

Open doors and open hearts

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[0:00] This morning, if I stood up to preach to you in a chicken costume, that would be weird, wouldn't it? You might be distracted. You might wonder what's going on. Is he okay?

But I say all that whilst wearing a funny hat and sunglasses. I'm going to take them off because they're also distracting the irony of the situation. And I say that because this passage helps us to see that we don't want anything to get in the way of people hearing the gospel, of hearing the Bible taught, of hearing God speaking. And it might just be that if I was wearing something funny like a chicken costume or wearing that hat and sunglasses, you might be distracted. You might not be able to listen as well. And that's what's going on in this first bit of this reading. We're going to see three big points from each of the three sections. And this is the first big point. We don't want anything to get in the way of people hearing the gospel.

And Paul, we've seen in Acts, has been on his first missionary journey. He took Barnabas with him and they preached to many people. They told them of the gospel, of the good news that Jesus saves.

And many people became Christians. God worked greatly through them. They had many, we might remember this, open doors of opportunity. People ready and willing to listen. And their hearts were changed. And Paul wants to make sure that that continues to be the case. And we saw last week there was a sad split between him and Barnabas. But both of them have gone off with other people to continue to preach the gospel. And we're going to follow Paul as he begins his next journey.

And one of the things he does on his next journey is hears about a chap called Timothy. Have a look at this in verse one. Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer, but whose father was Greek. Paul hears of Timothy for the first time. Now, can anybody tell us where in the Bible might we have heard of Timothy? Where else elsewhere in the Bible? Does that make sense? Where might we have heard of Timothy? Mark? Yes, one and two Timothy.

[2:48] He's got his own books, as someone also said. One and two Timothy. These are letters that Paul writes to Timothy, who we're first meeting in Acts 16. They have a really special relationship with one another. It's like Paul is his spiritual father. And he encourages Timothy and trains him up to serve God's church. But something odd happens between Paul and Timothy in verse three. And as we were reading, we might have thought, why verse three? Let me read it to you. Paul wanted to take him along on the journey. So he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area. For they all knew that his father was a Greek. And that might strike you as odd in different ways. You might just think that's just gross. But you might also think that seems odd because the last few weeks we've heard Acts 15 preached.

And we've seen that some Jewish believers said, those Gentiles over there, they can't be saved because they've not been circumcised. As in, they've not followed the rules of God properly. But Paul said, that's not an issue. Don't place unnecessary rules on people, but Jesus saves by grace alone.

We don't have to follow different rules in order to become Christians. We trust in Jesus alone to save us.

And so what we read here seems odd. Is Paul going against what he's said and stood up for in Acts 15?

[4:39] Well, no, I don't think he does. And the reason is chicken costumes. The reason is we don't want anything to get in the way of people hearing the gospel.

And so Paul does this in order that everyone who they preach to will listen to them. But nothing's going to get in the way. That's what Paul wants to make sure. No barrier. Gets in the way of people listening to the Bible's message. Gets in the way of people listening to the gospel. Timothy will be circumcised. So that nothing gets in the way of people hearing their gospel message. In case you're not sure I'm right, there's a verse in Galatians which talks about another chap, Titus.

And Paul says of him, Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was Greek. He was Greek. He didn't have a Jewish background. But Timothy does.

[6:18] And so those Jewish people, they could say, well, he has a Jewish background. But Paul says, don't worry, it's been sorted. Because we don't want anything to get in the way of people hearing the gospel.

Now, you might go to some churches, and I've known some, that say, if someone's preaching, they need to wear a suit.

Otherwise, we won't listen to them. And if I was going to a church, and that was the case, to preach, then I would make sure I wear a suit. Not because I believe I need to, but if that's going to stop people from listening to the Bible's message, I'll do it.

But I might, if I was going there for a while, want to encourage them that I don't need to do that. But how does this work out at Calvary Church? Well, this morning, we were in an all-age service.

And our second Sundays of the month, they may feel a bit different. And we may think, not sure this is really what we should be doing. Why do we have to change things a little bit?

[7:24] Well, we're doing things a bit differently because we want everyone to be able to hear the gospel. We don't want anything to get in the way of people hearing the gospel.

And so we pray that God would help the smallest to the biggest here. Hearing the Bible's message. And we're going to see more of this in a moment.

But firstly, we're going to sing our next song, If Christ is Mine. If Christ is ours. We don't need any more. We don't need to follow different laws.

We trust in Him. And we receive so many blessings of salvation. So David's going to help us to sing this song together. Amen.

Amen. Thanks, Jorim.

[8:22] Before we look at this some more, I've realized I forgot probably the most important announcement for this morning. That was, if you haven't heard, Shamar and Evelyn, dear members of our church, had a baby girl born this week on Monday.

And she's been given the name Thelma. So we rejoice in that news. And before we continue to look at Acts 16, it feels appropriate that we say a prayer for Shamar, Evelyn, Duncan, and now Thelma. So let's pray together. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you that we can rejoice together in new lives. Thank you for the new life that you have given to Shamar and Evelyn and Duncan and the rest of their family.

Thank you for little Thelma. Thank you for the new life that we pray for her.

[9:57] Thank you, little ones. Bless them and look after them and provide all that they need for that little family. And we are asked now as we continue through Acts 16 that you would continue to be speaking to us all, young and old, this morning.

And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Well, I want you to imagine for a moment, I realise I left this here, that you've been given a ticket to Legoland.

Legoland in Windsor. And you're very excited. And you're very excited. You make plans. You decide what rides you're going to go on. Excited that you can buy something in the gift shop maybe. Someone's given you this gift of a ticket and you've got plans. But then someone comes and...

And I wasn't sure if I should do this. Rips up your ticket. And you can't go anymore. And that would be really sad.

[11:11] On the board, we see Paul's plans. And we read them in this passage. He's going to go to Asia and Bithynia to preach the gospel there.

But it's like God comes along with a giant rubber and rubs out Paul's plans and says, No, you're not going there. I think it would feel a bit like someone ripping up your ticket to Legoland.

You'd be like, Well, what's wrong with me going to Legoland? And Paul is probably thinking, What's wrong with me going to Bithynia or to Asia? I'm going to preach the gospel there.

Why can't I go there? Well, that's where God is leading them. We might have said we even circumcised Timothy so we could go there.

What's wrong with us going there? Well, nothing. But it's not what God's got planned for them. And so the big point in this passage is this.

[12:23] We can make our plans. But only God opens the doors. We make plans. We make plans all the time. We planned on Friday to eat dinner.

We're going to have chicken Kievs and mashed potato and vegetables. And we turned on the oven. And it didn't work. It didn't heat up. Half an hour later, it was still cold.

So we had to make different plans. Don't worry. We still ate dinner. We make our plans. But they don't always work out, do they?

And that happens with Paul here. So in verse 6, we see this. 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.

It was like a big no-entry sign went up to them when they would try to go to Asia. So they make different plans. Verse 7, when they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.

[13:38] So again, a big no-entry sign comes up. You can't go there, Paul. So what's going on? How do they know that this wasn't God's plans for them?

Well, we're not actually told. But perhaps Paul had a strong feeling that they shouldn't go. Perhaps they tried to get there, but something stopped them.

From getting there? It seems as Luke looks back on this, and what Paul tells him about it, they see the Lord was at work.

The Lord was directing their footsteps, and actually it wasn't right for them to go to those places. But they are told to go somewhere by the Lord.

Have a look at verse 9. During the night, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia standing and begging him, come over to Macedonia and help us.

[14:40] So after Paul had seen the vision, we got ready to leave at once for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel there. So they were told not to go to these places, and instead they needed to cross the sea and go over to Macedonia, which means they're now in Europe, which is very exciting.

The gospel's coming to Europe. But this shows us that we can make our plans, but only God opens the doors.

It wasn't right for us to go to Bithynia or to Asia. That wasn't God's plan. And that's what the Lord does for each of us. Little Thelma, who was born this week, didn't choose to arrive in Brighton, but her parents have chosen to live here.

And so the Lord has, for some reason, brought her here, and we're looking forward to meeting her. For those of us who are older, perhaps we never dreamed we'd end up in Brighton, but maybe through a conversation, or because work has come up here, or perhaps we had dreams of what university we were going to study at, and we thought, oh, somewhere in London, or Oxford, or Cambridge, we'd love to go there, but somehow you've ended up in Brighton instead, which is great.

Brighton's the best place you could be. But perhaps you never planned to be. Perhaps it wasn't on your top lists of places you'd like to move to, but now you're here.

[16:20] And the Lord's brought you to this church. He directs our steps. He directs where we should go. Calvary Church, over the last, I reckon, 10 years or so, the church has thought about who would continue with the

ministry here when Phil retires.

What would happen? And so, I believe this is sort of what happened. Plans were made for an assistant pastor to come, and I think there were a few people interested, but nothing came of it. And then, as the years went on, someone more experienced, looking for someone more experienced to come and take on the role. Meanwhile, I was at Bible college up in London, and I applied for countless jobs as an assistant pastor or a youth worker, thinking, that's what God wants for me.

But none of those happened. And so, I moved back nearby, back home, and I started meeting some people who told me about Calvary Church.

So, Angela, she's not here this morning, but ended up on holiday with her in the Lake District. I'll tell you about that later. But she told me about Calvary Church. And she said, I think you'll like it.

[17:42] Come and try it. And then, Vicar over in Hove said, have you thought about Calvary Church? And I said, no, I don't know much about it.

And so, maybe you should just go along one Sunday. What harm can it do? And then I meet Stephen Brenda, and they take interest in me. And then, another Vicar in Hove says, Calvary Church, and look where we are today.

Wasn't in my thinking, wasn't in my plans, wasn't in your thinking of plans, but it's in God's plan. And we submit to His plan. Because we can make our plans.

But only God opens the doors. Perhaps our plans make sense to us. I wonder, any younger ones? Do any of you have an idea what you want to be when you grow up?

Isaac's hand was straight up. Yes. An archaeologist or geography person. That sort of fits in your flag.

[18:50] Yes. Or a missionary. Nice. Other Isaac? I've got two of it, so I've got archaeologist, missionary, and I want to be an artist.

Archaeologist, missionary, or artist.

Cool. Otis. I want to be a footballer. A footballer. Wow. Bethany? PE teacher. PE teacher. Nice. Gracie? Yeah. Teacher.

Has Arabella got her hand up? No. No. Oh, Samuel. A conservationist.

Conservationist. Footballer or an artist. Footballer or an artist. Well, so much variety, and I'm sure we could go on, and I'm sure adults could tell you what they wanted to be when they were growing up.

I can tell you, I want to be about four different things. I want to be a train driver, a bin man, a... I love watching the bin lorries.

[19:48] A postman, or a pastor, and so far, only one of those things has happened. We need to be prepared that our plans may not be God's plans.

And so, think about a school. So, some of you might be looking ahead to what secondary school you might be at, so others might be there already. Maybe you don't really know yet where it's going to be.

Maybe you have an idea where you want it to be, but when it comes to finding out, we need to trust God that He knows where we should be.

And we'll trust Him with that. Trust Him that He'll help us as we go there. For others of us, we might be looking for work. We know there's quite a few in our church family looking for work at the moment, work to...

the things that they've studied in, wanting to do that as a job. And for some reason, whatever reason we don't know, that hasn't come yet.

[20:54] And so we keep praying and we need to keep trusting that God has His purposes and God will make His plan for us come about. We don't know what it will be yet.

We say, I haven't got this job yet, but I know that God is good and He has plans for me. Some of us, maybe, as those growing up, might think, look to the future and think, I want to be married.

I want to have children and things like that. But maybe, for whatever reason, and painful it might be, when we get there, that might not be what God has for us.

But we do know that if we're following the Lord Jesus, He has good plans for our lives and we know that the Lord Jesus loves us more deeply and sticks by us more faithfully than any person ever will.

We don't know what's in our future, but we make our plans and we trust that only God can open the doors for us.

[22:05] We don't know what's in store. And Paul and his team, they didn't know what was in store, but turns out he was leading them to Macedonia. Maybe that never even came on Paul's mind to go there, but that's where he wants them to be.

And so he's got to trust that's God's purposes for him in this. And I say all this as someone who likes to make a plan. Look at the church diary for the next few months and you'll see everything's planned out for what we're going to preach on.

But as we know, that may not always happen. So we need to trust God. We need to be prepared that our plans may not be his plans. By the way, before we sing again, just interesting to note, look at verse 3, sorry, verse 10.

After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave. And that we suggests to us that Luke, who's writing Acts, is now with Paul and his team.

That's pretty cool. So we can spot the we's and us as we read through Acts because he'll come up a bit more. But for now, we're going to sing again before we look at some more.

[23:18] We're going to sing this life I live is not my own. We learned this last week. I think we sang it very well. So we're going to sing again. And verse 3, verse 2 even, seems appropriate.

With every footstep that I tread, what mysteries he has in store. I do not know what lies ahead, but I know that he has gone before.

He knows the plans for our future. So we trust him in that. So we'll stand and sing. Wonderful. We're going to have the final section of Acts 16 read to us.

I think Lily is reading this for us. Acts 16, 11 to 15. Thank you. Thanks, Lily.

Thanks to all our readers, Anya, Jerome, and Lillia for reading the Bible to us. We appreciate that. So we've seen so far that we don't want anything to get in the way of people hearing the gospel.

[24:23] And we've seen, I can't remember what we've seen, that we can make our plans, but only God opens the door for us.

God's plans come to fruition. So what's the final big idea for us? We can tell people about Jesus, but only God can open hearts.

We can preach at people. We can tell our friends about Jesus, but only God can work in their hearts to bring them to know him for himself.

So that's what we're thinking about in this last section. Some of us who were at a Sunday evening service recently may have heard this already. So I apologize, but hopefully it's helpful.

There were two calls of God in the world. There's the universal call. So the call that everybody around the world hears that Jesus has come to the world and he's died for people's sins.

[25:33] And you can come to know him. And then there's something called the effectual call. Don't worry about that word particularly. I mean, effective. Where God comes to someone and he calls them to himself.

So two different calls in the world. Universal call. Everybody can hear. Jesus has come into the world.

And then the effectual call, the effective call, where God comes to someone and brings them to him. It's a bit like, it reminds me of when I used to work in Primark some years ago.

I had two buttons under my tail. One was a male voice. One was a female voice. And whichever one I pressed, it would say, check out number four, please.

So that everyone in the queue could hear that the person at the front should come to check out number four and come and be served by me. But it didn't always work very well.

[26:38] Some people were daydreaming or chatting to their friends or just not listening. And so they didn't hear the call that probably the rest of the queue did hear to come to check out number four.

And so I would have to wave or shout and call them over myself. And when I did that, that was often far more effective than pressing the button under my tail.

And that's a bit like the gospel. People can hear the gospel, can come to church time and time again, but never respond until God himself calls them to be his people.

Now, why do I say all that? Because Paul here arrives in Macedonia and he has the opportunity to speak to some people.

Have a look there in verse 13. On the Sabbath, we went outside the city gate to the river where we expected to find a place of prayer. And we sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.

[27:51] So Paul has started to speak to these women who are gathered and that they're interested about God. They like to pray, but perhaps they haven't heard the gospel yet.

And so Paul is telling them of this. And we hear about one woman in particular. Verse 14. 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. So we hear about this lady, Lydia. We get told what her job is. She sells purple cloth.

Apparently, Thyatira was an area which was known for its textiles and particularly its sort of luxury textiles like purple cloth.

Purple was a material. Purple cloth was a material for the rich people. And so Lydia would have known the rich and the famous of the area.

[28:56] She would have probably been really wealthy herself, made a really good lot of money. She was a businesswoman. And that's helpful for us to hear in Acts because Luke is writing to someone called Theophilus and he himself is probably a very rich and important man.

And he's hearing that other rich and important people can hear the gospel and be safe too. The gospel is for everyone, rich and poor alike. So Lydia is listening.

She already sort of believes in God, but she's hearing of the Lord Jesus. She's hearing the gospel explained to her. And we read this at the very end of verse 14.

The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. The Lord worked in her. Paul told her the message, but the Lord now was drawing her to him.

He opened her heart so that she could come and find the Lord Jesus as her own Savior. And this changed her life.

[30:08] We see this in verse 15. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home.

If you consider me a believer in the Lord, she said, come and stay at my house. She heard, she believed, and so that changed her life. So she responded in obedience to Jesus' words to be baptized.

And that's something. When we too come to believe in Jesus, we should do as well. We should go into the pool, be dunked under the water, and show to others that we're a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We're dunked under the water. We died to our sin, and we're raised to a new life as we come back out. And if you're a Christian this morning and you haven't yet been baptized, do consider it.

Do consider talking to myself or one of the other elders here, and we'd love to help you through that process of coming to be baptized. So her life is changed.

[31:15] She responds in obedience to Jesus' words, is baptized. And not only that, but she invites people into her home, we read. Her heart changes so much that she has a spirit of generosity and thinks, what I have is from the Lord, so I'm going to bless others with it.

So come into my home, Paul, and the rest of you. You've preached the gospel to us. I've been changed. Let me serve you. And that's what happens when people hear about Jesus and when God opens their hearts.

He changes their lives. And He's done that in many of us here this morning. We sing the songs because our hearts have been changed by the Lord.

We love to hear His word because our hearts have been changed by the Lord's. And maybe even this morning, as you've been hearing the sermon, as you've been hearing the word of God, as you've been hearing God's people sing, there's something in your heart which is thinking, yeah, yeah, I want to follow this Jesus that everyone else seems to be following.

And that might just be that the Lord is working in your heart and say, why don't you, even this morning, say, Lord Jesus, I'm sorry for my sin.

[32:39] Please forgive me and help me to follow you. So, in this passage, we've seen that Timothy wants to, sorry, Paul wants to make sure that nothing's going to get in the way of people hearing the gospel.

And then we see that as he makes his plans to go and tell others of the gospel, that it's not God's plan. They can hear of it later, but it's not God's plan right now.

And we see the wisdom in God's plan because as Paul goes to Macedonia, there's this lady, Lydia, and she is ready to hear the gospel. And the Lord opens her heart and she's saved.

It's amazing what God does here. Why don't we respond in prayer? And then we'll sing a song to close. Father God, we thank you so much for your work through human beings.

Father, thank you for how you worked through Paul and Timothy and Luke and Silas, that team who you sent to preach the gospel to people.

[33:50] Thank you that they were concerned that nothing gets in the way of them hearing. But Lord, we see this is ultimately your work. And so, they trusted in your plan, obeyed your call to them to go off to Macedonia.

And we thank you that there we see how you opened Lydia's heart to come and find Jesus as her savior. And we pray that you'd help us to look to you and trust you wherever you lead us through our lives.

Help us to trust that your plan for us is good. and we pray that you'd put people in our hearts that in our lives that we can walk alongside encourage, be encouraged by and even tell of the Lord Jesus. Would you open doors, doors of opportunity for us and as you do that would you open hearts to respond in faith to Jesus. And we ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.