

The Holy Spirit Works Powerfully

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[0 : 0 0] free. So if you have a Bible, perhaps you can turn with me to Acts chapter 16, page 1111 of the church Bible. As we continue to think about the personal work of the Holy Spirit, we're recognizing today that the Holy Spirit works powerfully, and we see that in Macedonia.

Yeah. It's interesting sometimes, I think, to take a step back to recognize that without the truths that we have here in Acts 16, we would not be here. Because what we have in Acts 16 is God the Holy Spirit directing church-planting mission in Europe for the very first time.

So that we are here today in a Christian church in Europe with the gospel is by God's design and power. That's a great thing to think about. So it's true for us as a group, but it's also true for us individually. As we recognize the Spirit active in hearts and lives, transforming and saving, without His work, we wouldn't be here. We would never choose to be in church.

We would never choose to follow Jesus. We would never know nor desire to be saved. Luke highlights for us the Spirit's powerful work in the mission of the church, and we need it.

But there's a problem the church in every generation faces. In a previous generation, Francis Schaeffer diagnosed it this way. He said, the central problem of our age is the church of the Lord Jesus Christ individually or corporately tending to do the Lord's work in the power of the flesh rather than of the Spirit. Working out of our own strength rather than working from the strength the Spirit provides. When that happens, the church can rely on the right strategy or the right technique. We can make it all about us and our powers of persuasion. We might be tempted to redesign the words of the gospel, to redesign worship to what we think will be most effective in reaching our contemporaries. We can rest all of the work firmly on our shoulders and either feel really puffed up with pride or be overwhelmed by a sense of fear and weakness. And so Acts 16 is so helpful for us in this way as well. It pulls us back towards confidence in the Spirit and not confidence in ourselves. It points us towards the need for more prayer, not necessarily more programs. It invites us to listen to the Spirit and to be looking for Him to work. There's a lovely picture Jesus gives, a powerful picture Jesus gives of the Spirit in John chapter 3 as He's talking with Nicodemus. He says, the Spirit's like the wind. We can't see the wind, but we feel and we see its powerful effects. And those effects are various. You know when the wind blows, as it often has been, it generates the wind turbine, so we get our electricity.

[3 : 3 0] It brings the waves and the storms. It rattles our windows. The effects are various, but we see them. And what we see in Acts 16 is the Spirit working powerfully and in various ways, directing the mission of the church and saving people by grace. And as we gather together and think about it, I want us to be encouraged as we recognize the Spirit is always working and that we'd be asking that the Spirit would be working. So the first thing for us to notice, and it's in verses 6 to 10, is that the Spirit works powerfully by directing His church.

Two simple questions to ask of this text. First, who directs and how does that direction happen? Look with me at verse 6 and 7. We have Paul and his companions, and they're traveling.

They traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the Word in the province of Asia. Then they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. Okay, so who's directing? It's the Holy Spirit, also here known as the Spirit of Jesus. Luke gives us a significant reminder. He's done it all through his work. The Spirit is the agent through whom Jesus continues His ministry. The work of Jesus building His church continues now by His Spirit guiding His people. So we meet Paul, the apostle, and he had his plans.

Maybe he wanted to go and visit some of the churches he'd already established to bring fresh encouragement, to bring more teaching. We don't know. But we do know that these aren't necessarily bad plans. It's not wrong plans to want to go to certain places to preach the gospel. Paul had his plans, but he's learned to listen. He's learned to be sensitive to the Spirit, to submit, and to be flexible. Because Paul knows, and the church always needs to know, that it's Jesus' mission and not ours. So that's who directs. It's the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Jesus. But how does the direction happen? We see it in two ways, I think. First of all, sometimes the Spirit says no. And this can seem really surprising. Here is the Spirit saying no, as Paul and Silas want to continue on a particular missionary journey. A chance to share Jesus with people. The Spirit is wise. He's God. And He knows each person is limited. Paul, Silas, you and me, we can only be in one place at one time. And the Spirit has another purpose. He wants to use their gifts and their time, their energy, in a new way. Now, how did he say no? That's not clear. Was it an illness that stopped them in their tracks? Was it opposition from the authorities? We don't know. But the point is, they understand that God has closed that door.

Paul is ready to trust God's wisdom, God's leading, willing to change direction. It's actually something we see in church history. One example would be David Livingston, you know, famous for his exploits in Africa. David Livingston really wanted to go to China for God. Ended up in Africa. William Carey, famous for bringing the gospel to India, he really wanted to go to the Polynesian islands.

[7 : 05] It's a reminder. Planning is good, but we must always leave room for the Spirit. And we see that with Paul. So sometimes the Spirit says no, but then sometimes the Spirit says go. In verse 9, we have that. During the night, Paul had this vision of a man of Macedonia begging, come over to Macedonia and help us. After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. So the Spirit speaks through a vision. Again, a reminder that the Spirit is not limited in how he works. So the vision happens at night, the next morning, Paul shares it with his companions. They discuss together the significance, and they conclude God's design is that we take the gospel into Europe. And so what we have is, in the book of Acts, the Spirit directing his church as directed by Jesus and as Jesus promised. We see some wonderful, remarkable examples of that.

In Acts chapter 8, the Holy Spirit leads a deacon by the name of Philip to go into a road in the middle of the desert, where he will meet an Ethiopian man who's just gone to the temple to worship. He's reading Isaiah 53, all about the suffering servant, the Messiah. He doesn't know. Is this about Isaiah or somebody else? Philip is directed by the Spirit to share the gospel from Isaiah 53. In Acts chapter 10, we have a Roman man called Cornelius, and we have Peter each having visions, leading Peter by the Spirit to go to Cornelius' house to share the gospel. The gospel comes to him and to his household, and they receive the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts is full of this, working powerfully to spread the good news of the good news of the Lord Jesus, to continue the work of Jesus through his church.

The Spirit guides powerfully. The question for us to reflect on today is, how does the Spirit guide us today? And it's so important for us to recognize that the primary means that God speaks and directs his church is through the Word of God. The only time we know with certainty God is speaking a message to me is the Word of truth that we read in the Bible. And the Spirit helps to speak from God's Word to help us to grasp God's love, to see the glory of Jesus, to have wisdom to know, how can I live in obedience?

So if we want God to speak to us, we come to church. We read the Bible. There are other means, of course, that the Spirit uses, but they are secondary. So he can prompt us, like we see with Paul and his companions. Sometimes we can have that sense that this door of opportunity has closed, but another one has opened. Perhaps we're talking with Christian friends, and we receive some good wisdom and insight and advice. Perhaps we feel led to pray, and that prayer leads to action.

The Spirit is not limited, and he can prompt us in those ways, but we need to be careful not to attach the same level of certainty to those promptings or to our feelings as we do to the Word of God. That also means for the Spirit to speak to us. We need to be ready to listen, and that's a question of our character. By which I mean, am I ready, really ready, to let God be in charge, to let God's Word be applied to my life, even if it leads to a radical change of direction, something I may even find uncomfortable. Will I allow him and his Word to have authority? If we want the Spirit to be guiding us, we need to be hearing and receiving the Word of God. We need to be living in a spirit of trust and submission to him as Lord and King. We need to be ready to make plans, absolutely, but to hold lightly to those plans. The Spirit is still pleased to guide and to direct the church's mission and the church's growth. If you were here last week listening to Derek, you would have heard that sense coming through. Yes, the five-year plan is there, but yes, listening to the Spirit. Because Acts 16 reminds us that it's God's timing, it's God's location, it's the people God has in mind that he is directing Paul and Silas to. And so we work, as the people of God, we work all the while resting and trusting in his work. So what this means for us as a local church and for our calling as disciples is we need to commit to being a worshiping community, to being a community that hears God's Word, to be a praying church. We need to be asking for help to live holy and obedient lives and to pray that God would guide us, give us wisdom from his words for each day and as we make our plans. Now, before we move from this,

[12 : 48] I just want to pause to address a different guidance question just for a moment. Because as Christians, I imagine many of us have asked or perhaps are asking, what is God's will for my life?

Perhaps we have an important decision coming up. We're thinking about our future. It often happens, what's God's will? We want to know. Perhaps we find that we're faced with an abundance of choice and we've got anxiety. How do I know if I'm making the right choice? Perhaps we find ourselves delaying, wandering, never really settling to anything because we're always wondering, is this God's will? What's God's will? I would recommend one book, Kevin DeYoung's book, Just Do Something. I was rereading it again this week. It's really helpful biblical wisdom. Just one or two things on that. For Christians, we should always remind ourselves, whenever we're thinking about God's will, remember that God is in control of all things. His will will always be done. God is able to work all things together for the good of those who love him, so we can trust, even as we face uncertainty. Secondly, to remember that God's will for us primarily is concerned with our obedience and with our holiness.

We can spend a lot of energy and stuff that's not really an ethical choice. God wants us to direct our attention to make sure that we are being faithful, we are being obedient. But it is also true that God does have a plan for each one of our lives, but he does not expect us to figure that out in advance. So we can rest, and we can seek wisdom, and then we can do something. God's will is not like walking a tightrope, where if we make one bad decision, we're done for. We trust him, we trust his words, we listen to good, faithful, godly people around us, and we act. Because the Spirit works powerfully by directing his church. If you have any guidance questions, I'd really recommend that book, or if you want to speak to me or one of the elders, we'll be happy to talk with you. But the second thing we need to see is that the Spirit works powerfully in saving people. This is from verse 11 to verse 34 that we read. The section of Acts 16 is a real gift. Here we have the first church in Europe, a very surprising group of members drawn together, a group that would never be together, except for the Spirit uniting them all to Jesus. This little section says to us, God's grace is amazing and transforming.

It says to us, there's no such thing as a Christian type. Ah yes, that kind of person could be saved, because no one is beyond saving. Tells us the Spirit is not limited in how he brings new birth.

Talk to any group of Christians and you'll find different stories of how God led them to faith. Every testimony demonstrates God's powerful grace, and Acts 16 reminds us God loves to save people, to take people from darkness to light. So let's ask the Spirit to use these personal powerful stories to encourage us for our own faith, to encourage us for our mission, to challenge us on our own response to Jesus. As we see the Spirit at work in salvation in Philippi, we begin with the first story of the businesswoman Lydia. That's in verses 13 to 15. On the Sabbath, Luke and Paul and Silas and others went outside the city gate to the river where we expected to find a place of prayer. So in a city, if there was not more than 10 men in that city, they weren't able to establish a synagogue, a place of worship, so it was common for people to go down to the river to pray. So here's a group of God fearers. Lydia is described as a worshiper of God, verse 14. She is believing and she is behaving like a Jew. And then Paul comes to this group and he begins to speak. And whenever Paul speaks, we know that he is wanting to show people that what they are looking forward to from the Old Testament has been fulfilled now in Jesus. That he is God's promised Savior King. That God's kingdom is established by

[17 : 44] Jesus, but that's a spiritual kingdom. The way into that is by the grace of God. It's through his death and resurrection. That there is forgiveness. There is a way home to God, and it's through trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ. And so as Paul preaches the gospel, we discover in verse 14 that the Spirit, the Lord, opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. So the Spirit is active in two ways. The Spirit is using Paul and his words powerfully. And then he's powerfully at work in Lydia's heart, opening her heart, opening the eyes of her heart so that the message about Jesus makes sense, leading her to believe and to be saved. And then leading her, verse 15, and the members of her household to be baptized.

They have this sign of loyalty, this recognition that they've received the Holy Spirit, that they've been washed free from sin. And then something else we see about Lydia in verse 15. If you consider me a believer in the Lord, come and stay at my house. We see her hospitality. God has welcomed her into his household, and she now opens her home to others. A wonderful response to God's grace. The Spirit's been working in Lydia.

Second story, quite different, isn't it? Of a demon-possessed servant girl. I would suggest that when Luke puts this story in between the jailer and Lydia, we're invited to recognize that she too is saved and becomes part of the church. Verse 17, we meet this girl who's earned a great deal of money for her followers, for her owners by fortune-telling. She had a spirit by which she predicted the future, and she's shouting, these men are servants of the Most High God who are telling you the way to be saved. Just as we see in the Gospels, in Jesus' day, the demons present a spiritual opposition to God's kingdom. And so as Paul is bringing the good news that Jesus is the Son of God who has the power to save, the demons work through this slave girl, probably to try and discredit the message by connecting Paul with the darkness. They're speaking a form of truth, but there's definite hostility, and we see that in the Gospels with those who are possessed by demons. And it leads Paul to speak.

In verse 18, we have in the NIV that Paul became so annoyed, I think it might be more helpful to see. Paul became so grieved by her condition that he turned around and said to the Spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of her. Paul speaks with the power of the Holy Spirit, speaking directly to this evil spirit. And what do we see? We see Jesus' powerful name sets her free. We're being reminded of the mission of Jesus to directly confront spiritual forces, darkness, darkness, darkness, and sin. In this case, that have held this girl prisoner.

But now she knows Jesus truly is the Most High God who has saved her in his death and resurrection.

[21 : 28] Third story, showing us the Spirit working powerfully and saving people, takes us to this Roman prison officer, from verse 19 to verse 34. As so often happened to Jesus, as so often happens to his servants, hostile opposition begins to Paul and his message. It begins with those slave owners who've now lost their earnings. They then turned that into the claim that Paul is throwing the city into an uproar.

This opposition then leads to them being attacked, being beaten, and flung into jail. The first time we meet our jailer, verse 23, after they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stalks. We meet a jailer who's more than happy to comply with this injustice. He is quite happy to inflict the maximum amount of misery that he can on Paul and Silas, chaining them in the dungeon, in the stalks. He is a jailer with no real sense of moral decency.

Fast forward a little bit to midnight, and we find Spirit-led worship. Verse 25, about midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God. Amazing. They've been treated so unjustly, but they're not cursing people. They're praising God. They're not groaning and complaining. Rather, they're worshiping and praying. And the prisoners are listening, and we would imagine the jailer is listening also. And then suddenly, verse 26, this earthquake hits. And then the doors fling open, and the jailer has a panic. He presumes there's going to be a great prison break. It's going to make the news. His superiors are going to find out he's going to be executed. And so he concludes, the only thing to do is to kill myself. And just as he's about to do that, Paul shouted, verse 28, don't harm yourself.

We are all here. And then he asked that wonderful question. Verse 30, sirs, what must I do to be saved? Did he hear the shouts of the demon-possessed girl? Did he hear the songs in the night?

Either way, he's asking this vital question, what must I do to be saved? And he gets the clear answer, believe that Jesus is Lord. Believe that he is God with the authority of God. He is the king, the king who came into this world to live a life of perfect obedience in our place, to then suffer and die for the sins that we have committed. To be punished by God so that we might not be punished.

[24 : 45] Then raise again, showing that God was pleased with the sacrifice, so that Paul could say to the jailer, believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved. The same message is true for us.

Believe in the Lord Jesus, we are forgiven, we are saved, and we have life with God. And we see the remarkable transformation in the jailer's life. Verse 32, they spoke the word of the Lord to him and all the others in his house. At that hour of the night, the jailer took them and washed their wounds.

Remarkable, from helping to cause wounds and make those wounds even more painful. Now he's washing Paul and Silas' wounds. Why? Because of the gospel. Because now he knows by the wounds of Jesus I've been healed. His response, he wants to care for Paul and Silas. And then, as to complete the circle, then he is washed. Immediately he and all his household were baptized. Again, a sign that Jesus has washed him from sin. And look at the change of emotions. Verse 34, the jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them. He was filled with joy. Because he'd come to believe in God. Just a few hours before that, depths of despair, ready to kill himself. But now, there's this joyful feast. Why?

Because he believes, because of the gospel, because of the joy of salvation. He's now enjoying fellowship with God. And he has joy as he shares fellowship with Paul and Silas.

So he has a wonderful picture of Paul, the prisoner for Christ, who with the Spirit's power, he sets the prison officer free from spiritual chains. What can we take away from this, from these stories in Acts 16? Well, it should remind us that salvation is a work of God's grace.

[26 : 39] As we see that God, by his Spirit, is directing Paul's journey, his connections, his words. We see that same Spirit causing one at the riverside to be saved, one from the great crowd around Paul to be saved, one from the jail to be saved. We're reminded the Spirit moves where he pleases, and when he saves, it's by his grace. The Father who sent the Son to be our substitute and our Savior is the Father who sends the Spirit to open hearts. Not based on merit, but because of the gift of grace. We also are invited to recognize that the Spirit brings a personal encounter with the living God. That's remarkable. Lots of people today would describe themselves as spiritual and are searching to connect with God. We have what people are looking for.

It's found in knowing God in his Word, as God sends the Spirit to live in the lives of his people. And he works very differently in these personal encounters. For Lydia, it's like she has some information, but what she needs is more. She needs to know the Gospel. She needs to know Jesus as answer, and when she receives that, she believes. For the servant girl, she has a spiritual problem, a psychological problem, because she's been possessed, and the Spirit meets her at her point of need. For the jailer, it's a moral problem. He doesn't know what it means to be made in the image of God. He doesn't know his God, but they are all met by Jesus and all transformed. It's wonderful.

It's wonderful to recognize that the Spirit is the one who makes people willing to receive, Jesus. No one is forced to believe. No one is forced to follow, but rather, everyone here freely chooses because the Spirit made them willing. The Spirit opened all of their hearts.

Jesus says, no one comes unless my Father draws them, and that's true. But we also recognize, don't we, that there is a personal response. God works, but there's that response. We must believe in the Lord Jesus and be saved. And we also recognize this, that the Spirit works in such a way to save people and then to unify people around Jesus. Here are three people who are totally different, totally different socially and culturally. They'd never be around the same dinner table, but by God's grace through the mission of Jesus and the fullness of time. They will be around the Lord's table together, most likely at Lydia's house. Because Jesus is their new center.

It's the gravitational pool of God's grace that connects them all together in Jesus. And that's great news for our mission. It's great news for us as we look around this room. We recognize that we come from different places and different backgrounds, but we can have real unity in the Lord Jesus and by His Spirit.

[29 : 58] And it's great news for us as we look out, as we look out into our city and its streets. We have this great task, but we have a great missionary God who still works by His Spirit, and He gives us His Spirit, and He sends us to be witnesses. He directs us into His Word, and then He directs us out to love our neighbors. The Spirit acting powerfully to bring the good news of salvation, because God loves to save men, men, women, boys, and girls, and all for His glory. Let's pray together. Father God, we thank You for the powerful personal work of Your Spirit. We thank You for the direction that He brings.

Thank You that He speaks to us from Your true and living Word. Help us to be guided, to be led into holiness and obedience. We thank You that the Holy Spirit powerfully works to bring salvation. We thank You for every testimony.