Building Jesus' Church

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[0:00] chapter 16 and verse 1. So he came to Derby and then to Lystra where a disciple named Timothy lived. His mother was a Jewess and a believer, but his father was a Greek.

The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, but they all knew that his father was a Greek.
As they traveled from time to time, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.
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. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.
So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night, Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, come over to Macedonia and help us.
[1:13] 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.

Okay, may the Lord bless the reading of his word. Hey, well, we'll see, as we've been seeing, Paul's missionary journeys are going to continue, and we'll see that it's Jesus who keeps building his church.
You know, the big picture of Acts is that Jesus, before he returns to heaven, gives the spirit to the apostles, so they will continue the work of Jesus in building God's kingdom.
And in this little section, we see the guiding of Jesus through his spirit in both of these stories. In the first five verses, Paul is guided to do something that maybe as we start to think about it, is kind of surprising, so that Jesus, the Messiah, can be preached to the Jews.
And then in the second, and again, it's perhaps surprising to us, Paul is forbidden from preaching in certain parts of the world by the spirit of Jesus so that ultimately the good news could reach Europe for the first time.
[2:20] So we're seeing that Jesus builds his church, and he does it in his way, with his timing, and it's all for his glory. So let's think about those first five verses and think about this idea that Jesus' mission makes the gospel central.

A long time ago, a Christian pastor by the name of John Newton described the apostle Paul in this way. He described him as an iron pillar in essentials, but a reed in non-essentials.
And this is one of those places where we see that. In chapter 15, he had the wisdom and the conviction to say that we cannot bend the truth. People are saved by grace alone, so we cannot for a second give people the impression that circumcision saves, but he also has the love and compassion to say, do you know what?
We can bend in our mission so that the glory of God's love can be shared. Paul's heart is that he wants to make followers of Jesus wherever he goes.
He wants God to be glorified through his son getting glory. He's not trying to convert people to his tribe or to exercise his freedoms instantly.
[3:41] And we see that very clearly in these first five verses. And we see it in how and why Paul has Timothy undergo this Jewish right of circumcision.

Having just argued at the Jerusalem council that a person doesn't need to be circumcised to be saved, he then has Timothy circumcised for mission. So that's something we need to think about. We'll do that in a couple of minutes. But first of all, let's introduce ourselves to Timothy. What do we know of him from the first couple of verses? A disciple named Timothy lived in Lystra, whose

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mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek.
The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. So Timothy comes from a mixed race family, a Gentile father, a Jewish mother. According to Jewish law, he is a Jew, but he's not been circumcised.
So this either says his father didn't want him to be raised Jewish, perhaps sort of similar to what Andy was sharing with us, or his mom was not very faithful as a Jew and didn't bother to have Timothy circumcised.
[4:51] But at some point, most likely on Paul's first missionary journey, Timothy and his mom are converted. They come to faith in the Lord Jesus. Chapter 14 tells us of Paul's visit to Derby and Lystra.

And what we discover of Timothy is he's well thought of as a follower of Jesus. Paul makes a decision in verse 3. Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area.
But they all knew his father was a Greek. So as Andrew was reminding us, he's now separated from his partner in ministry, Barnabas. He's taken Silas along with him, but it seems he wants to take another mission partner, Timothy, perhaps to train up this young Christian man in mission, and he has him circumcised.
And again, we'll come back to that in a moment. But the result of their travels is so encouraging. Verse 4 and 5, as they carry about the verdict of the Jerusalem council that faith in Jesus alone is enough for salvation.
You're saved by trusting in God's grace, not in circumcision. What are we told? We're told the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in number. There's strength, there's stability, there's numerical growth as the gospel is confirmed.
[6:15] So, given that's the case, I wonder if anybody is a little bit surprised by what's happening in chapter 15 and what's happening in chapter 16.

Chapter 15, there's that battle against, you know, keep the law, be circumcised to be saved, and then here, Timothy is told to be circumcised. So we need to think, why is that?
So some people have suggested, here is Paul being inconsistent, or here is Paul operating out of fear. He has certain convictions, but because he's fearful of the Jewish community, he goes against those convictions and has Timothy circumcised.
But that's not it. When you read Paul's letters, when you read of his experience, you discover just how bold he is as a servant of Jesus. What we have here is that Paul cares, first and foremost, for people's salvation.
His big dream is that people will come to faith in the Lord Jesus. His concern is for the glory of Jesus and the extension of his kingdom.
[7:28] So what he's doing here is he is taking a barrier away to gospel proclamation. If I circumcise Timothy, then it will allow him to speak to a Jewish audience.

Sometimes we have that about certain people. We look at them or we hear them and we have a certain amount of distress. His teeth are too white or his hair is too slick.
He's too loud. He's too polished. And we make judgments. For a Jew, they wouldn't listen to Timothy because they would simply say, he's unclean. He's not one of us.
Therefore, we won't listen to his message. And so Paul, for the sake of the gospel, had Timothy circumcised. John Stott, I think, puts it well.
He says, what was unnecessary for acceptance with God, you know, Paul has argued it's not necessary to be circumcised, to be right with God. So what was unnecessary for acceptance with God was advisable for acceptance by some human beings.
[8:38] Timothy being circumcised is not a salvation issue. It's a stigma issue. If Timothy is circumcised, then he's much more likely to be effective in mission to the Jews and he'll also be used in mission to the Gentiles.

Now, Paul could have said, listen, Timothy is free not to be circumcised. But he doesn't use that freedom and he encourages Timothy to not exercise that freedom for the sake of the Jews who had weak consciences.
Because his goal is not that we exercise freedom, his goal is that the gospel is known and heard and that the Messiah is announced.

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We see some examples of that in mission history. If you've ever read the story of Hudson Taylor, you'll know that he shocked the churches in the UK by going to China and adopting Chinese dress and getting the Chinese top knot in his hair.
But, although he shocked people at home, he opened a door for the gospel in China. It's one of the things I think we would do well to pray for missionaries to have that wisdom to be able to understand the culture so as to speak the gospel into it.
[10:05] Paul knew the Jewish culture and he knew a circumcised male would be a better preacher than an uncircumcised Jewish male. Again, missionary story.

There's a wonderful book written by Don Richardson, a missionary who died last year, called Peace Child. Don and his wife were working in tribal island communities in Indonesia.
And he was finding the going really tough in terms of sharing the gospel. No sign of anyone giving Jesus a hearing. In fact, they thought Jesus was weak. They thought Judas was the hero of the gospel story actually.
And so he was faithfully trying to communicate the gospel, trying to find a way in until he discovered this. There were three tribes at war, constant fighting, and eventually they decided, somebody made this remarkable move, one of the chiefs gave a newborn, his newborn child, to one of the rival chiefs in order to raise the child.
The child was given adopted in order to end the fighting, became known as the peace child. The idea being if a man is willing to give his child to his enemies, then that's a man who can be trusted, therefore I should stop fighting with him.
[11:32] And Don Richardson, sort of looking into the culture, realized here's a connection with the gospel. And so spoke about God the Father giving Jesus as the peace child, to make us as enemies into friends, securing our forgiveness, that the God that he spoke of could be trusted because he was willing to give his son to his enemy.

But he was looking to understand the culture and to speak into it sensitively. And I think that's one of the things that we learn from the book of Acts, the importance of thinking to ourselves, am I trying to win someone for Christ first and foremost, or am I also, maybe even without meaning to, saying, but to do that you must also be a lot or a little like me.
It's not what we see from Paul. He makes the gospel central. There's that wonderful section in 1 Corinthians 9 where we discover Paul's ministry model.
He says, I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do this for the sake of the gospel. So Jesus' mission makes the gospel central and we see that in Paul's experience.
And then we come to that surprising little section, verses 6 to 10 where we see Jesus by his spirit closes some doors and opens other doors for mission.
[13:16] So let's remind ourselves of what's happening. Verse 6, Paul and his companions traveled through the region of Phrygia and Galatia having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.

When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troa.
So Paul's mission here hits a roadblock not once but twice. So he's got this plan A, natural plan A, let's carry along the Roman road called the Via Sebast, 150 miles southwest towards Asia, towards Colossae, towards Ephesus, but the spirit says, no.
So then they have another plan. Well, let's head north to the non-Roman territory of Mysia. And again, the spirit of Jesus says, no. So they've only got one other road left to take.
So they head northwest on the road that eventually leads them towards Troas. And what we discover is that while they're on that journey, verse 9, during the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, come over to Macedonia and help us.
[14:30] God gives him this vision. And 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. So Paul talks to his colleagues and they all decide that this is confirmation that we should go over to Macedonia to share the gospel.

And we'll see next week the gospel entering into Europe. But what are we seeing here? We're seeing that Jesus gave his spirit to the church, church, we're seeing that the spirit directs the mission of the church, and the spirit is directing Paul in different ways so that in God's purposes the

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gospel would come to Europe.
So the spirit works by closing some doors, by saying to Paul, no, you're not going there, and by opening other doors. He prohibits and he permits.
And it's interesting that we're not told how the spirit does that. But as we look through the book of Acts, we can learn certain things about God's guidance and mission that we see in Paul's own experience.
We discover the spirit uses various methods in order to guide his church in mission. Sometimes that's through circumstances.
[15:55] So we don't know this, but it may have been that Paul tried to go there, but the authorities were hostile. There was a Jewish community that chased them off. It could have been that he had an illness.

So those things happened in other situations. So circumstances are part of the way that the spirit works to guide the mission. Perhaps it was simply a sense of conviction.
Perhaps they went to go and then they really had a feeling that this wasn't at the right place at the right time. We find in other times in the book of Acts there's a message of a prophet that comes and the apostles will respond to that and will change their plans, will change direction because they feel a sense of conviction from one of the prophets.
In verse 9 we can certainly say that God's voice, God's words, is guiding them in the sense that he's given them this vision. And then in verse 10 we can also say that Paul's mission is guided in part by discussing with other people.
So there are circumstances, there are convictions, there is the word of God, there's other people all playing their part in how God by his spirit directs the church and mission.
[17:18] And when we think about guidance, sometimes we can make guidance seem like a really sort of supernatural out there kind of thing that we have to wait for sort of voices from the sky or great visions, but we're discovering, and we find this to be true in the Bible, that God most often works through those normal means.

In our own lives, he gives us common sense, he gives us other people to discuss things with, he gives us our own sense convictions about what is the right thing to do.
He gives us the word of God to give us direction and the gift of prayer. He gives us a fellowship of God's people to together seek to understand how God is leading and guiding.
But what we see in Paul's experience is the spirit uses various methods as he directs his mission.
And in that, and we see this from Paul's experience, that that experience will not always be comfortable.
Trying to understand God's guidance, especially when we feel God is saying no or not now, can be hard, can be frustrating at times. We can be confused, we can feel really compelled to do a certain thing, but it becomes clear that it's just not meant to be right now, and that can be a hard place to be.
[18:44] It made me think of the Dr. Zeus story, Oh, the places you'll go, if you know that book, you'll know that there is a place called the waiting place, a useless place where everyone is just waiting.

And sometimes we can feel like that, there can be a real sense of burden, that we want to do something for God, but the opportunity just isn't there, and that's a really hard thing to deal with.
I remember that in my own experience. I finished studying up at the Highland Theological College, and I spent months pushing at doors trying to find the right ministry opportunity in the UK, in Europe, in various places.
And it was a really difficult time, lots of sleepless nights, lots of confusion as to where is the best place to go, and ultimately, as God was saying stay and learn some more.
But it was a hard time of wrestling, and that can be hard when we find that our timing and God's timing don't naturally align. Trusting the sovereign plan and the sovereign timing of God is the right thing to do, but it's not easy.
[20:02] Sometimes we can feel confused. We might feel confused. Why didn't God allow Paul to preach the gospel in Asia? And it's important for us in those moments to be able to pull back and to remember God's never confused.

The sovereign God has a perfect plan for his people, for his church, for his mission. Sometimes it helps to learn from history. Church history shows that God knows what he's doing.

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I discovered this week that David Livingston, a famous missionary to Africa, he actually really wanted to go to China. And God didn't allow him to go to China, but instead sent him to Africa. Maybe you've heard the story of Gladys Aylward and her incredible ministry to abandoned children and to women in China. Well, Gladys Aylward had been rejected by all the missions, sending missionaries to China.
She wasn't smart enough, she wasn't well educated enough, she'd never be able to learn the language and culture. But God had his plan. Paul was forbidden by Jesus from sharing the gospel for weeks.
[21:12] And we're not told how Paul fell about that, but we do know that in God's providence, that was the way for the gospel to come to Europe. God knows what he is doing.

And we also see from Paul that when a door of opportunity opens, we should go for it. when they have that sense that they should go to Macedonia, and we'll get here next week, we'll see what happens when they arrive in Philippi.
It's a remarkable story. He's going to meet a girl who's held prisoner by men and by evil spirits. We're going to find him chained up in prison, but he's still going to be singing hymns of praise. Why? Because he knows that he's following the call of Jesus. He knows he's walking in obedience. So he's learning to be content because God had called him there.
So if we're here today and we feel like we're in the waiting place, where doors are closing rather than opening, we encourage you to take heart in the good purposes and the perfect timing of God that we'd be able to submit to him and to serve now with patience while we wait for what doors might open.
[22:33] But then on the flip side, if God is opening a door of opportunity for useful service in a friendship or in a ministry capacity, take confidence in the gospel.

Take confidence in the power of the Spirit. Take heart in the fact that God is concerned for his glory and God's able to use and chooses to work through the church, chooses to work through his people for his glory.
Remember from this story that God uses something surprising people and he uses surprising providences in order to extend his mission.
So, perhaps for us we can think for ourselves, what will it mean for us this week or in these relationships that we have to be flexible in order for the gospel to be shared?
To think, how do I need to respond to the way that the Spirit is guiding me today or how he's been guiding us in the last number of weeks?
[23:41] And let's remember that Jesus is the one who is the head of the church and who is continuing to build his church and to do that through us.

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