

Over the past two months, as we have been going through the book of Acts - as we have been watching videos of the different stories of the different ways that different people have come to faith in Jesus Christ – we seen that God uses some unusual means to bring people to salvation. The infamous Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon tells of a man who once went to church to listen to the singing, but he didn't want to hear the preaching. So as soon as the pastor began speaking, the man put his fingers in his ears. But after a while, a big insect landed on his face, and so he had to take one finger out of his ear to brush it off. Just as he did, the pastor read Mark 4:9 saying, “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear*” which caught the man's attention and he listened, and then then surrendered his life to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. While many may say such things like this happen by mere coincidence, the Bible tells us the truth is such things happen by pure providence through the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit. Charles Spurgeon stated this also when he declared: “Without the Spirit of God, we can do nothing. We are as ships without the wind, branches without sap, and like coals without fire, we are useless.”

One of the main lessons of the Book of Acts is that not only was the church born out the filling of the Holy Spirit, the expansion of the early church was due to the powerful working of the Holy Spirit. All throughout the pages of Luke's record of the first churches we read of their vital dependence upon God's Spirit - directing, moving, and empowering the apostles as they responded to the Spirit's leading. The Holy Spirit plays a key role in the book of Acts, which is also known as the "Book of the Holy Spirit" as the Holy Spirit is mentioned 55 times in the book. In our text for today we will see that God providentially saves people through the gospel of Jesus Christ by the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit.

Last week we examined the conflict that occurred between Paul and Barnabas as they planned their second missionary journey. They both desired to return to the cities in which they had proclaimed the gospel on their first missionary journey in order to strengthen the believers there. However, they could not agree about whether Barnabas' cousin, John Mark, should go with them on this trip. Barnabas wanted to take him along, but Paul did not because John Mark had deserted them on the first trip. Tragically, these two men who were so foundational to the spread of the early church ended up in a “sharp disagreement.” They allowed their passions to control them to the point that they were contentious and provoking to one another and ended up separating from each other. Barnabas took John Mark and sailed off to Cyprus while Paul choose Silas and headed north through Syria. Though Paul and Barnabas were wrong in the manner in which they became divided, God still used that division to double the missionary force and accomplish His will in both of the areas in which they went and in the lives of those that went with them. Today we begin to trace the expanding ministry that God gave to Paul and Silas. Last week's text ended with telling us that they “*went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches*” (Acts 15:41) – and Luke picks up from there in Acts 16.

*Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium.. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.* Acts 16:1-5

The first thing we see here that reveals that God providentially saves people through the gospel by the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit – in that *the Spirit can help us to choose the right people to do God's work*. We see this in Paul's selection of young Timothy to go with him. Timothy would have been in his late teens/early 20's at this time. He had already developed a good reputation in the church. The fact that he was known and well-spoken of in both his own town of Lystra and the neighboring town of Iconium added great weight to the confidence Paul could have in selecting Timothy to go with him.

In the new Testament book of 2 Timothy, which is Paul's letter to Timothy, we read of Timothy's mother, Eunice, and grandmother, Lois (2 Timothy 1:5). They were Jewish women who had become believers in Jesus Christ. Although Timothy's father was Greek, these women had taught Timothy the Scriptures from his childhood (2 Timothy 3:15). On Paul's first visit to Lystra, these women and the young Timothy had come to faith in Jesus Christ. It was also then that Timothy had been present and watched Paul's stoning (Acts 14) - which made a profound impression on the young Timothy. As a result, he had resolved to follow Jesus Christ, no matter the cost. Paul saw Timothy's commitment and invited him to join the missionary team. It was the start of a lifelong and life-changing friendship.

While Luke does comment that Timothy's father was a Greek man, he does not note he as a follower of Jesus Christ. But his mother Eunice, was a Jew - and so by Jewish custom, Timothy was still considered to be Jewish and it is for this reason that Paul circumcises him. The Jews would not expect a Gentile to be circumcised, but a fellow Jew that was uncircumcised would be a great offense to them. They would have considered him to be a traitor and that would have greatly hindered their ministry to Jews. Now there are some even today who accuse Paul of being inconsistent because of this, since Paul was so strongly against circumcision at the Jerusalem council. But actually, Paul was being consistent with his teaching in having Timothy circumcised. Paul was against circumcision in the cases of requiring it of Gentiles and when it was regarded as a condition of being accepted by God. But Paul was not against circumcising a Gentile in order to make him acceptable to the Jews and thus gain a hearing from them.

Here we see the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit - in that *the Spirit can give us wisdom in using the right strategies to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ*. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom from God's Word so that we know which convictions to take a stand for, and which areas we need to yield out of love. All too often, we stand firm where we ought to yield, and we yield where we ought to stand firm. Only the Holy Spirit can impart the wisdom we need as we grow to understand God's Word. We see this in the Spirit empowered wisdom of Paul in that when we can remove an unnecessary offense in order to gain a hearing for the gospel without compromising any of God's commands to us, then we should do so. Life is not about us and our comforts and preferences. Life is about fulfilling the purpose of our existence and bringing glory to God. It is about telling other people about God and His character and what He has done and what He has declared His will to be and then living according to that will. We should not do anything that will block the gospel from being clearly declared and received.

But while that is a highly significant point, it should not be taken to mean that we are to assimilate into a non-Christian culture in trying to win them to Christ. Too many professing Christians are now doing exactly that and consequently they are compromising the very message they are supposed to be communicating. They are being conformed to the image of the world, and a person who lives like the world loses any effectiveness to their witness. They may even declare the truth about Jesus Christ, but the manner of their attitudes and priorities and how they live out their lives makes it really for the non-Christian to believe what they say. True born-again Holy Spirit empowered followers of Jesus Christ are constantly in the process of being transformed by the renewing of their minds - and they are constantly evaluating the culture of those we are trying to reach, so they might have the wisdom to refrain from those things that would hinder and practice those things that would advance the gospel.

It seems that the common perception in North American Christianity is that gospel about getting people saved from Hell. Some then use this to justify questionable and even ungodly behavior under the pretext of trying to win a hearing for the gospel. But that is a perversion of the gospel. The gospel is not fire insurance, though that it is a wonderful secondary benefit. The gospel of Jesus Christ is about salvation from sin, so that we might be made holy and blameless before God - and surrendering our hearts and lives to Jesus Christ and our Lord and Savior, so we might be restored back to God, under His authority in His Kingdom consequences, so that we might be conformed to the image of His Son forever. We must always seek the Holy Spirit's wisdom regarding what cultural things we can practice or must refrain from.

*“As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily”* (Acts 16:4-5). Luke tells us there that the missionary team traveled throughout the region, delivering the decisions of the Jerusalem Council. And as a result the churches were being strengthened in the faith and were increasing in number daily. The Jerusalem decisions, as we saw, affirmed two things: 1) that salvation is not by keeping the Law of Moses, but rather is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, and 2) that Gentile believers, out of love and in consideration for the Jews, not to engage in things that were especially offensive to Jews.

It always strengthens the church to hear the gospel affirmed, that we are saved by God’s grace alone through faith alone in what Jesus Christ provided for us on the cross. And, it also strengthens church to learn to walk in love, in submission to spiritual authority. These churches were not free to vote on whether or not to submit to the apostolic decisions. They joyfully and willingly submitted to them. The aim behind the decisions was to show love and to avoid offending those who were lost so they might get saved. God providentially saves people through the gospel by the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit – in that the Spirit can help us to choose the right people to do God’s work, and He can give us wisdom in using the right strategies for proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ which will strengthen our churches.

*And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.* Acts 16:6-10

And so we read that after Paul and Silas returned the city of Lystra, where Paul adds Timothy to the missions team, the *“Holy Spirit”* restricts their efforts to proclaim the gospel in Asia. We are not told how the Holy Spirit communicated this to Paul, but He would not allow Paul to preach in the region of Asia through which he was traveling. This is the province immediately west of Galatia. Paul travels all the way to Mysia, which is the northwest region of Asia. From there Paul tries to go to the northeast to the province of Bithynia, but the *“Spirit of Jesus”* would not let him go there either. Paul finally ends up in Troas, a port city on the Aegean Sea in western Mysia. A special note here before we go any further.

First, when Luke wrote the names *“Holy Spirit”* and *“Spirit of Jesus”* he uses them interchangeably. The Holy Spirit is not an impersonal entity as some people claim. The *“Holy Spirit”* is the third person of the triune Godhead. He has personhood and is co-equal with the Father and the Son. Second, note Paul’s sensitivity to the Holy Spirit. Paul was a fairly pragmatic individual. He would plan what he wanted to accomplish, yet he was always sensitive to God’s leading. It appears that Paul was heading west to new areas along the major trade route leading to Ephesus. However, when Paul got to the region of Phrygia the *“Spirit”* would not let him preach. We are not told the specific manner in which the *“Holy Spirit”* stopped Paul, but in whatever way it occurred, Paul paid attention and followed it. Paul living out the truth of Proverbs 16:9: *“The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps.”*

How then did Paul know which way to go? Well our text tells us that the Spirit gave guidance to Paul through a vision in the night. In Acts 10 Peter received a vision during the day. In several places in Acts we find that God sent angels to direct people. In Acts 13 it appears that the Holy Spirit directly communicated to the church leaders in Antioch in reference to setting aside Barnabas and Saul for missions work. Here we see the Spirit came to Paul as *“a man of Macedonia . . . urging him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’”* This was the direction that Paul had been waiting for. He and the rest of his team conclude from the vision that they were to go to Macedonia and preach the gospel.

Here we see how the sovereign power of *the Holy Spirit calls us to the right opportunities for ministry*. Does God still direct us through visions today? The answer is, yes - He can. But we must be careful! There are all sorts of crazy visions that people have that are not from the Lord. The Holy Spirit is not limited to visions when he speaks to us and gives us guidance. He can speak to us and give us guidance in a vision in the night or a still, small voice in our hearts when we are reading our Bibles or in an idea that comes to us during conversation with someone we don't even know or in things that we see that are happening during an event or in hearing a song during worship on Sunday morning or in a statement that is made while we are listening to a sermon or in the midst of taking a long walk on a beautiful day.

The balance we need in hearing and getting guidance from the Holy Spirit is on the one hand not to quench the Spirit, but on the other hand to examine everything carefully according the truth of the Word of God and hold fast to that which is good. In 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21 Paul writes: *“Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good.”* An obstinate apostle Paul could have plowed ahead into Asia or Bithynia against God's promptings not to do so. But the obedient apostle humbly obeyed God's promptings and waited until the Spirit showed him where to go. Then he went immediately. And ever since then - the world we live in has never been the same. The sovereign power of the Holy Spirit is the one who calls us to the right opportunities for ministry.

*So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us.* Acts 16:11-15

In these words we read that God providentially saves people through the gospel by the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit – in that *the work the Spirit of God will most often be beyond our expectations*. Paul and his team travel across the Aegean sea past the island of Samothrace and to the Macedonian port city of Neapolis. From there they traveled north to the town of Philippi in Macedonia. Paul's team stayed in Philippi for a few days, but no Macedonian man materialized. And so on the Sabbath, Paul's pursued his normal routine to first visit a synagogue, but there wasn't one there because Philippi lacked the ten Jewish men that it took to form an official synagogue. As the missionary team wandered down by the river, they came upon a small group of women praying. Paul and his team sat down and explained the gospel to them. The Lord opened a woman named Lydia's heart, along with the hearts of those in her household. They responded to the gospel by surrendering their hearts and lives to Jesus.

We see the providence of the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit when we take a closer look at Lydia. Lydia was from the town of Thyatira in Asia. The town was noted, among other commercial ventures, for its trade in expensive purple cloth. Emperors and Roman senators, as well as the wealthy, wore purple garments as a status symbol. Lydia moved from Thyatira to Philippi to do that business there. That was significant in that Paul would have preached in Lydia's hometown of Thyatira in Asia – had not the Holy Spirit forbade him to do so. Instead, the Holy Spirit led Lydia to move from Thyatira in Asia to Philippi in Macedonia - and the Holy Spirit kept Paul from going to Thyatira in Asia and, through the vision of the Macedonian man calling for help - sending him to Philippi in Macedonia, so that Paul could share the gospel Lydia so she and others would come to faith in Jesus. I suspect if you had asked Paul if he intended to start a church with a group of women rather than men, I'm sure he would've said, “No way!” The Macedonian man ended up being an Asian woman! God providentially saves people through the gospel of Jesus Christ by the sovereign power of the Holy Spirit. Imagine what Holy Spirit could do through us at Arrowsmith if we all followed the lead of the Holy Spirit together!

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