest heart and a humble learning mind. We should also consult with a servant of God who can see things in spiritual perspective. Most of all, we should examine our motives. Are we seeking the will of God or our own desires? The Holy Spirit can convict us in this regard when we submit to him. We should also pray that God may open and close doors according to his will.

Paul had a humble heart to follow the Holy Spirit. Then something dramatic happened that would change not only the course of their journey but also Christian history. Look at verses 8-9: *So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”* In a vision, Paul heard the cry of a Macedonian man. God's direction for him became very clear at this point. Paul heard the Macedonian call. How about us today? Many young people in our campus are groping in the darkness of sin, without knowing the love of God. Can you hear their Macedonian call?

Look at verse 10. *After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.* Beginning with this verse, the author Luke uses the pronouns “we” and “us.” Luke had joined the journey team at Troas. The team was now headed for the part of the world known as Europe today. In this way, God opened the door for Europe to be evangelized.

Fourth, in Philippi, Lydia opens her heart to God's word (11-15). They sailed from Troas to Samothrace, to Neapolis (Kavala in Greece today), and then went inland to Philippi. The city of Philippi was named after the father of Alexander the Great. It was a Roman colony and a leading city of Macedonia (12). In Philippi lived many retired Roman army officers. There were not many Jews there, and so there was no synagogue.

Paul could not begin his preaching at a synagogue which was his custom (14:1; 17:2). Look at verse 13. *On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer.* Paul and his journey team came to Macedonia because of the vision of the Macedonian man. So they could have expected that Macedonian people were waiting for them when they arrived. But no one welcome them. Were they disappointed? No. What did they do? They began their mission work by praying to God. This is important. The work of God is the work of the Holy Spirit. When there seems to be nothing we can do, there is one thing we can do. We can pray to the Lord. That is what the journey team did. On the Sabbath they went outside the city gate to the river to find a place of prayer.

At the river, there were some women, probably doing laundry. Paul's vision was of a man of Macedonia. But only women were there. Paul was not disappointed. He and his team sat down and began to speak to them. They had an outdoor group Bible study beside the river. One of those listening was Lydia. She was a worshiper of God, but did not know Jesus Christ. She was a businesswoman, a dealer in purple cloth. As she listened to the word of God, the Lord opened her heart. She was deeply moved by God's love who sent his one and only Son Jesus Christ to save sinners like her. She was happy to learn that Jesus' resurrection opened the door to heaven. She realized that God was offering her eternal life in the kingdom of God. She accepted Jesus as her personal savior. She became the first Christian in Europe. She and her family were baptized. Then she opened her home for the Lord. It became the first house church in Philippi. The church supported Paul's mission both financially and with prayers. The great church of Philippi began when one woman opened her heart to the word of God. One person is very important in the work of God. May God raise up many women of faith like Lydia among us!

Fifth, Paul and Silas in prison (16-40). Look at verse 16. *"Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling."* This slave girl was used by her owners as a tool to make money. She was suffering greatly under the torment of a demonic spirit. She followed Paul and the journey team, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved" (17). She kept this up for many days. At first, Paul ignored her. Evil spirit may recognize God's servant but it would never want a person to be saved by God. But Paul was a shepherd who cared deeply for one person. Her persistent shouting troubled him. I think Paul heard in her shouting the desperate cry of a young girl tormented by the demon. He turned around and said to the spirit, *"In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!"* At that moment the spirit left her (18). To the slave girl, it was the moment of liberation. She was set free from the demon. She must have cried with joy. But her owners were angry, because their hope of making money was gone. They were so upset that they stirred up Roman pride and had Paul and Silas arrested, stripped, severely beaten and put into a maximum-security prison. Their feet were fastened in the stocks. What a terrible injustice!

How did Paul and Silas react? Look at verse 25. *“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”* Wow! How could they pray and sing hymns to God in prison? But that is what they did. They were joyful. They thanked God for his work in Philippi. They knew that God was in control. They committed everything to God and had a midnight worship service in the prison. The other prisoners were listening in amazement. This pleased God. He sent a violent earthquake to open all the prison doors. Everyone’s chains came loose. They could have walked out to freedom. But they did not. They remained in the prison cell. When the jailer woke up and saw the open doors, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself. But Paul called out, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here.” Paul did not save himself when he had a chance. Instead, he saved the jailer. The jailer was deeply touched by what Paul and Silas did. He rushed in and fell trembling before them and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Look at verse 31. *They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household.”* Then they had a Bible study with his family. The jailer and his whole household believed and were baptized (33). They were saved that very night.

We learn that God helps his servants, even in the darkest situations, when they struggle to serve the work of God. We should not lose heart but depend on him. When we please God, he can use any difficult situation for his own glory and the saving of souls. Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”

The next day the magistrates ordered that Paul and Silas be released. They could have crawled out of the prison and disappeared quietly. But they did not. Paul revealed that they were Roman citizens who had been unjustly treated and demanded an escort. This shocked the magistrates and they tried hard to appease Paul and Silas. Paul did this to protect the growing church in Philippi. The magistrates would think twice about mistreating a church member in the future.

In this passage, we learned that Paul heard the Macedonian call and carried the gospel to Europe for the first time. We also learned that a church begins when one person opens his or her heart to God. That is what happened in Philippi. Lydia was an important person in God’s history. May God help us to be sensitive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit and obey him! May God help us to care for one person at a time!