



Sunday, May 5, 2024

Speaker: Pastor John VanderWindt

Scripture: Acts 15:36-16:10

Sermon Title: Closing and Opening Doors

Transcribed by: Liza Perry



God is good. [Congregation responds: All the time.] In God's goodness, He leads us to places in his timing. Today in our story, as we continue the story of Acts, we will see how the story of the lives of the people who have just shared [testimonies were given by new members of the church before the sermon] is very similar to what's happening in Acts. So we're going to turn to Acts 15. We're going to begin at **Acts 15:36**.

So let me just recap as to where we've been. Paul has gone on a missionary journey through the area of Galatia. He has returned to Antioch. In Antioch, there were some people from Jerusalem who came north to Antioch in Syria, as opposed to Antioch in Galatia, which is where he was before. And when the people came to Antioch, they said, "Hold on, we need to change some things because you are saying that you can preach directly to the Gentiles, and they don't need to become Jews first."

So this great discussion began and then they went back to Jerusalem. And last week, we saw how they made this decision, that when God pours out His Spirit, God is doing the work. And God has said that He will pour it out on whoever He pleases. And so He does. So it was decided that you don't need to be circumcised in order to believe in God.

But there are some things that you should do to help build the unity of faith between Jews and Gentiles. And those four things were given to the apostles and they brought those back to Antioch in Syria. And that's where we are now. And so in verse 36, we are just coming off of that, and it says...

Disagreement Between Paul and Barnabas

36 Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." **37** Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, **38** but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. **39** They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, **40** but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. **41** He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Timothy Joins Paul and Silas

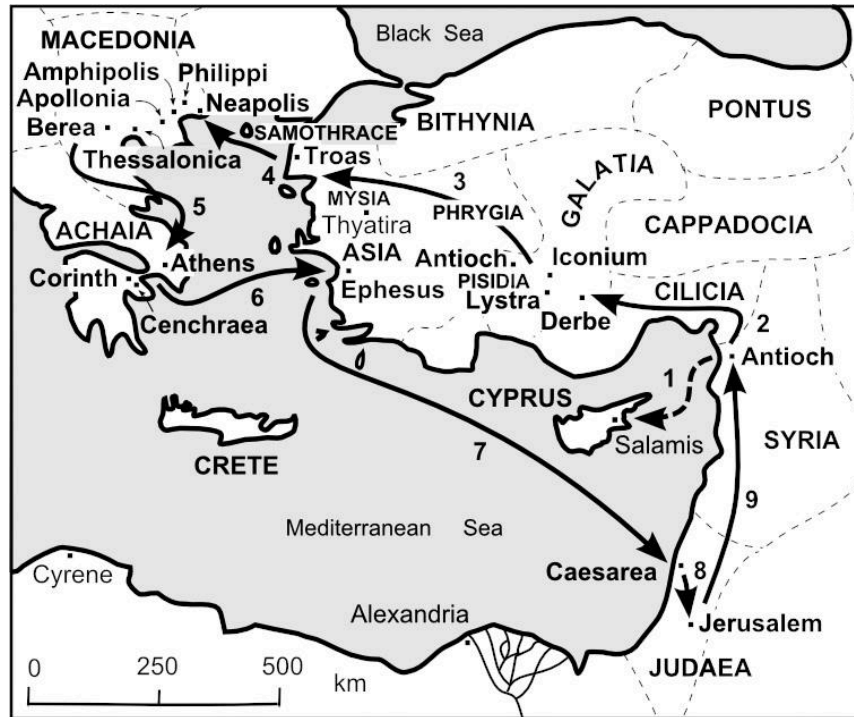
16 Paul came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was Jewish and a believer but whose father was a Greek. **2** The believers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. **3** Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. **4** As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey. **5** So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers.

Paul's Vision of the Man of Macedonia

6 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. **7** When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. **8** So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. **9** During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." **10** 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.

This is the Word of the Lord. Let's pray. Dear Lord, we thank You for Your Word. Lord, we thank You, as we've already heard this morning, that Your Word is sharper than any two edged sword. Lord, we ask now that through Your Word, You will pierce our hearts, that we may fall fully in love with You, and that You may guide us and show us what You have for us. And Lord, I pray that the words spoken may be Your words, and that nothing of me may come out because, Lord, we've come to hear from You to open our ears, open our hearts and help us to hear what You have to say. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

There are almost three separate little stories happening here but I put them together because there is a theme which I want to bring together at the end of seeing how God is at work. And it shows up similarly to the way you've heard the stories from many of the new members this morning, where God is working with different people in different ways, but brings them together to complete His will.



So let's begin with this first bit where you've got Barnabas and Saul. Saul is the one who says, "Hey, Barney, we should go back and visit all the churches where we were. We should encourage them. What do you think?" And Barnabas says, "I think that's a great idea. I think we should bring John Mark with us." His cousin. Paul's like, "Nope, that ain't happening. Do you remember what happened last time? He deserted us halfway through. We had to figure out how he was going to get back. We ended up short a person after that to do our ministry. We are not taking him. He's not ready for us." Barnabas is like, "Come on, man. He's family. Like, we've got to take him!" Paul's like, "No way, we ain't doing this." And so they split. Barnabas goes to Cyprus and Paul goes back up north to visit the other churches where he was.

Hang on to that piece. We'll come back to it later.

Second one. Paul gets to Derbe and Lystra. There's Jerusalem. They're up in Antioch. So there's the debate. And Barnabas heads down to Cyprus which is where he was from originally. Paul ends up back in Derbe, Lystra, Antioch and Iconium. These are the cities that he is in, in the second piece. Okay, so now he's in this piece and he's going back there. And as he's there, he meets a young man by the name of Timothy. Timothy, as we read in the book of Timothy, his mother taught him in the Jewish faith. His grandmother taught him in the Jewish faith. And so Timothy is a believer.

And Paul sees a belief in Timothy that he's like, "You know what? I need to spend time with you. I need to take you along with me so that you can grow and then give leadership to other people." So he gathers Timothy to go with them.

But then we read this interesting piece in **Acts 16:3**, "3 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 you're probably thinking, "Paul, If you go back just a little bit in the story, didn't you argue for the people that they didn't have to be circumcised? And so here you're arguing that people don't have to be circumcised in order to be saved. And then you say, 'Hey, Timothy, this is awesome. Let's get circumcised.'" Like, that doesn't make sense." But do you remember what James said? James didn't talk about the circumcision, but he said, "What you need to do is refrain from blood and from strangled animals." And he gave them a list of things in which he said, "In order for us to do community and to do it well, we have to understand where other people are coming from."

So basically, Paul's conversation with Timothy is this, "Timothy, when I do ministry, I go to the Jews first. You're a Jew. But they know your dad's a Greek, so they know you're not circumcised. If you're going to have any weight with them and take you seriously at all, you have to become circumcised. This has nothing to do with being safe. This has all to do with, 'How do we share the gospel with fellow Jews so it's got credibility?'" And Timothy says, "If that's the reason, I'll do it. If God wants me to do this so that I can share the gospel with other people, I'll do it." And so he does. Then Timothy joins Paul.

Then we get the next part where Paul says, "You know, I want to go over and I want to head to Asia." God said, "No, you're not going there." So then he goes a little bit further and he's thinking, "Okay, I'm gonna go up to Bithynia." And God says, "Nope, not going there." So then he ends up in Troas. And in Troas, he has a vision and it calls him over to Macedonia which is now getting into Europe. So God says, "Here's where I want you to be."

Now, when we look at all three of these stories, there is direction in each of them for listening to what God wants to happen. You've heard the saying that, "God opens doors or closes doors." Or maybe when you watch *The Sound of Music* a long time ago, you know, "When God closes the door, He opens a window." There's a lot of truth to that, but here's some of the things we need to understand. There are times when God will say, "This door is open and you can go through it." There are times when God closes a door and says, "That's not where I want you to go. You need to go in this direction over here."

And as we look at the stories today, you need to see how God uses this in each of these ways. And God can use different circumstances to either open or close doors. One of the things we have to understand is that a closed door may actually be the best thing for you. We don't often like that answer but sometimes that's what happens.

So in our first story, we've got Paul and Barnabas. Paul is saying, "Hey Barnabas, we need to go back. We need to go through this door and return to the places that we visited so that we can encourage the people." And Barnabas, you remember, is the man of encouragement. So he says, "We need to take John Mark with us." Paul is like, "He's not ready. He's still too young. He left last time. Don't you remember?" And Barnabas is challenged because suddenly this becomes an emotional thing for him. This is family and emotion is taking over in this place and he's like, "No, we've got to do this for him." He's gotten to this place where his emotion has tried to determine where he is going. And Paul saying, "God is speaking clearly that it is not time for him yet."

Later on, we read that Paul actually calls for John Mark. And John Mark goes with him and does great things for him. But at this point, that debate became so heated that they split. And you're thinking, "How can that be? Barnabas is the one who helped Paul get established. And now Barnabas and Paul are splitting."

Now interestingly enough, there are times when God closes the door and we try to force our way through it. So Barnabas goes home and he goes over to Cyprus, and he witnesses in Cyprus. But you'll also recognize that Barnabas is not spoken of again in the book of Acts. And it's also an interesting piece here, when you read at the end, it says in **Acts 15:39**, "**39** They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus." He just went. Barnabas chose Cyprus and left commended by the believers to the grace of the Lord. Barnabas just left. Paul, as he went on his return to the vision of visiting the churches, he was prayed for and he was sent by the church to do the will of God. And so he went.

The second story with Timothy. Timothy is a young person as well. Timothy is in this place where he is saying, "I want to serve God and I don't know where to go. So I'm standing at the door saying, 'Lord, do I go here? Do I go here? Where do you want to lead me?'" And Paul says, "God is calling you to come with me." So Paul takes him by the hand, leads him through the door and says, "Let's do this together, as God is leading." And he makes that choice.

But then they start leading and it says, "They plan on going east." It says in Acts 16:6 that, "The spirit kept them from going." The second part there says, "... having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia." So they travel the other way.

Paul understood when God closed the door. And we would see years later that God's Word gets spread out into the Asian area. But now is not the time. God said, "I've closed this door for you." And then it says that they wanted to go north to Bithynia but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. And so they went to Troas and their God spoke to them again through a vision. But notice what it says in Acts 16:10, "10 After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia..." Who's the "we?" This is where Luke joins. Luke is the writer of Acts and he has now joined Paul in Troas. There are many scholars who believe that the thing that kept Paul from going north into Bithynia was his illness. That he was deathly sick. And so he called Luke, the doctor, to come and be with him.

That raises a challenging question. If Paul was thinking of preaching the gospel and wanting to go here but was so sick that he couldn't go... is that God's way of keeping him from going? It just says that the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. Could it be? That there are things in our life that happen where we look at it and go, "This looks like it's the right thing for me to do. This looks like it's in God's will. How come this door won't open?" And God is saying, "No. It's not the right time." Or, "No, I have something else for you."

As we listened to the stories this morning, did you hear the theme of God's calling and leading through it all? How God has been opening doors? But did you also hear of people talking about doors that were slammed shut? And I think in each of our lives, we realize as we look back, it's much easier to see it than when we're in that moment. But as we look back, we see how God will open a door for us at God's time. When it is God's time and when God has the other things in place.

Then the door opens. As we will see as we travel on with Paul, he goes into the area of Macedonia and ends up in Philippi. We'll see how God has been preparing people to receive God's word in that space. But if Paul had gone there another time, it probably would have been fruitless. In each of our lives, God is preparing us for ways of service in His Kingdom.

Ugochi talked about that. She talked about how God was giving her service in the kingdom and when her mind got into other areas, she was quickly reminded, "You need to seek what God is doing and go through the door that God is opening up for you. Don't try to create doors on your own." Anne shared about that with her prayers that didn't happen but then afterwards, she sees how God opened other doors for her. And one of those doors was an introduction to Romer. And when you heard Romer's story, you heard how Romer was introduced by playing the drums at church, and God worked through each of those moments. But imagine if Anne had met Romer before he played drums in church. Romer wouldn't have introduced Anne to God. Who knows how it would have ended up.

God opens doors. But as I said earlier, God also closes doors. But here's one other place which you need to see a connection in this story as well in the stories of the people that we welcome today. There is Barnabas. There's Paul. There's Timothy. And you could maybe include Luke. But Howard Hendricks says this, "Every disciple needs three types of relationships in his life. He needs a 'Paul' who can mentor him and challenge him. He needs a 'Barnabas' who can come alongside and encourage him. And he needs a 'Timothy,' someone he can pour his life into." I think that's a good question for each of us today. Can you identify a Paul in your life? One who has been mentoring you? Can you identify a Barnabas? One who has come alongside you and encouraged you? Can you identify a Timothy? Someone that you've poured your life into or are pouring your life into to know about God? God feeds us so that we can feed others and share His Word with others.

So I'm going to invite the praise team to come on back up just as we finish off here. And I want to remind us of how we are called to live our lives as a life of service. Howard Hendricks also said this, ""You are able to do many things. But be sure you find the one thing you must do."

Find the door that God is opening for you. And if the door is closed, then maybe spend time in prayer and say, "Lord, what is it that I need to learn? And where is it that you want to lead me?"

Join me in prayer. Dear Lord, we thank You that You direct our lives in such a way that it is to honor You and Your Kingdom. Lord, help us to see in those spaces where we are trying to push doors open that we are not responsible for. Lord, help us to see doors that you are opening and inviting us into to service with You. And Lord, help us to see this not just individually but Lord, help us to see it as a church. Lord, as You have opened Your doors and You have brought people to us, may we be faithful in continuing to open doors for people to see You as You are. In Jesus' name. Amen.