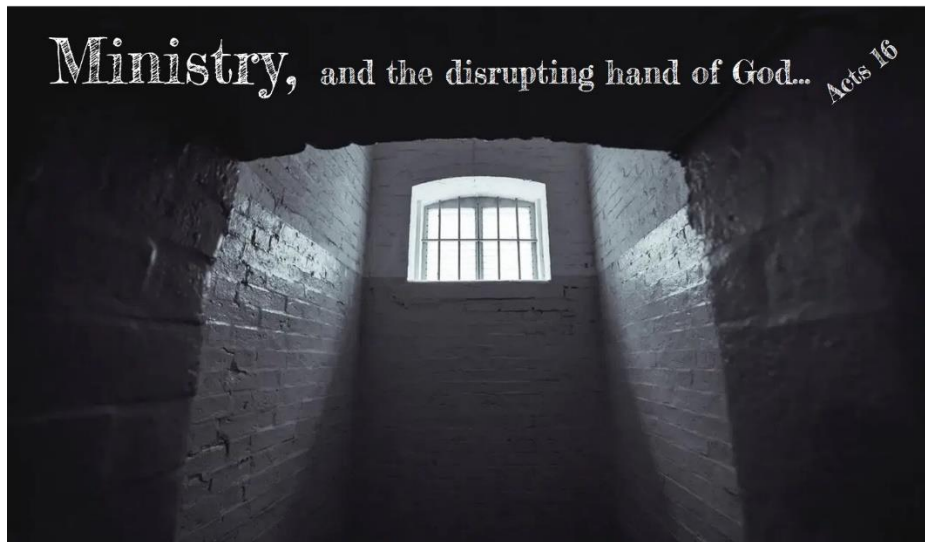


“Ministry, and the disrupting hand of God”

- Acts 16 -

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Acts 16 - 1 Then he came to Derbe and Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father was Greek. 2 He was well spoken of by the brethren who were at Lystra and Iconium. 3 Paul wanted to have him go on with him. And he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek. 4 And as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. 5 So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily. 6 Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. 7 After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. 8 So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. 9 And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10 Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them. 11 Therefore, sailing from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and the next day came to Neapolis, 12 and from there to Philippi, which is the foremost city of that part of Macedonia, a colony. And we were staying in that city for some days. 13 And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there. 14 Now a certain woman named Lydia heard us. She was a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira, who worshiped God. The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul. 15 And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." So she persuaded us. 16 Now it happened, as we went to prayer, that a certain slave girl possessed with a spirit of divination met us, who brought her masters much profit by fortune-telling. 17 This girl followed Paul and us, and cried out, saying, "These men are the servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to us the way of salvation." 18 And this she did for many days. But Paul, greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And he came out that very hour. 19 But when her masters saw that their hope of profit was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to the authorities. 20 And they brought them to the magistrates, and said, "These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city; 21 "and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe." 22 Then the multitude rose up together against them; and the magistrates tore off their clothes and commanded them to be beaten with rods. 23 And when they had laid many stripes on them, they threw them into prison, commanding the jailer to keep them securely. 24 Having received such a charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. 25 But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. 26 Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were loosed. 27 And the keeper of the prison, awaking from sleep and seeing the prison doors open, supposing the prisoners had fled, drew his sword and was about to kill himself. 28 But Paul called with a loud voice, saying, "Do yourself no harm, for we are all here." 29 Then he called for a light, ran in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 And he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household." 32 Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. 33 And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized. 34 Now when he had brought them into his house, he set food before them; and he rejoiced, having believed in God with all his household. 35 And when it was day, the magistrates sent the officers, saying, "Let those men go." 36 So the keeper of the prison reported these words to Paul, saying, "The magistrates have sent to let you go. Now therefore depart, and go in peace." 37 But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us openly, uncondemned Romans, and have thrown us into prison. And now do they put us out secretly? No indeed! Let them come themselves and get us out." 38 And the officers told these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Romans. 39 Then they came and pleaded with them and brought them out, and asked them to depart from the city. 40 So they went out of the prison and entered the house of Lydia; and when they had seen the brethren, they encouraged them and departed.

At the end of the last chapter, we read of a disagreement that cropped up between Paul and Barnabas. It happens sometimes...even amongst the best of friends and even amongst people in ministry. I'm not condoning it, but it reminds us that God has not finished with us, even when we are teachers of the Word. Paul and Barnabas separated ways because of the contention between them. We do not know the details of the debate between them, but we know a couple of things: one, there was found no peace and they therefore separated ways. Many commentators are uncomfortable with suggesting that someone...*especially the likes of Paul or Barnabas*, may have been out of line, so they present a picture that paints a rosier scenario and points to an imagined blessing in expansion of ministry.

Which one of them was right? For someone was! Well, Luke is remarkably objective here. He does not seem to take sides. Perhaps one little clue is that scripture shows that the church inclined to the side of Paul, because in Acts 15:40 it says that Paul and Silas were commended by the brethren to the grace of the Lord. It doesn't say this about the departure of Barnabas and John Mark, and furthermore the path of scripture from here followed only Paul. In fact, from this point forward, we never hear anymore of Barnabas' ministry endeavors. John Mark was reinstated by Paul and used in the future, so perhaps some maturing in ministry was all that was needed to put him back on track. I find no cause or reason to believe that God in anyway *caused* this strife, however, as He always does, He moved forward with His plans *despite* what men will do. He simply gets someone else to do the job. In this case, he chose what is a new player to the stage, a young man by the name Timothy.

Timothy was a Jew on his mother's side, but was Gentile on his father's side. Because his father was Greek, he was raised as such and, therefore, was never circumcised as a Jew. The text tells us that Paul, noting that Timothy was "well-spoken of" by the brethren in Lystra and Iconium, desired to bring Timothy "under his wing" and to have him accompany him on this missionary endeavor.

Seemingly utilizing the same reasoning that occurred in the Jerusalem summit in the last chapter, Paul and Timothy apparently decided to not potentially stumble weaker individuals needlessly when they could avoid such. Thus Timothy was circumcised so as to not offend the Jews that they were attempting to minister to.

This can in many circles illicit cries of foul in what can appear to be a blatant case of acquiescing to the enemy and even legalism on Paul's part. However, there are a couple of considerations here. One, nothing here leads us to believe that Timothy was not open to such an act or he was somehow forced or coerced into this act. Second, we must remember that these two were *going to the Jews* with the gospel message. It would be presumptuous, elitist, and even overtly dangerous to march into the mission field without careful consideration of those who they were going to and how they might be perceived by them. Such would have the potential of acting as the proverbial "bull in a china shop."

What IS evident here was the clear desire to have the open door of ministry and to have an unimpeded opportunity to minister the gospel. It's not that the two of them surrendered to the Jewish mandates, but they remained flexible on non-gospel cultural issues that would divide them before they could even get a word in. Love here simply superseded stubborn self-righteous positions. And frankly, that separates the men from the boys. The battle was on, and these two geared up.

This text now begins to paint a picture...a reality, of what the journey of ministry looks like in practical truth and application. The fact is, there often is no glimmer and shine and no "we are the champions" music track in the background. In fact, as the old saying goes, things are not going to happen precisely as we have them planned, for "the best laid plans of mice and men often go astray." No matter what plans we might make, God will see *his* agenda come to pass. We have here in this church experienced that on innumerable occasions! And despite experiencing the human emotions of frustration and dejection, we have also seen countless times where later...in hindsight, we applauded God's intervention as we gained clarity on the why after seeing what He had planned.

Our text tells us that despite their initial plans to go preach in Asia, Paul, Silas and Timothy were “*forbidden by the Holy Spirit*” to do so. But what does that mean? We are given nothing more, and that is, no doubt, on divine purpose.

What could be wrong with preaching the gospel in Asia? We often look at similar situations in our own reality, and in our own little box. In our pride and individual reasoning, we always think that our grasp of a particular situation is accurate. But it is often not as simple as we think. We think “what is wrong with” instead of “is there something better?” Does God want us to do something else instead? After all, we are *His* servants, are we not? It is these times that God often supernaturally and often abruptly intervenes and disrupts our best laid plans. We find ourselves “blind-sided” by our own presumptuous tunnel-vision.

You probably are as familiar with that feeling as I am. Times where we are simply dumbfounded as to why things did not work out when we were *so sure*. Ahhh, but while it may have been a *good* idea, it wasn't a *God* idea! It may have been that they simply were not the *right men*, or it was not the *right place*, or even just the *right time*, no matter what *they* might have thought! God clearly had a different plan, as He often does today! It is our responsibility to simply seek His will and follow Him wherever He goes, even if we do not understand.

Herein, we see that Troas was at least Paul's *third choice*, even while it was in fact God's *first*. It was in fact right where God wanted Paul to be. But left to himself, even with the right motives, Paul would have been far away from God's explicit and specific will for him. I must however note that Paul kept swinging. He didn't wait at home in front of the TV waiting for that invitational email to come. He kept at it, until a door opened. I think we all have something to learn from that caveat.

God had bigger plans it seemed. For clearly He was ready to take His “good news” into what we know today as Europe. Our *forefathers!* The early road to America! Aren't you glad God headed Paul off and turned him in another direction? Paul of course, had no idea at that point what God was doing. How I know that place! He just knew that he wanted to go to Asia-minor, modern day Turkey. Hindsight is of course 20/20! There is no doubt Paul grew in his faith in God through this event. It should be our prayer that ours grows also as we experience God's direct hand in similar situations!

God guided Paul to where he was *needed*, not where he *wanted to go*. And Paul's response is the very clear line between a *servant* and an immature child in the faith.

Once Paul was on the right road, the confirmation of God was immediate. Truly the “wind was at his back.” For the journey that under normal circumstances should have taken over a week took only one day! Luke, the human writer of the book of Acts, apparently joined the team at this point as the text changes to the first person, “we.”

By the way, this could be another small hint of why God delayed Paul's journey and changed his direction. For again, somewhere along the way they hooked up with Luke, which I am sure was not an easy task in that day. Luke probably didn't even *have* Paul's cell phone number! If things had been different, perhaps we would not have this careful account recorded by Luke!

The fact that the Jews were meeting “in the park” in Philippi would immediately lead us to believe that there were very few Jewish men in the city. For we know that if there had been a minimum of ten Jewish men in town, then there would have been a synagogue. But you know, it was a good place for the start of a church! Humble beginnings for a world class group of believers. After all, ours began in a living room, a hotel conference room and a coffeehouse. It's also great to see that the women didn't wait around for the men to get it together in order to worship God. Looking at our own time, one might tend to think it could have been a long wait!

As Paul and his cohort gathered “down at the river” they continued to experience “divine meetings” one after

another. Here they met a woman by the name of Lydia. Lydia was a Gentile proselyte, *one who had converted to Judaism*. Lydia's heart was "opened to the gospel." She personally *chose* the faith, but the Father went before her and *opened her heart*. That's the way the kingdom operates! Lydia was a wealthy woman, for the text tells us that she was a "seller of purple." The purple cloth of Thyatira was extremely rare, expensive, and renowned.

The dye to make purple came from the throat of a very small snail or a kind of shellfish, at the amount of roughly one drop per snail! There was obviously some skill or talent involved in acquiring this dye, or at the very least, a great deal of patience! Lydia and her family were born again that day and they were promptly baptized. In her excitement and perhaps with the early signs of the gift of hospitality, she persuades Paul and his band to come and stay at her house.

Now the gift of discernment is crucial to any pastor and teacher/leader. And Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, was keen to the events that are about to transpire. The text tells us that they came across a slave girl who was possessed by a demon and was being used by her owners to tell fortunes for a price. Apparently, as we will find out, *she was pretty good at it*.

Now the thing to take notice of here is that this girl, while *even possessed by a demon*, still "gave glory to God." And that fact must cause us to "throw on the brakes." For the fact is, this story as well as our own experiences of like kind, must acknowledge that just because someone is involved in the things of God, speaks in grand terms concerning Christ, goes to church on Sunday, and overall "talks the talk," does *not* mean they are a born again believer! They may be "spirit-filled," but certainly we must ask, *by what spirit?*

Paul puts up with this girl for several days before he finally puts an end to it. Throwing tact and social protocol aside, Paul calls it and commands the demon to leave her.

What happens next is yet another "disruption" in the ministry plans of Paul and his entourage. The guy behind this woman's mystical work is now upset because he's off the gravy train. Once they realized that the show was over, they naturally wanted to sue (or at least beat Paul to death, one or the other.) So they grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them off to the cops. Now of course they obviously had to make up a story, because the truth was just never going to do in this situation. So like most everyone, *they lied: These men are really causing a lot of trouble in our town.*"

Things go quickly from bad to worse, as it looks as if Paul and Silas are going to pay for their "good works" with blood. The soldiers beat the both of them without even hearing their side of the story. Once they whip them, they are placed under lock and key with a command that the jailer guard them closely. Note that Paul and Silas were placed in an *inner* cell away from any windows, and just to be sure they weren't going anywhere, they were locked down in leg stocks.

Verse 25 begins with a powerful little word in the ministry of the Kingdom: *but*. As is always the case when there is a dire situation in which God is involved, there is always a "*but*." It is inexplicably clear that despite the apparent desperate situation, Paul and Silas seemed to be far from concerned! For as the rest of the inmate are trying to get some sleep, they were still awake and *singing hymns!* So by choice or not, the other prisoners were no doubt awake too and listening to this midnight praise.

Verse 26... Try to wrap your heads around this moment! We as believers find it so hard to connect the miraculous with the same God that is personally involved with us today. We tend to think that somewhere along the way, God stopped causing earthquakes on behalf of His servants. Yet I look around and feel the earth shake under *my* feet almost daily, and I see the faces of those who were once bound by chains and are now miraculously free. If we fail to *see* the power of God, perhaps it is because we are too far away from the prisons that enslave men to actually see them set free.

Now in the days of Roman occupation, if a soldier somehow lost an inmate, it would mean either death or they

would have to serve that inmate's sentence. So this guard, who probably laid awake half the night listening to gospel tunes with no accompaniment, and then lived through an earthquake, figured he was having a really bad day at work and decided to take things into his own hands and commit suicide. But before he got to it, Paul came to the rescue: "***we're here dude...don't do it...***" Now that was apparently the "straw that broke the camel's back," for now he was ready to give in to Jesus. Remember that moment Christian? I sure do! It sure takes a lot to bring some people to their knees. He asks "*what must I do to be saved?*"

Paul tells this guard "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved...*" Please note that the correct language isn't believe ***in***, but rather "believe ***on***" the Lord Jesus Christ. The fact is, the difference between those two words is the distance between heaven and hell!

Jumping into this new faith with both feet, the guard takes Paul and Silas home to his house, feeds them, and takes care of their wounds. And through it all, he now "rejoices." He is born again, and like Lydia, his family followed him to new life. The earth had shook that day, but not just for Paul and Silas, but for a family that got up that morning thinking it was just going to be another day.

Picking up in verse 35, we are reminded that it was an extreme mistake to beat or imprison a Roman citizen without due process, and apparently the cops had forgot to read Paul his rights upon arrest! For Paul was a natural born Roman and the magistrates had failed to check. Suddenly the tables were turned, and it was the *magistrates* that were in trouble!

Certainly in verse 37 one might think Paul was just being hubris with his actions, but he was no doubt actually moving to protect the new believers in town (i.e. Lydia and the jailer) from future persecution. For if they simply walked away without a clear statement of innocence, it would only be a matter of time before the others would receive the same treatment that Paul and Silas received.

It was a great move! You have to love Paul's words, "*Nope...no way man...Let the authorities come here themselves and get us out.*" Ahhh...it was a fine moment! The "powers that be" came dutifully out to escort them out of the jail. But apparently, they did not beat it out of town, for they first went back to the believers. Ever placing the flock over themselves, they went first back to Lydia and the others to encourage them. That's ministry gang...what's best for the flock must come first! There is no doubt they were indeed encouraged! It wasn't what Paul and the boys had originally planned, ***but God had***. God's "disrupting hand" had shaken their world. Such is the ministry of God led by His Spirit...