

## Acts 16:9-15 “A Global Gospel”

May 1, 2016

Pentecost is two weeks away. Ascension day is this coming Thursday. Only four more days with Jesus with us. What Jesus said in John 16 sounds confusing at first. “It is good for you that I am going away. Unless I go, the counselor will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you.”



How can having the Holy Spirit in us be more important than having Jesus with us? What can the Holy Spirit do that Jesus can't? If each one of them is God, can't they both do everything? There are unique attributes or characteristics that belong to each one. Only Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. Only Jesus became incarnate as the God-man. Only Jesus could die on the cross for the sins of the world. Only Jesus could descend into hell, conquer the power of the devil, and destroy the power of death.

What does the Holy Spirit do? He is the giver of life. Jesus could walk beside me but the Holy Spirit lives in me. He will lead you into all truth. He knows our hearts perfectly and He will intercede for us with sighs that words cannot express. Jesus said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria ...” He will convict the world of sin and righteousness. What does this mean? The Holy Spirit is the one who makes the preaching of law and gospel work. One of the works of the Holy Spirit as He lives in us is to assault our comfort zones and break down the barriers. He shows us our sin that we might repent, turn from it every day, and live. Having brought us to the edge of despair by the law, He then revives us with the refreshing message of the gospel of the forgiveness of sins. He leads us in paths of righteousness and helps us keep the kingdom of God first. He leads us in understanding; He gives us power; He directs us in ministry and mission according to God's plan.

The Holy Spirit has always been the one to plant faith and makes it grow. The Holy Spirit is the one who can sanctify. If you want to deal with a sinful life, you have to do something about the sinful heart. Create in me a clean heart, O God ...- That's the kind of thing that has to be done from the inside out. A very real part of that change of heart is a change of direction in life. When David first penned Psalm 51, he understood that as God's Spirit gave him a new and contrite heart, that same Spirit would lead him out into the world. The good news of the gospel that forgave him, propelled him to “teach transgressors your ways”. The message of forgiveness cried out to be shared and he could not hold it in.

As the book of Acts begins, Jesus' disciples are paralyzed with fear, self-doubt, and personal shame. They had not only failed to prevent Jesus' suffering and death, they had even denied Him, betrayed Him and left Him alone when it had come to the darkest moments of His life. They were afraid that what had happened to Him could happen to them as well. His cruel death could easily be followed by the killing of His disciples. So they'd all hidden in an upstairs room to allow time to go by and help them be forgotten. Something changed ... they changed ... they were changed. When you comes to the second chapter of Acts, those men who abandoned Jesus at Gethsemane, have become courageous preachers of the “mighty acts of God”. The Book of Acts confirms that the power of the Spirit which transformed the disciples' lives while Jesus was still with them, could transform their lives after His death, too. That power of the Holy Spirit has been changing people's lives ever since. The Gospel marches on, the message goes on, the Holy Spirit leads on.

As we come to Acts 16, the mission of the church takes on a new dimension. The Holy Spirit does what He has always done, He guides the church away from its comfort zone and out into the world. It happened with Philip in Samaria. It happened with Peter and Cornelius. It's about to happen again. Today is day 36 from Easter. By now the message is getting worn and tired. It needs to be energized all over again ... recharged ... renewed. Even Paul's missionary journey seems to be losing some steam. He and his companions are part way through trip number two. They have been back to visit all they places they had been on trip number one. They had a clear mission when they started. Strengthen the churches they had planted on the first trip and when they finished doing that, they kind of just sat there wondering what they should do next? Have we gone far enough, or is there more? Which way should we go?

Up until now the mission of the church has taken the Gospel of salvation throughout Judea and Samaria, and on into modern day Turkey. The Gospel has bridged the gap between Jew and Samaritan, between Jew and Gentile, and God's church has grown. Now the message is poised to go even farther. Just how far will this next step go? How far does God want us to go?

As Paul and his companions try to sort it out, Paul has a vision. He is being called over to Macedonia. He shares it with his companions and they all agree ... God wants us to go there. So they set sail straight away and arrived in Philippi, something like the capital of the district of Macedonia. There they stayed for a few days; and on the Sabbath they went out and sought other worshippers. Now, on the map it may not be many miles, but Macedonia is a continent away. It might as well be another planet. Asia Minor was Paul's home turf. He was originally from Tarsus, and virtually all of his missionary work to-date had been in that larger region. To make the move to Macedonia, was to travel into foreign territory. Now Paul, and with him the gospel, would enter Europe. In the process, they would both move a step closer to Rome.

That voyage across the Aegean takes only a moment to read in the text but it required at least two days to make. So, I want you to imagine the excitement and anticipation of the missionaries during those days and nights on board ship. Imagine, too, the apprehension and uncertainty as they approached unfamiliar territory and unknown challenges. With each hour of their voyage, the coastline of Asia Minor grew smaller and smaller behind them, until it was no longer visible on the horizon. With each hour of their voyage, they were further and further away from what was familiar, and they moved nearer and nearer to the unknown. All that they knew for certain going into Macedonia was the man Paul had seen in his vision. But just how clear was Paul's vision? How vividly had he seen that Macedonian man? Had Paul seen his face? Did he remember his look, his features, and perhaps even the sound of his voice? As Paul disembarked the boat there in Neapolis, did he find himself looking at every face ... listening to every voice? It would have been a natural thing to do. How could one help but look for a familiar face in the sea of unfamiliar faces? How would he ever find the man from Macedonia he had seen a few nights before? Had they even made the right decision, or was this all just a big mistake?

Paul and his companions continued on, travelling inland from that port city of Neapolis. They arrived shortly at the important city of Philippi and started looking for the local synagogue. It's what Paul always did. Paul understood his mission as being especially to the Gentiles, yet as a matter of policy and procedure he always began with the Jews. He was one of them. He shared with them a common heritage, faith in the same God, and confidence in the same scriptures. When he would arrive in a new town, he would find the local synagogue, and begin by sharing the gospel with the folks gathered there. This was different ... very different. When they got to Philippi, Paul and his companions discovered that there was no synagogue in that town. In any city, a minimum number of Jewish men was required in order to form a synagogue. The city of Philippi fell short of even that negligible number. That must have been a discouraging discovery for Paul. If Macedonia already seemed foreign, now it seemed more so. The natural point of contact, the customary starting place, wasn't available. If Paul was looking for the familiar face from his vision, it surely seemed more distant and elusive now. The apostle had been beckoned over to Macedonia to help but where were the people who wanted his help?

In the absence of a formal synagogue, Paul went to Plan B. Where there was insufficient population to establish and maintain a synagogue, local Jews and God-fearers would designate a "place of prayer." It would have no street address or structure. It was just the site where a handful of devout folks habitually gathered. In many instances, such a place was by the local body of water. In Philippi's case that was the river, and that is just where Paul found a group of women gathered for worship when the Sabbath day came. Just when Paul thought it couldn't get any worse ... a group of *women*. Not only was there an insufficient number of Jewish men in Philippi to form a synagogue, it seems there were no Jewish men there at all. If Paul was still looking for the familiar face of the Macedonian man in his vision, he would not see it here in this makeshift congregation.

I wonder if Paul and his companions looked at one another that Sabbath morning and asked, "Where is everybody?" not because no one was there at that riverside place of prayer, but because the people they thought would be there, were not. He did not find a synagogue. He did not find the Macedonian man from his vision. He found no men that Sabbath day at all. But he found a small gathering of earnest women, and he sat down and spoke with them there. There are churches throughout history that have been built, that have survived only because of the dogged determination of a few women. Philippi is one of them.

The New Testament shines an admiring spotlight on the role of women in God's work. It begins with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and continues with the group of women who provided for Jesus and His disciples out of their means. Women were the first witnesses to the resurrection. Women were instrumental in the ministry of Paul and the early church. Women were the cornerstone of God's work in Philippi. And one particular woman has the distinction of being known as the first

European convert to Christianity. Her name was Lydia, and she was among the women that Paul found gathered down by the riverside. She responded to the message she heard from Paul and his companions that day. She and all her household were baptized. Then she followed through on the faith of her heart with the work of her hands, extending an insistent hospitality to the missionaries during their stay in her town. One of their nights in Philippi, however, was not spent in the comfort of Lydia's home. One of Paul's nights in Philippi was spent in prison. The beating and confinement were entirely undeserved and in Paul's case, as a Roman citizen, they were also unjust. It had come to pass that Paul had attracted the attention of a poor slave girl, who was demon-possessed. She had followed and hounded Paul for several days, when finally he turned and ordered the demon out of her. While this was liberty for her, it amounted to constraint of trade for her owner. The poor girl's condition had been exploited and turned into a profitable venture by the man who owned her, and so her deliverance interfered with his bottom line.

Paul and Silas were publicly stripped and beaten, and then thrown in jail. As they sat there, chained and bleeding in a foreign prison, what thoughts went through their hearts and minds? Would Paul have revisited that night in Troas when he saw the vision of the man from Macedonia? He still had not found that man. He had shared the gospel with a group of women and received considerable welcome from one. He had set another woman free from her spiritual bondage. But the Macedonian men with whom he had had contact were the slave-owner who had him and Silas arrested, the public officials who had them beaten and sentenced, and the jailer who had fastened their feet to heavy blocks of wood. In pain and in prison, you couldn't blame Paul for wondering if he had misunderstood God's direction, if he had come to the wrong place. Paul went to Macedonia because he believed he was following the leading and guiding of the Holy Spirit, and indeed he was. Before that night was over, an earthquake had broken open their chains and cells. By morning, the jailer and his entire household had been converted and baptized. Within a few years, the church in Philippi had grown into one of Paul's most cherished and happy partners in ministry and fellowship with him. But what of the vision? Was there some person who wanted Paul to go to Macedonia or not? Indeed, there was, but it was not a man from Macedonia. It was the God who loved Macedonia so much that He gave His only Son.

Jesus came to carry the sin of the world to the cross. He came in answer to the jailer's prayer "what must I do to be saved?" He came to break the power of death. He came so that the Gospel might go global. To that end, Jesus says, "It is good for you that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." The day would come when the disciples would need the Holy Spirit to come, more than they needed Jesus to stay. The Holy Spirit would bring understanding. He would bring power. He would bring direction to the mission of the church.

God's Spirit continues to come to us today to lead us out of our comfort zones to ministry and to people we wouldn't get to without His leading. Some of those places may seem fruitless. Some may seem fearful but He is with us nonetheless. So, how far does God want us to go? On the map Macedonia may not seem far away, but is a continent away ... it is a world away. Nevertheless, the Gospel will march on, the message will go on. The Holy Spirit will lead on. Thanks be to God!