

THE SPIRIT'S LEADING & LIMITING

As we continue in our series on the Acts of the Holy Spirit, please open your Bibles to **Acts 16**. Listen to verse 1...

¹ He (Paul) came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek.² The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him.³ Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.⁴ As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey.⁵ So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

Wow, even though it had been agreed at the council in Jerusalem that circumcision would not be bound and that message was to be conveyed on their mission, Paul had Timothy circumcised any way. Why? As we said last week, hearts aren't easily changed, so Paul decides to remove what would likely be an obstacle to the presentation of the Gospel. (*A church leader in MI insisted I teach from the KJV*)

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.⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but THE SPIRIT OF JESUS WOULD NOT ALLOW THEM to.⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."¹⁰ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

The Holy Spirit kept them from preaching in Asia – and instead directed them to Macedonia. This passage raises a lot of questions for me. What was the problem with going to Asia and how did the Spirit of Jesus close the border? I can't say for sure, but my guess is it was matter of timing. There was an open door in Macedonia right then and Paul was being prompted to cross that threshold. How the Spirit prohibited him from going to Asia is a mystery, but I can tell you from my own experience that He can do that in any number of ways. He may lead and He may limit for God's glory and our good.

At times, the Spirit closed some doors in order for me to see another He was opening. Other times, He's placed hurdles in my path that made me pause, pray, and prepare before going forward. A delay in issuing our visas to the UK caused us to count the cost and grow deeper in our faith. I recall praying, *"Lord if this is Satan trying to dissuade us from Your course, make the way clear. Remove the barriers. But, if this is You redirecting us, then please make that clear as well - and strengthen us to be patient."* Within 48 hours we had our visas in hand. A similar thing happened when God led us here 17 years ago this very weekend. Reading on...

¹¹ From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis.¹² From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.¹³ On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.¹⁴ One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshiper of God. THE LORD OPENED HER HEART TO RESPOND TO PAUL'S MESSAGE.¹⁵ When SHE AND THE MEMBERS OF HER HOUSEHOLD WERE BAPTIZED, she invited us to her home. **"If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay at my house."** And she persuaded us.

They expected to find a place of prayer – but they I don't think they expected who they found there. Paul's vision was of a man calling them to this region, but what they find is a gathering of women. If there was a man present, it's not mentioned. What's up? Were these Jewish ladies with no husbands or fathers to lead them? Or was this a group of gals who just wanted to go deeper in their relationship with God than was possible in the traditional gathering of the synagogue? I know this: Lydia's heart was sensitive to the Lord and He opened it to receive the good news.

As we've seen time and again, He also opened it to **RESPOND BY BEING BAPTIZED** which led those in her family to do the same. I've seen that scenario played out many times in my life. Last year, a sweet lady who'd followed Jesus the best she knew how for decades came to the conclusion in her own personal study that she should be immersed like Jesus was.

Her son and granddaughter had come as witnesses, listened in on our study, and ended up following her into the water as well. It happens.

¹⁶ Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling.¹⁷ This girl followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."¹⁸ She kept this up for many days. Finally Paul became so troubled that 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.

So, now they encounter a possessed woman who seemed to be on their side. What she says of them is true, but rather than accept her support, they shut her down. Why? Wasn't it free advertising? Yet, considering the source, many who might otherwise have listened to them, wouldn't. If an evil spirit was endorsing Paul, maybe he's not someone they'd want to hear from. If a racist supports a candidate, it could be a red flag. If the communist party funds their campaign, I'd be suspicious. If the leaders of the LGBT or Pro-choice movements were major sponsors of a church, I'd think twice about joining. Reading from vs.9ff...

⁹ When the owners of the slave girl realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities.²⁰ They brought them before the magistrates and said, "These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar²¹ by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice."²² The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten.²³ After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully.²⁴ Upon receiving such orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

Arrested on trumped up charges, Paul and Silas are publicly humiliated and severely beaten before being locked up. Reading on...²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose.²⁷ The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped.²⁸ But Paul shouted, "Don't harm yourself! We are all here!"

Finally, they're dealing with a man. Some scholars have surmised that he's the very guy that Paul and his companions were meant to find. I can't say for sure, but it is not beyond the Holy Spirit to do such a thing - even providing other opportunities along the way. The jailer is desperate. Other guards who let prisoners escape were put to death by being cut to pieces or burned alive. So, he decides to kill himself, and would have if not interrupted by Paul announcing that they were still there. Why for heaven's sake hadn't they run? Perhaps because they also surmised they'd been sent for this very purpose...

²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas.³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"³¹ They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved--you and your household."³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.³⁴ The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God--he and his whole family.

When the jailer led them out, he took them to his home before asking 'what to do to be saved.' Was the jailer asking how his life might be spared? Or did he somehow know he had a deeper need to save his soul? Paul and Silas had been preaching for several days before being arrested. Even the evil spirit said they were "telling of the way to be saved." So perhaps he'd heard at least some of what they'd preached – directly or 2nd hand. Or maybe the prayer and songs of his prisoners had got to him. Whatever the case, Paul and Silas seize on the opportunity to tell him and his family about Jesus. They "spoke the word of the Lord" to them, presumably expounding upon who Jesus was and what He'd done to make salvation available. They must've also told him how he was to respond to this good news.

I say that because right after washing their wounds, he and his family are “washed” in the waters of baptism. Likely they were immersed in the same pool of water where he’d bathed Paul and Silas. And after that, they “were all filled with joy!” Reading on from vs.35...

³⁵ When it was daylight, the magistrates sent their officers to the jailer with the order: "Release those men." ³⁶ The jailer told Paul, "The magistrates have ordered that you and Silas be released. Now you can leave. Go in peace." ³⁷ But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. Now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out." ³⁸ The officers reported this to the magistrates, and when they heard that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens, they were alarmed. ³⁹ They came to appease them and escorted them from the prison, requesting them to leave the city. ⁴⁰ After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to Lydia's house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left.

After insisting on being publicly acquitted, they are turned loose. Why not just go quietly? Sometimes, when we're wronged we need to demand an apology – perhaps even seek restitution - not for our sakes, but for the good of those who may be subjected to similar treatment. The magistrates would think twice before arresting others without due process.

And though they did as they were asked and left the city, Paul and his companions did not go before returning to Lydia's home to encourage them one more time. Why? I can only conclude that they were following the Spirit's leading. How about us?

What may He be leading us to do or where might He be leading us to go that we haven't? Or might He be telling us we should not do something or that we shouldn't go somewhere we have been inclined to go – at least not 'now'? He could be telling us to stop and turn around to avoid a catastrophe ahead - or to return to some junction in our lives when we went off course. That's the very picture of repentance.

The Spirit limits as well as leads. May we be sensitive to His direction always...