

“Come Over and Help Us”

Acts 16:6-40

Key Verses: 16:9,10

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

For those of you that don’t know me, my name is Sam Toh. I was born and raised in this church, Chicago UBF. I’m so blessed to be a part of this church. I serve the high school ministry here and I am so blessed to be able to share life with them and pray for them. I never planned to minister to these high school young people. It was really unexpected, just the sovereign hand of God that led me. It was in this ministry that I met my wife.

I remember after I graduated college, I was praying to get married. I told God that I could marry anyone that loves Him except I gave God a short list of things that I didn’t want in my future wife. That list was: 1. That she not be taller than me. 2. That she not be older than me. 3. That she not be a Korean FOB. But God’s so funny, he led me to a woman that was all of those things! And she is the best thing that ever happened to me. Really my amazing friend, coworker and prayer supporter.

God’s way of working is beyond our way of understanding and expectation. But it is wonderful and full of excitement. It’s the life led by the Holy Spirit.

While preparing this message, God led me to a quote by A.W. Tozer that really got my attention. “If the Holy Spirit was withdrawn from the church today, 95 percent of what we do would go on and no one would know the difference. If the Holy spirit had been withdrawn from the New Testament church, 95 percent of what they did would stop, and everybody would know the difference.” Writing this message, God put in me a sincere prayer topic to live like the early church full of the spirit. I know we all don’t want to go on in our Christian lives without the Holy Spirit as if we are a monument. We want to be a movement, moving forward by

“Come Over and Help Us”

the spirit. We have a great example of that in our passage today. We see this excitement and joy in Paul’s life as God gives him a vision and leads him by the Holy Spirit to establish the church in Philippi.

As we go through this passage, let’s see how God first leads Paul away from Asia Minor and gives him a new vision. Then let’s see how this vision is realized as God leads Paul to three very different people that each needed Jesus.

I. God leads Paul through the Holy Spirit and a vision (vs 6-10)

Our passage takes place in the beginning of Paul’s second missionary journey. From Antioch Paul had decided to **“go back and visit all the believers in the towns”** where they preached the word of the Lord during his first missionary journey. (15:36) This shows us Paul’s sense of responsibility and love for these people. In gospel work, evangelism is important, but the follow up with a heart of love and compassion is also important.

So the journey begins with a visit to Tarsus, Derbe, and Lystra. There are several people together with Paul on this journey. There is Silas, whom Paul chose as his companion after a disagreement with Barnabas (15:39.40). Timothy joins them in Lystra (16:1). And we notice Luke is with them because in verse 10 the word “we” is used for the first time in Acts most likely indicating that at this point, Luke, who wrote Acts joined the missionary journey. I love that Paul did not try to be a super solo evangelist. He traveled as a team. He knew and saw the value of having a group working together, as partners, to do God’s work.

From Lystra, Paul and his team travel northward through the regions of Phrygia and Galatia. It seems like good human wisdom to preach the gospel in an efficient way, staying in a small geographical area. So Asia Minor seemed like the natural place to expand Paul’s ministry, as there were several prosperous cities nearby just to the north. But verse 6 says that they had **“been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.”** We’re not sure exactly how the Holy Spirit kept them from doing so. But Paul must have had a strong sense of the Spirit’s guidance. He persistently seeks God’s leading and travels 400 miles west to Mysia and ends up in Troas. 400 miles west is a long ways to travel. 400 miles

“Come Over and Help Us”

west of Chicago is like Omaha, Nebraska. Google maps says it takes 154 hours to walk there. If you walk 12 hours a day, that’s almost 13 days of walking. Paul had a lot of time to consider what God was doing, but he didn’t sit around waiting for inspiration. His heart was to preach the gospel of God’s grace. (Acts 20:24). And we see him pressing on. We see a passion to obey God and find how God wants to use him as he actively seeks God’s will.

From here, again Paul tries to preach the gospel in Asia Minor by attempting to go north into Bithynia, but verse 7 says, **“the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.”** In case there is any confusion, “the Spirit of Jesus” is another name for the Holy Spirit.

What we notice in these first three verses is how the Holy Spirit is leading Paul away from something he thought was a good idea for this journey. In a sense, the Holy Spirit is saying “No” to preaching the gospel to the big prosperous cities of Asia Minor. Why would the Holy Spirit lead Paul away from what seems to be such a good, biblical, efficient, and godly work? That led me to ask myself, “how do I know when God is leading me away from a ‘good’ work?” This may be the hardest to discern.

One thing that makes discerning the Holy Spirit difficult is ourselves. It is so hard to separate ourselves, our own desires, our own wish dreams, and our own ambitions from God’s vision. So as God works in us, to show us his will, we need to be honest with ourselves, and be aware of the reality that our own subjective selves, our bias, prejudices and preferences, will get in the way of seeing God’s vision.

We see here that Paul is being guided by hinderance. The Holy Spirit “kept them,” and “would not allow them.” The Holy Spirit guides us as much by the closing of doors as He does by the opening of doors. How often do we only want God to “open” doors for us? Sometimes God closes doors and we need to seek what is open to us. We can trust God and His plans both when he opens and when he closes doors.

“Come Over and Help Us”

Another thing we need to know is that while God wants to give us each a very personal and individual vision for our lives, it is always part of God’s much bigger plan and purpose. As God was moving Paul away from Asia Minor, he was leading him toward Rome. Paul was looking North, God wanted him to look West. Paul could never fully see or realize in his lifetime how God would eventually use the Roman Empire to spread the gospel to the whole world. As God uses us for his work, it may not always be easy to see or understand, but with faith we need to trust that God has a plan and trust in his sovereignty.

So then, why didn’t God just give Paul the vision right at the beginning rather than waste a lot of time wandering around trying to find God’s will? That sounds like it’d be a much more efficient way for God to work. But when Paul and their team could see that the Holy Spirit was not working in their own way, they could surrender their own ideas and be ready to hear and accept God’s vision. They searched throughout the land, you can notice from the map that they literally have reached the end of land, and maybe ran out of ideas of their own. So now, with open hearts, God can show them his vision. The Holy Spirit works not only to give us his vision, but to tear down our own. Paul worked hard and actively sought after God’s leading. He really wanted to know where to go. As he was being diligent, the Holy Spirit was at work. I pray that we may be prepared to lay down our own plans and ambitions to see God’s vision. May god give us all open and humble hearts to actively seek God’s will, not our own. May the Holy Spirit open our eyes to see what He sees and where He leads us to.

So the Holy Spirit closed the first two doors. But now He opens another through a vision. Let’s read verses 9 and 10 together, **“During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” 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.”**

God’s way of persuading people is very interesting. This vision was some kind of visible image that came to Paul with a strong sense of God’s presence and leading. We can notice three things about this vision. Firstly, the vision is visual. God could have given Paul a command, in just words, “Go to Macedonia.” But God gave Paul

“Come Over and Help Us”

a picture. A picture is worth a thousand words right? It was a compelling image. Secondly, this vision was of an open hearted person. A person begging for help. And not just any person, a Macedonian. That means a Roman, a person of the ruling class. Paul probably thought that these kinds of people would never be open to the gospel message, but God shows him that their hearts are open. Thirdly, this vision put a sense of problem on Paul’s heart. God gave Paul a vision of a man begging for help, so Paul had to respond to this man’s need. God gives us his vision to give us a heart that is broken for the people in need around us. That’s how he often leads us.

Though this process can be long and painful, the Holy Spirit works to empty us of ourselves until we can humbly accept God’s vision. It’s easy to put on blinders and stick to our own ideas of how God wants us to serve him. It’s easy to focus on ourselves, sit on the couch, enjoy our comfortable homes, attend all our church functions, and not worry about the people and issues around us. But I pray that each one of us may have a burning desire to see God’s vision for the people around us. I pray that we may be a church that loves and serves our neighbors. Let’s not just talk about being a church that teaches the Bible and raises disciples and expect someone else to do the dirty work. Let’s not just say we are about world mission and expect someone else to go out and be a missionary. Let’s get our own hands dirty with joy and enthusiasm. Let’s get out into our neighborhoods and campuses, let’s be salt and light at our workplaces where we spend the majority of our day, let’s love the people in our own homes to find the open needy hearts around us. Let’s actively and humbly seek after God’s vision, that our hearts might be broken for the people around us. Do you see God vision? May God give us each such a vision that breaks our hearts and compels us to respond.

II. God carries out the vision (vs 11-40)

So with this vision, Paul and his team set out straight for Samothrace, then to Neopolis, and then to Philippi. (v11-12) Philippi was a Roman colony and the leading city in that district of Macedonia. This part of our passage gets very interesting. In Philippi, God leads Paul to three very different people: first a rich business woman, then a slave girl, then a jailer. Let’s see how God led Paul to people in need.

“Come Over and Help Us”

Usually, when Paul entered a city to preach the gospel he went to the Synagogue. But it seems that in Philippi, they couldn't find a synagogue to worship in. So they spent a few days to learn about the city, to pray for the city, and searched for the best place to share the gospel. They must have heard about a place of prayer near a river outside of the city. So on the Sabbath, that's where they went. When they arrived there, they found several women who had gathered.

One of them was named Lydia. Let's read verse 14 together. **“One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message”** So Lydia was a purple cloth dealer from Thyatira. To be a purple cloth dealer meant that she must have been very well off and probably well connected because in her time purple cloth was for royalty. It is amazing to see that she had been a worshiper of God.

As Paul spoke to the women, the verse says that the Lord opened Lydia's heart to Paul's message. As Paul diligently worked hard to share the gospel, God opened her heart. We can see that Lydia, though wealthy and successful, needed to hear the gospel. She worshiped God the best she could, but she did not know Jesus. She clearly wanted to know God more, but didn't have anyone to help her. This was the first person in need that God prepared in advance to receive Paul's message.

Many times God works this way. I've heard countless stories in UBF of how a student had reached a point in their life where they cried out to God for help. Sure enough, at that time, they bump into a random person with the strangest greeting, “Hi would you like to study the Bible?” Through God's preparation in the student, and God's leading of the Bible teacher to the student, God could work. Still now there are people around us, on our campuses, in our homes, neighborhoods and workplaces, that God has prepared with open hearts. And he wants to send us to them. Are we ready to go and follow the spirit's leading to find them?

Now Lydia's response was remarkable. It showed her readiness and eagerness to commit her life to God, for the Lord had opened her heart. When she believed, not

“Come Over and Help Us”

only was she baptized, but her whole household along with her. And she persuaded Paul and everyone to come to her house.

So, the first person in Macedonia that accepts Paul’s message is a woman. But wasn’t God’s vision to Paul of a Macedonian man? It seemed reasonable to me for Paul to dismiss this group of praying women, and specifically Lydia saying to himself, “this wasn’t in my vision, it was a man, not a woman!” This shows me that Paul didn’t cling to his own ideas when following the vision’s details, but he followed the working of the Holy Spirit to see where God is working. That spirit led him to a river outside of a main city to a group of women. To human eyes, this was not the ideal place to begin a great work of God!

Paul did not show any prejudice or have any bias. As a Jewish man he may have also had to overcome some discomfort to be welcomed into a Gentile woman’s home. God led Paul to an unexpected place, to find an unexpected Gentile woman, to share the gospel with. May God give us each an attitude and a willingness that follows the Holy Spirit to overcome our prejudices and take us out of our comfort zones to share the gospel.

Look at verse 16. The next person that Paul interacts with was a slave girl who had an evil spirit by which she could tell the future. This evil spirit followed Paul around and said, **“These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.”** This was problematic. If Paul accepted this woman’s affirmation, he would be indirectly affirming her and associating himself with her. Paul did not want either the Gospel or the name of God to be promoted by demons. Paul became annoyed and worn out because of the evil spirit’s provocative continual hindrance until he rebuked the spirit to come out.

Here we see God leading Paul to another person in need. Though the details of this exchange are interesting, in the end Paul frees a woman in bondage. This woman was enslaved by her owners, taken advantage of by greedy men. She was enslaved by an evil spirit. To think about her bondage is heart breaking. What hope does a woman like her have to get out of her situation? She needed to be set free. And God used Paul to drive out the demon and give her freedom.

“Come Over and Help Us”

Look at verses 19-24. When this happened, the owners of the slave girl realized that their hopes of making money was gone, so they seized Paul and Silas, dragged them into the marketplace and turned the city into a big uproar, until the magistrates decided to have them stripped, beaten with rods, and thrown in prison. At this point, Paul and Silas could have been very discouraged. But we should know that as God works out his vision in our lives, hardship and persecution is often part of his will.

So how did they respond? Let's read verse 25. **“About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.”** If you saw these men, covered in their own blood, feet bound in stocks, and in prison singing hymns to God you'd think these people were literally crazy. Here we see Paul's deep trust and love relationship with his Sovereign Abba Father. When there is faith and a trust in God, we can rejoice and praise God even in the midst of persecution and hardship. Paul and Silas could see that God had begun a good work in Philippi and that God was with them fulfilling His vision. With this assurance, they could endure hardships. Such joy that comes in persecution is not natural. It is supernaturally given as we are not only led by the Spirit, but filled with the Spirit and controlled by the Spirit who gives us love, joy and peace (Gal 5:22), regardless of our circumstances.

Look at verse 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 everyone's chains came loose.”** As Paul and Silas prayed and sang, God worked. These events were not just a super well timed, coincidental natural disaster. It was clearly the work of God as the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. When the prison gates flew open, Paul and Silas didn't say to each other, “Run! quick! We're free!” They stayed in their jail cells.

Why would they do that? I thought maybe as they sang and prayed they'd be asking for God to get them out of there. But it seems that their prayer was not to be freed, but to share the gospel even in this circumstance. For Paul saw these sequence of events as the opportunity to reach the jailer. As the jailer drew his

“Come Over and Help Us”

sword to kill himself, Paul shouted, **“Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”** Those words changed the jailer’s life. He came to Paul and Silas and asked, **“Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”** They replied, **“Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”** (v29).

God led Paul to another needy person, this jailer. Though we don’t know much about him, he seemed to be under much stress and pressure as he was so quick to try to kill himself when he thought the prisoners got away. Maybe he felt trapped in his profession. His first question, **“What must I do to be saved?”** shows the longing in his heart to be set free and have salvation. And this is how God led Paul and his team to a third person that needed Jesus. The jailer’s life became a testimony to all his household and they were all baptized that day.

Look at verses 35-39. Word was sent to the jailer to let Paul and Silas go. But Paul demanded that the magistrates come and escort them out. The reason is because these events became such a public spectacle that without a proper release from prison, it could have appeared that this young church was started by a bunch of rebels only looking to cause trouble. And that the early church, Lydia’s house in specific, was harboring fugitive prisoners. By being escorted out they could make a public declaration that they were treated unjustly, that there was no criminal activity, and thus clear the reputation of the young church.

So after this verse 40 says, **“they went to Lydia’s house, where they met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them. Then they left.”** Even in their short amount of time, the church has grown, for now there were “brothers and sisters.” How amazing?

Through this crazy sequence of events we can see how God leads Paul to very unlikely individuals, each needing the gospel message. His following of the vision, and the way it has been carried out thus far doesn’t seem spectacular or grand. Actually it’s filled with persecution and a random group of misfits. But God showed him one person at a time that needed the gospel, and this gives birth to the Philippian church.

“Come Over and Help Us”

In this passage we can see how God wants to empty us of our own plans and ambitions, he wants to give us his vision, and carries out his will by showing His saving grace to to one person at a time that needs Jesus.

The reality is that our own plan can be selfish and short sided. There are people all around each one of us that God prepared in advanced for us to meet. People in need of love and of a shepherd. People in need of the gospel and the truth. Can you see what God sees in this world? Can you see people’s real needs? There are students on college and high school campuses all around Chicago with so many questions on their hearts, searching for answers. Can you hear them calling for help? We each have neighbors and coworkers around us with so many pains and wounds in their lives. Is your heart broken for them? Some of us have children and family members that we’ve taken for granted, we think they’re doing ok, but they’re looking to be loved. Can you feel their longings?

Through this passage, my heart was challenged. It is easy for me to stay in my comfort zone. Just brush things off and focus on myself. Instead of being led by the Spirit, I often live led by my own ideas and preferences. I’m guilty of just talking about world mission, just thinking about reaching the lost, and expecting someone else to go and carry them out. I’ve gotten comfortable in my calling and vision God gave me to serve HBF ministry. I pray that God may give me passion to actively seek after God’s vision and be obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit. I pray that I may be led by the Spirit, be filled by the Spirit and be totally controlled by the Spirit that my heart may be broken for the people whom Jesus died for.

Would you join me in my prayer, that we as a church would get our own hands dirty, get out into our neighborhoods, get on to the campuses and have God’s vision. Let’s make genuine relationships and genuine friendships with the people around us. Let’s not overlook our own children and family members. Let’s love our coworkers and get to know them. Would you allow the Holy Spirit to find the open needy hearts around you? God may lead us to the most unlikely people. But as this fall semester ministry is starting, may God help us to find the Lydias, the slave girls and the jailers around us and share the gospel with them by the help of the Holy Spirit. It certainly won’t be easy, but at least it won’t be boring.