

Come to Macedonia

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on May the 16th 1999. The preacher is Phil Muleman.

His sermon is entitled, Come to Macedonia, and is from Acts chapter 16, verses 6 to 15. Open your Bibles to page 900 as we look at Acts chapter 16 this morning.

Thank you. Now many of you will have seen the movie Titanic, which was released a year or so ago, and was nominated for so many awards, wasn't it?

Now the very essence of the tragedy and the whole event surrounding the sinking of the Titanic have provided numerous materials for films over the years, hasn't it? And the latest version begins with the young guy who luckily wins a ticket to board this luxury liner in a poker match.

And with great excitement, this last minute turn of events sends him aboard full of anticipation about the great journey ahead, about the great country that lies ahead of him.

[1 : 13] What a lucky guy, isn't he? He's fortunate. And yet because we all as viewers know the ship will sink, because there can be no other ending to the movie of the Titanic or to the story of the Titanic.

We know that this guy is extremely unlucky. Indeed, the man who lost his ticket in the card game is the one who has had fate shine upon him, isn't it?

Well, I wonder if you have ever found your circumstances changed suddenly. All your plans go awry, they go astray. The world may interpret such chances and changes as fate, luck or mere coincidence.

But how do we see the events of our lives as Christians? Is there divine intervention in our lives? Or has God left us to flounder around as victims of circumstance?

Well, today in Acts chapter 16, we're looking at a situation which sheds some light, I think, on these questions. Now, if you recall back to last week, we've been looking through the book of Acts over the past weeks.

[2 : 24] And if you recall back to last week, the Apostle Paul had discussed with Barnabas about returning to the believers in every city where the word of the Lord had been proclaimed to see how they were doing.

Paul had completed his first missionary journey and he'd reported to the church in Jerusalem about all those sorts of things. And he wanted to go back and see how they were doing. And that seemed like a logical thing and a good idea.

But there was a sharp disagreement over who would go on this return journey. And so sharp was this disagreement that Paul and Barnabas eventually part company.

Barnabas goes off one way with Mark and Paul chooses Silas and sets out to revisit the believers he had met on their journey, on his prior journey.

He goes out to visit the churches. And we read in Acts 16 that he visits the cities where he was formerly, Derbe, Lystra and Iconium, picking up along the way Timothy and reporting to the believers about all that had happened at the Jerusalem Council.

[3 : 32] And I've gone over that ground over the past few weeks. And the result of his visits, as he visits these places, is seen in verse 5 of chapter 16.

And we find our answers. As a result of his visits, the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily. It's good news, isn't it?

It's great. And it's obvious to us as the readers, the listeners, as we listen to Acts read to us, it is obvious that God has worked mightily through Paul and his companions.

Similarly, God's providence is seen and made obvious by Luke in verses 6 to 10. We see in these verses God's sovereignty at work in the lives of the apostle Paul and his companions as he travels.

So after having ministered in the towns of Derbe, Lystra and Iconium, then God's Holy Spirit does not allow them to preach the word in the region of Phrygia and Galatia.

[4 : 41] I'll put up a map in a moment and show you all those things. So they're not allowed to preach the word, so they go through it. Now it's likely that Paul perhaps tried to go south-west to the important Asian city of Ephesus.

But again, the Holy Spirit didn't allow it. And seeing that the door to Ephesus is clearly closed, then he travelled further west to a place called Mysia.

And then he thought, oh well, I've gone far enough west. He attempted to head north to a place called Bithynia. But again, the Spirit, this time called the Spirit of Jesus, in verse 7, the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.

So Paul has a bit of a problem. He has a bit of a problem communicating the word in Asia at this time.

And it would have been frustrating for him, I think. Now the Asia that we are talking about here is central Turkey, as we would know it today. Now Paul has already ministered in Asia and he's unable to go north as a result of the Holy Spirit.

[5 : 53] So he can only go further west. And eventually, he comes to the seaport of Troas. And it's due, this is all due to the work of God that they have ended up in the place of the city of Troas.

Now Troas was a main port for travellers between Asia and Macedonia, or Macedonia, what we would call Europe today. And while Paul was in Troas, he might have sailed in several directions. He could have gone out from Troas and gone on a wonderful holiday to the Greek Isles and had a great time. It's what I would have done. He could have gone further south, west, down to Athens or something like that.

But the matter was settled by a vision in which he sees, we're told here, a Macedonian pleading with him and saying, come over to Macedonia and help us.

Come over to Macedonia and help us. And it is God who gives him this vision. And once again, we read that God is involved in the whole process, guiding the Apostle Paul each step of the way.

[7 : 05] And what happens? In verse 10, after this vision, and they consulted with him, we read in verse 10, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

Well, there's four things that I want to point out here. First of all, in verse 10, it says, we immediately, for the first time in the book of Acts, we see that the author, Luke, joins up with Paul, possibly met up with him in Troas, and he is now travelling with Paul, and Silas, and Timothy. And during that time, obviously Luke gets a lot of information, and that's how he's able to pen down all the information about, in the book of Acts. Secondly, the gospel goes from Asia.

Paul has been proclaiming the gospel throughout Asia, and the gospel goes from Asia for the first time to European soil, over to Macedonia. And I'll speak more on that in just a minute as well.

And thirdly, God has guided and directed this whole process of the gospel getting to the point that it has. And the fourth thing, on seeing God's guidance, what did they do?

[8 : 28] They acted upon it immediately. They didn't wait, they didn't think about it, they acted upon it immediately. Now we as readers should hardly be surprised at what is happening here.

Again, it's a reminder to us of the sovereignty of God, and a reminder to us as well of the power that the Holy Spirit has, that God's Spirit has, that the Spirit of Jesus has.

Right back at the beginning of Acts, chapter 1, verse 8, Jesus says to his apostles after his resurrection and just before his ascension, just before Jesus ascended to heaven, you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Well, the gospel has hit Asia, and Paul has planted churches around Asia, and it's no doubt spreading there, that people have gone off, and the gospel has been spread around Asia, and now here, we see that the gospel hits Europe, and the gospel has rapid expansion there as well.

What can we make of these verses? As I've said several times, there is no doubt the sovereign work of God being written about, being written here by Luke.

[9 : 54] I think that's a key thing. But it also raises questions for us about human planning and divine guidance. I feel sure that Paul had some plan in mind about what he was going to do when he went to revisit the believers in the churches, in Derbe, Lystra, and Arconium.

I feel sure about that. And that's the point that Luke is making. But it's apparent that God guided Paul in other directions.

God's strange providence in the way he prohibited Paul from going to places where he wanted to go, as we've seen in verses 6 to 8, shows us that while it is right for humans to plan and even have visions, those plans, no matter how great we may consider them to be, must be submitted to the will of God and even to his veto.

No matter how great a plan you may think it is, we must submit it to the will of God and even his veto. The writer in Proverbs says this, chapter 16, The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps.

Now Paul submitted to God's will and was also receptive to his voice. Though he may have had his plans, he always presented them to God and God was able to get through to him with his will because of his submissive spirit.

[11:27] Because of Paul's submissive spirit. Listen to what James says in his letter to those of us who would be planners. James chapter 4, Come now you who say, Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there doing business and making money.

Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.

Instead, you ought to say, If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that. Just as God guided Paul after a period of uncertainty, we too can trust God to guide us if we earnestly seek his will.

Paul again says in Romans chapter 8, For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

Now we cannot say for how long the time of uncertainty will last.

Paul must have been frustrated for some time as he travelled throughout the region of Asia waiting for God to give him that definitive guidance. And I'm sure that there are many here who are frustrated and uncertain about the future that God has for you.

[12:53] But in times of uncertainty in your own lives, God often does a work in you that does us a great good. It strengthens us. It builds us up.

Well, are you uncertain about God's plans for your life? Then let me encourage you to pray to him. Pray, being prepared to submit to his plans for you rather than doing what you consider to be the best option.

That's what Paul did. And in submission to God's will, God used him and God used him to take the good news of Jesus Christ to Europe for the very first time.

And we see in verses 11 through to 16 how God used Paul to present the gospel to a group of people in the city of Philippi. Now, can we just turn that map on just for a second?

It might just help to clarify all these situations. I tried to find a color map yesterday and the shop was closed because he didn't have enough business. So we've got a black and white.

[13:57] This is Paul's second journey and he goes off on himself and he starts out at Antioch and then you can see the arrows pointing west and he goes to the churches of Iconia, Derbe and Lystra and he strengthens the churches and they are encouraged and the numbers increase daily.

And then the Holy Spirit whisks them through the region of Phrygia and Galatia and they end up at a place called Mysia, a little bit further west and they try to go north to Bithynia but they're prevented by the spirit of Jesus and so they have to go west to Troas and it's right, that seaport right there, they can't go any further and he has to, you know, what am I going to do now sort of thing and that's where he has this vision and that the man from Macedonia pleading to come on over to Macedonia and help us.

So Paul, immediately with his companions, they leave there and they sail over to, well, they stop at Samothrace for a night which is an isle, they stop there for a night and then the next day they head on to a place called Neapolis which is on the mainland and then they head inward, west, for about 10 miles, I can't remember, to a place called Philippi and that's where they land, that's where they take the gospel to European soil, they land in Philippi.

Now Philippi was an important town, you can turn that off now, thanks. Philippi was an important town and verse 11 tells us that it is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and it's a Roman colony.

It was a proud city and one person writes, in Paul's own account to the Philippians, we are constantly brought face to face with the political life of Rome, in particular with the power and pride of Roman citizenship and Luke 2 makes the point here in noting the status of Philippi as a Roman colony, so it was an important place.

[16:03] Well it's in this Roman colony that Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke stay and after several days of being in the city we are told in verse 13 that they went outside the city gate on the Sabbath day where they supposed there was a place of prayer.

Now the words place of prayer was used in those days to mean synagogue but in this instance in Philippi it must have been simply a place where people met to worship God because a synagogue for it to be called a synagogue needed ten men to constitute a synagogue to be given the name of the synagogue and Luke tells us in this passage in verse 11 that there are only women gathered there.

So we can assume that there was no synagogue perhaps in Philippi. Now in verse 14 he introduces us to one of Philippi's, Luke introduces us to one of Philippi's first converts to Christianity and that is a woman her name is Lydia and Lydia is a seller of a purple cloth.

This purple cloth comes from the region of Thyatira and Thyatira was renowned for its purple cloth purple dyes I should say and Lydia the woman was presumably the Macedonian agent of this manufacturer the Thyatira manufacturer of this purple cloth and she was probably wealthy and all those sorts of things and Luke tells us that Lydia was a worshipper of God believing and behaving like a Jew without having become one.

Now Lydia becomes a Christian and we are told in verse 15 that she and her household are immediately baptised and her household would have been those who were travelling with her and then we also see at the end of verse 15 that she opens her house up for hospitality by inviting Paul and his companions to stay at her house.

[18:10] Let me go back to verse 14 because I think in it we learn something astounding about evangelism. Firstly we see that Lydia is listening to Paul.

She is listening to what he has to say as he shares the gospel message, the message of Jesus Christ, of his death and his resurrection and how through his death and faith and trust in him we can have eternal life.

Paul is sharing that gospel message and that is if you like the human dimension in evangelism we proclaim the message. But secondly in this verse we see that God here was the ultimate evangelist. God hasn't removed himself from the process of evangelism. He is present. He is right there in the thick of it. Just like he is present with Paul guiding him through Asia, through to Macedonia, to Europe.

Paul preaches the gospel to Lydia at Philippi but we read in verse 14 the Lord opened her heart.

[19:16] It was the Lord who opened her heart. And that is he opened her inner eyes to see and to believe in the Jesus that Paul proclaimed. Although the message was Paul's the saving initiative was God's.

So just as we have seen that God is sovereign in guidance we also see here that he is sovereign in evangelism. Why be for us then to say that I am responsible for converting such and such. It was me that did this. It was me that did that. It's wrong. It's wrong to say that. God is the one who is responsible. And we as God's people, have the privilege to be involved in the process of proclaiming the gospel message.

It also, I think as we look at that it doesn't mean that we should be complacent about the task of evangelism. Far from it. I think that there is a challenge for each of us here to be equipped for the task of proclaiming the gospel message.

Well there are a couple of principles about evangelism worth pointing out. Firstly, as I've already said, God is sovereign in it. God is sovereign in evangelism. It is he who opens people's eyes and enables them to respond in faith and obedience to the gospel message.

[20:42] Secondly, Paul took the gospel to Philippi. He gets there and he's looking for an entry point in which to share the gospel. In other words, he was looking for a way in to tell him people about the good news of Jesus Christ.

And we too, as God's people, need to be looking for bridgeheads in order to penetrate our communities, whatever they may be, with the message of the good news of Jesus Christ. Often the best way is to find some point of contact with someone in the community that we wish to reach. And such a point of contact is usually found through a common interest. And the interest may be related to a felt need that we know Christ can answer.

For example, it could be through sickness, insecurity, people's insecurities, through people's fears. It could be through marital problems and so on. And it can also be commonly held religious

convictions, which is what Paul looked for when he made contact in a new community. Here, he attended the place of prayer. In Philippi, he attended the place of prayer. Now in Doncaster, I've been thinking about this and a couple of entry points that we have for sharing the gospel could be with our next door neighbours.

[21 : 58] It could be through the schools, going into the schools and talking with the mums and dads and the kids and so on. It could be at our very own swimming centre, Aquarina.

It could be at the hallowed shopping centre, shopping town. Many entry points for us to share the gospel. And I'm sure there are many others that we could think of.

Now, I have recently started walking my dog. I haven't walked much this week. And it occurred to me that that's also another entry point for sharing the gospel.

Not with my dog, but with other people who might be walking their dogs, meeting other people and sharing the gospel. I mean, it's a good, healthy thing for me to do, for us all to do.

If you want to come and walk my dog, you're welcome. But the point is that maybe that can be used as an opportunity to meet with others and to share the good news of the gospel.

[22 : 57] Well, there are no doubt many things that we are already involved in without realising that they could be entry points for the gospel. Now, I want to challenge each one of us to pray that God will show us ways in which we can get alongside those we know who are in need of Christian faith.

Now, recently, many of us from the parish have studied everyday evangelism. And I think for all of us who went to the parish weekend and those who did the follow-up studies, one of the greatest challenges for us all was the challenge to pray for our neighbours and friends, looking for opportunities to share the gospel.

We need to be praying about and looking for entry points to share our faith. as well as discerning God's sovereign guidance for us in those situations.

Now, I know that many of us are scared to speak about our faith for fear of saying the wrong things. But isn't this passage, as we look at it this morning, isn't it a great reminder to us that God's spirit is with us?

God's spirit is with us. And no matter how inadequate we may feel, as we speak the Christian message of salvation, if we are faithful in its proclamation, God is the one who will open up people's hearts, causing people to respond.

[24 : 22] Isn't that a fantastic thing? To know that we have this relationship with God, that he is with us, and that he will be with us in the conversations we have with our Christian friends.

We need to be praying about that. I want to encourage us all to be praying that we would look for opportunities to share our faith with our Christian friends, with our non-Christian friends, as well as our Christian friends.

Let's pray. Our gracious God, you are sovereign. You are Lord of all. We sing your praises here this morning.

And Lord, as we read about your sovereignty, as we learn about the ways in which you guided Paul, took the gospel from Asian soil to European soil for the first time, we want to praise you.

And Lord, we want to praise you that you are alive today, and that you are sovereign in our lives.

And Lord, we pray that as we continue to submit to your will, as we bring our plans before you, one in your approval or veto, we pray that we would be clearly guided by you.

[25 : 34] We pray too, Father, that we would have courage and willingness to pray for our unconverted friends. Help us not to be afraid of sharing the gospel because we know that your spirit is with us.

And Lord, we know that you open the hearts of people. And we thank you that you have opened our hearts to hear your word. Lord, give us courage this week to think of some people and some entry points for sharing the gospel.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.