

Guided Down a Wrong Path?

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Date: 06 December 1998

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on December the 6th, 1998. The preacher is Phil Millman.

His sermon is entitled Guided Down a Wrong Path and is from Acts chapter 16. Leave your Bibles open at page 900.

Acts chapter 16. Let's pray. O God, we pray that you would open our hearts and our minds to your word.

May your spirit speak to us and give us clear guidance and wisdom and knowledge as to knowing how to serve you. For we ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Well, is a trouble-free life for a Christian a sign that God is guiding and that we are being obedient to his guidance?

[1 : 09] No. It hasn't been the case in my experience nor the experience from other people I know. But this is often a very perplexing issue for Christians who seek God's guidance in matters.

They believe that they have made a right decision after reading the scriptures, praying, consulting others, discerning the Spirit's leading and so on. And in making this right decision, they then head off convinced that it will be all smooth sailing ahead of them.

Well, no sooner have they head off down that path, down that road, and they run into a host of new problems which otherwise would not have arisen. Problems being things like isolation, criticism from other people, abandonment by their friends, and practical frustrations of all sorts.

And at once, they grow anxious and they cry out, God, why me? Why me? You sent me down this road and now look at the mess that I'm in. I thought that everything was going to be fine now.

Well, often in these situations, they then ask themselves, is this a sign from God that I am off track, following the path of self-will rather than the way of God?

[2 : 37] It may be so. And as Christians, we should look at ourselves in times of trouble to check whether the original guidance that we thought was right, was right.

Jim Packer, in his book, Knowing God, says, trouble should always be treated as a call to consider one's ways. But, trouble is not necessarily a sign of being off track.

Now, I would like to add to that, that if we find ourselves in times of trouble or times of difficulty, we aren't necessarily being guided down a wrong path.

Far from it. The Bible has a lot to teach people who think that trouble is a sign of disobeying God's will.

Or is only a sign of disobeying God's will. And tonight, I want to look at Acts chapter 16 to discover what Paul did when he sought guidance by God.

[3 : 46] So, hopefully you've got your Bibles open and we're looking at verses 6 through to 24. And in verses 6 to 10, the first little stanza, the first paragraph, we see that the Holy Spirit gives Paul's guidance to him.

Paul's relationship with God is activated through his relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. And we see that Paul is willing and open to being led by the Holy Spirit.

Now, Paul here, the Apostle Paul, is on his second missionary journey. And we see that his work is carried out in the region of Phrygia and Galatia because they had been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word, that is, the Christian gospel, in Asia and Bithynia, the names of the places in this passage.

Now, there's all sorts of speculation as to why the Holy Spirit prevented Timothy, Paul, and Silas from entering into Asia and Bithynia, but we're not told the reason why.

There's all sorts of speculation, but we're not told why. All we know is that they are certain that it is the Holy Spirit who has prevented them from entering these places.

[5 : 07] So, they head off and they end up in a place called Troas. And please notice here in verses 6 and 7, the prevention of them heading into Asia and Bithynia is taken as God's leading.

Although they may have thought it a good idea to go to these places, they thought it was a great idea to be going to those places, they see that it is clearly God's will not to head in this direction. And notice too what they don't do here. They don't dwell on it. They don't dwell on it and worry about the fact that they haven't got into the places that they wanted to get into.

They took this, what happened to them, as God's leading. So often, I hear of people lamenting the fact that they have been unable to get into something that they thought would be really good for them and for their Christian faith.

But surely that is to take on the mind of God in a situation and to tell God what he should be doing for me or for you and so on.

[6 : 28] Isn't part of our purpose as God's people to bring honour, praise and glory to his name rather than seeking to make our name great?

Isn't that part of the purpose of what we're here for? If we're in a relationship with God, then we will seek to serve him and follow his ways, being obedient to his will for our lives rather than us telling him what would be good for us.

Paul and the boys who were with him, the guys who were with him didn't lament the fact that they were unable to enter Asia and Bithynia.

I have no doubt that they were perplexed at what was happening to them at the time but they continued to go where they were able to and as the Holy Spirit led even though they didn't know at the time what was in store for them.

Now confirmation that what they did was right is seen in the vision that Paul has while he's in Troas they go on to Troas and we read in verses 9 and 10 During the night Paul had a vision there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying come over to Macedonia and help us.

[7 : 44] When he had seen the vision we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

Their confirmation comes in the form of what we would call a supernatural leading but Paul sees it simply as God's leading from the Holy Spirit so he and his companions they now head off to Macedonia.

I haven't put maps up for you to look at tonight because I'm not so sure if that's important what's important to see is that they're doing what God is calling them to do and they've been told to go over to Macedonia.

Now there are going to be occasions in our life when doors are closed and there is no sense of understanding at the time why it is so why is this door closed why does this keep happening to us and so on but I'm sure that there are people here probably many of you here who have been grateful years later that God has closed doors on them.

Indeed I'm grateful that he has closed doors for me. However I'm certain that we will never know this side of heaven why he has closed certain doors in our lives.

[9 : 06] We just may never know the answer to that. Well write it down in your notebook and when you get to heaven ask him he might answer that. Well the door was closed for Paul and his companions in Asia and Bithynia as a result of the Holy Spirit.

But the Holy Spirit led them to Macedonia and there are two things that we see. The first thing we see is in verses 11 through 15.

Here we see that Paul and his companions obedience to God's leading I've said leads to conversion as you read this passage. In verses 11 and 12 we see that they head out from Troas to Philippi a Roman colony and a leading city in the district of Macedonia.

Now as was Paul's custom when he went to a new place to preach the Christian gospel he would begin by proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Jews that were present within the town.

That was the obvious place for him to go to. And so the obvious place to begin is where the Jews would gather to worship. And in the case of Philippi it is the place of prayer outside the city gate or outside the gate by the river.

[10 : 30] And it was outside the town probably because the authorities would not allow the Jews to meet inside the town. And on their arrival at this place they speak to the women that are gathered there.

Now there don't appear to be any men in this group I'm not sure but it seems to suggest that the group they were with was only a small group.

Now perhaps one of the things that's going through Paul's mind is why on earth God or why on earth did the Holy Spirit send us down here? There's hardly anyone to proclaim the Christian gospel to.

But there is one woman who we read about here who is present who is from another place a place called Thyatira and her name is Lydia and she is selling purple cloth.

She's a merchant and probably this is the reason why she has come to be in Philippi at the time to sell her cloths and so on. And Lydia also happens to be a worshipper of God.

[11 : 39] And it is known that the city of Thyatira had a Jewish community in it. And there or elsewhere this woman Lydia had become an adherent of the Jewish religion.

We read in verse 14 a certain woman named Lydia a worshipper of God was listening to us. She was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth.

And then we read that the Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. Paul no doubt preached Jesus.

That's what Paul was on about. He preached Jesus which enabled her to have a complete understanding about how she could worship God fully.

And as a result she comes to faith in the risen Lord Jesus and she is baptized. And then she now prevails upon Paul and his companions to stay at her home.

[12 : 45] She wants her to come over and stay, probably to learn and so on. And why am I saying all this? Because Paul has been guided by the Holy Spirit to go over to Macedonia.

He has responded to the guidance and has proclaimed the gospel resulting in people being converted. Verse 15 says that Lydia and her household were baptized.

Now it could have been all too easy for Paul to lament the fact that there was hardly anyone to preach the gospel and that God had guided him down the wrong path and so on. And if he had done that, if he had lamented and all those sorts of things, then he would have missed the opportunity to preach the gospel where he was at at that time.

He got on with the job that he was called to do. The results being people were converted. If we believe that we have been guided down the wrong path and we go around saying that, then we risk the danger of becoming ineffective vessels for God.

We miss the opportunities that lie in front of us to serve him where we are. But if we believe, as Christians ought to, that God is sovereign, then we must also believe that God can use us in the situation he places us for his purposes no matter what becomes of it.

[14 : 23] And that's what Paul did. And God used Paul powerfully. So Paul's obedience to God leads firstly to the conversion of others into God's kingdom.

freedom. But we also see here that life isn't a bed of roses for Paul, is it? Nor his companions.

Let's look on to verses 16 through to 24. And in that, in those few verses there we see that Paul's obedience leads to more trouble.

people. These verses tell the story here of a slave girl who had a spirit of divination. And this was good for her owners because it brought them a lot of money.

And this girl who had these powers seemed to be causing a bit of grief to Paul as she followed him around. Now if Paul wasn't known before he got to Philippi, he was now, as this woman followed him around for days crying out, These men are slaves of the Most High God who proclaim to you a way of salvation.

[15 : 42] This girl is a very perceptive person but going around and being much annoying, very annoying. I'm a dad and I have three kids and it'd be a bit like having your youngest kid hassling you in the shops.

When you go up to the shops and they say, Dad or Mum, I want this. Dad, I need a drink. When you've just walked out of the shop where you had a drink or something.

I need to go to the toilet. You don't get any shopping done when you go with the kids. It's a pain. It becomes irritating. It becomes irritating.

Sorry, the kids aren't here, are they? No, that's okay. Well, Paul here was no doubt irritated by this woman, but he was also grieved at her condition.

And in his distress, he turns around and he orders the evil spirit out of this woman in the name of Jesus Christ, which it does in that very hour as we're told here in this passage.

[17:02] Although we aren't told, I suspect that this woman was relieved of her troubles and was to become perhaps a member of the Philippian church. Well, Paul's troubles are just about to begin.

What he has done has perhaps become of eternal value to this woman, but has caused her owners to become unemployed. They made lots of money out of this woman.

How are they going to earn any livelihood now that this girl is normal? This is surely going to be no earthly value for Paul or Silas.

It is trouble. Paul and Silas are taken before the authorities. They are abused by the crowds. They are stripped of their clothing.

They are beaten with rods and thrown into the innermost cell of the prison with their feet fastened in stocks. They are in trouble.

[18:08] And living out our lives as faithful Christians is sometimes going to mean trouble. There will be times due to circumstances around us when we will think that we have been guided down a wrong path.

Especially when hardship comes upon us. As I said at the beginning, we do need to re-evaluate the situation from time to time.

But if we let the hardship get on top of us, that is when the problems begin. It is okay to be upset and to be distressed about unfortunate situations that come our way.

But if we keep lamenting the situation and do nothing about getting on with it, then we just go backwards. We drift backwards. The other week I was fortunate enough to take up one of the many passions of my life and that was to go sailing in a race from Geelong to Queenscliff on a trailer sailor.

And we were doing very well. We won the start and we were first place in our division and moving away from the opposition you could see that the gap was getting bigger.

[19:27] It was a real hoot. It was really exciting. And I hadn't been racing on this particular race for three years. And the wind was good and strong and it was a great day.

Well this big gust of wind hit us and we were doing all the right things. We were easing out the sails and the boat was going faster and faster and faster and we could see we were going further ahead and I was going yee-haw sort of thing and suddenly the mast broke.

I looked up, I was looking up and the mast broke. Everything that we had worked towards suddenly came to a grinding halt.

we were coming first and we had no chance of winning now. And Rob and I were very disappointed to say the least.

But we got straight on with the job of cleaning up and getting ourselves back onto dry land again.

We didn't wallow around in our self-pity. We didn't go thinking about what could have been all day.

[20:31] We did but not all day. And if we had just wallowed around in our self-pity that would have been destructive. We probably would have ended up out at sea and sailing around the world solo or something.

But we didn't. We had to get on with the job that we had to do. And despite the setback it was a great day. And I'm looking forward to another sailing adventure if Rob will let me go on his boat again.

I think he thinks I broke his mast. We got on with the job. And as Christians we can't keep lamenting. We've got to get on with the work that's in front of us.

Now Paul would have been disappointed about not going to Asia or Bithynia. And he also would have been disappointed, very disappointed about being thrown into jail. But we can see here that he rejoiced while he was in prison.

Why? Because he knows God's sovereignty. He knows God's sovereignty. He has seen God at work in people's lives, in the place where he is now.

[21:43] He has seen Lydia and her household come to faith in the risen Lord Jesus. He has seen the slave girl freed from this bondage, this terrible bondage that she was under.

And he knows that God can use him whatever situation he is placed in, even if he happened to go down the wrong path. For Paul and for all of us, the issue of God's guidance is a matter of seeking and endeavouring to bring glory to God rather than seeking to make ourselves secure within this world.

God can and he will use us wherever he places us. And we have to be willing to be used by God.

Now is our prayer, I am your servant, take me and use me. Is that our prayer? And does that prayer mean that we are prepared to cope with the trouble that comes our way for the sake of God's kingdom and being willing to be God's servant?

If it is, then God will never ever steer us down a wrong path. God's kingdom I began tonight by speaking about trouble and I'd like to say that trouble is a reminder to each one of us as Christians that we are living in a fallen world where sin and evil abound.

[23 : 26] It's a reminder I think. And it's not necessarily an indicator that we have been guided down a wrong path. It's a reminder that Satan is there doing his darndest to convince us that God doesn't care about us.

But God does care. He loves us and he wants us to grow closer to him. And he wants us to grow closer to him through the reading of scripture, through prayer and through life's experiences as well. Jesus' promise to his disciples is that he will be with them always. That same promise is passed on to each of his followers.

When we look to the cross and put our faith in the risen Lord Jesus, there is the assurance that he is with us.

Hard times will still come our way. It's a part of life. And there will be times when we think that we have gone down the wrong path. But with our eyes fixed on Jesus, he will never guide us down a wrong path.

[24 : 48] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we look at the world and we see so many hardships and we see so many frustrations within our own lives and often we lament on it and we dwell too deeply.

Please forgive us for those times when we do that. And Lord, thank you that your Holy Spirit is with each one of your followers. And Lord, we pray that sometimes when doors seem to close or hardships come our way, we feel like we're doing the wrong thing.

We pray, Lord, that we would remember your sovereignty, what you have done for us in your Son coming into the world and dying on the cross for us. Lord, we pray that in that certain assurance that you were with us, that we would take up our cross and follow you and serve you more nearly and more dearly in the places where you place us.

May we have the courage to preach the gospel. May we have the courage to share our faith in the joy that comes from having purpose in this world.

And Lord, we pray that in the hardships and the times when we feel like we're being guided down a wrong path, that we would grow out of those experiences and grow closer to you and that we would root ourselves deeply in your love.

[26 : 33] We ask this in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen. Amen.