

Acts 16:1-15 Who is in the driving seat?

Introduction

The second missionary journey had been underway for up to two years because Paul and Silas had been given the responsibility of revisiting all the churches Barnabas and Paul had planted in the territory we called Turkey today. Their primary responsibility had been to pass on the good news of the Jerusalem Council and then staying for some time to build up these local congregations with the emphasis on pastoral support rather than new evangelistic initiatives. Partway through this leg of the journey the Holy Spirit redirected their schedule, an intervention that they rightly chose to heed. We have no idea of the details of this revelation or how they were certain that the Holy Spirit was guiding them. But what is clear is that this was not just a situation in which they had some doubts about a course of action and opted to go a different way, rather they had clear plans and by means unknown the Holy Spirit made it very plain that a change of direction was required. We too make our plans, but all of us are (sometimes painfully) aware that sometimes what we expect is not what happens. No-one who is interested can be unaware that David Miliband was both the most experienced and arguably the most gifted candidate standing for the leadership of the Labour Party. He, and until the closing stages of the contest most other people, expected that the leader's post was his for the taking. Yet as the newspapers had reported in the last week in September 2010 he was totally shell-shocked that his less experienced brother was appointed to this position instead. It was, therefore, no surprise that he chose not to stand for the Shadow Cabinet. A man who had expected to have a very full diary and a hectic schedule of meetings, suddenly had a lot of time to spend with his family. Each of us may have had our disappointing moments when something we had hoped to do appeared out of reach. Possibly a career appointment that just never happened; maybe a lesser qualified but better connected colleague got the post instead. For others it can be relationships that failed or never got off the ground, which can take years to come to terms with. For other people it can be long-term health issues for ourselves or for our families? It is helpful to reflect on a verse in Proverbs: *In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps* (Proverbs 16:9). In this section of chapter sixteen of Acts Luke records two brief incidents that took place either over a few months, or possibly up to a year, followed by the extraordinary and unexpected start to the establishment of a Christian Church in the Roman colony of Philippi. In these accounts it is evident that Paul's ministry did not follow the pathway he had expected and planned for. However, God was with him and guiding his work. The implications for us are obvious. We too will need to accept that we will make our plans in the work of this church, but the way things turn out will in some situations be different to what we had anticipated. However, once again God will be with us leading and guiding our service for Him, as He was with Christians of previous generations.

1. Responsibilities and Rights (Acts 16:1-5)

(a) **The Reason for the Visit** (Acts 16:4-5)⁴ *As they travelled 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.* On what basis is a person accepted by God and given the gift of salvation- fellowship with God through the Holy Spirit in this life and eternal life in the age to come? This was exclusively through the all-sufficient sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, received by grace alone through faith, not through the merits of Jesus combined with our good works. The service we render for God is in response to His

love and an inevitable outcome of a life transformed by God. A person who has truly trusted Jesus will want to show love for God through their changed lifestyle and service to God and other people. It will be a natural outflow of their conversion. This subject was at the heart of the Protestant Reformation in the Sixteenth Century and was a recovery of the gospel of grace that was so strongly affirmed at the Council of Jerusalem in 48AD. In every age there is the temptation to promote a salvation produced by works in order to be good enough to be acceptable to God, but that is contrary to the gospel Jesus and the Early Church proclaimed. In the words of Paul in Romans 3:10-11, 20: *There is no-one righteous, not even one; there is no-one who understands, no-one who seeks God. All have turned away...Therefore no-one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin.* In other words the more we try to be good enough to balance our shortcomings with good deeds the more we become aware that seeking to match up to God's standard of perfection is beyond us! However, praise God there was someone who was perfect and who was willing to die in the place of the imperfect as their sin-bearer and substitute. The book of Hebrews explains how Jesus' sacrifice replaced the regular and the annual animal sacrifices that had been offered year after year in the Jerusalem temple for the sins of the people. When Jesus *had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God* [a picture of a work completed]...*because by one sacrifice He has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy* (Hebrews 10:12-14). Jewish believers were free to keep the Jewish law and its various rules and regulations, not least as part of their cultural and religious heritage, including such actions as the circumcision of male children. Gentile Christians (everyone who is not Jewish) were not required to keep any of these ceremonial laws, nor the Old Testament civil laws that applied specifically to the Jewish state in the Holy Land. The moral law, the Ten Commandments, as understood by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is the basis for our conduct. Paul and his colleagues had the pleasant task of informing each of the new churches what had been decided in Jerusalem. The practical guidelines (given in Acts 15:20) were put in place so that Jewish and Gentile believers could eat together and worship together in the same congregations. At first the majority were Jewish in many places, but as the years passed by and the Christian Church grew in numbers and in a wider geographical area the overwhelming majority of its members were Gentiles. What was the response to the message Paul delivered: *So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers* (Acts 16:5). The spectacular growth over the next three centuries was directly attributable, humanly speaking, to the lifting of these religious restrictions on Gentiles who wanted to follow the Jewish Messiah, but without having to become Jews. The quality of family life and the personal integrity of the vast majority of Jewish people had caused many pagans to look on enviously over the years. This had prepared the way for the launch of the Christian Church throughout the Roman Empire and beyond.

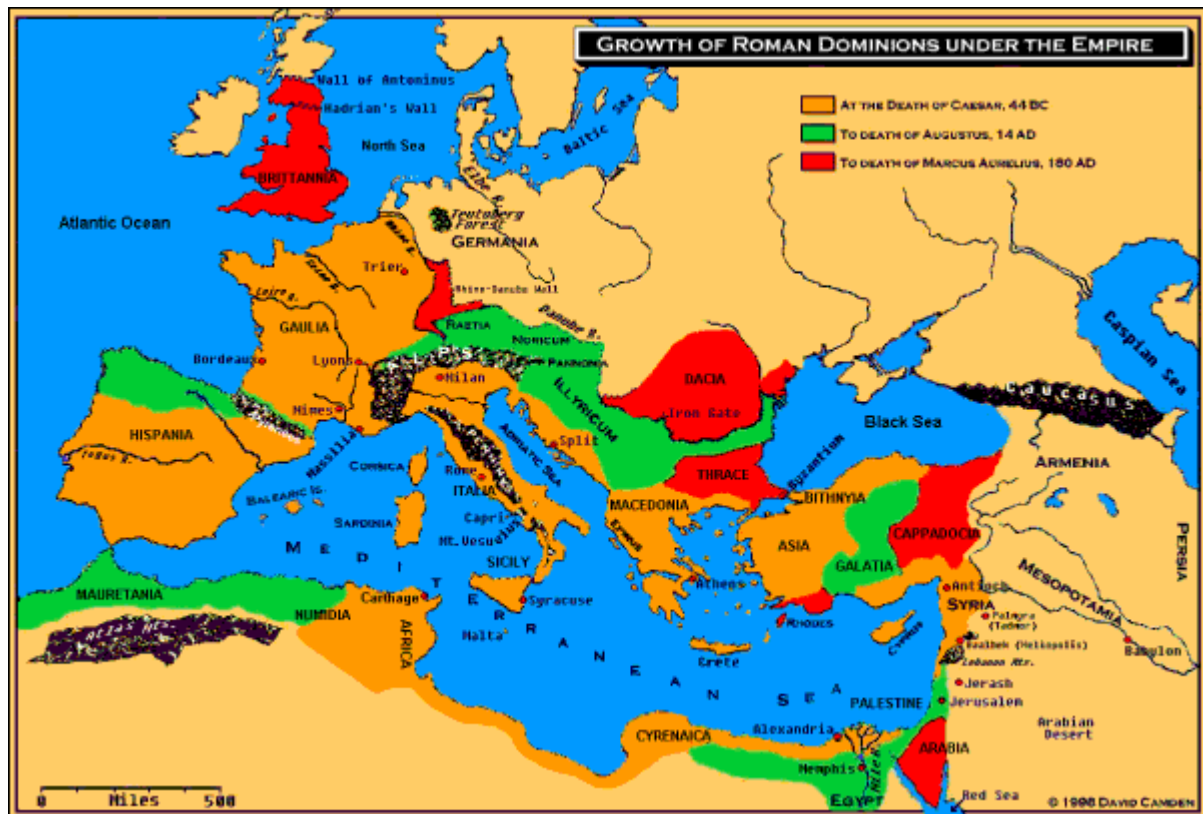
(b) **The Explanation for the Act** (Acts 16:1-3) ¹ *He came to Derbe and then to Lystra, where a disciple named Timothy lived, whose mother was a Jewess and a believer, but whose father was a Greek.* ² *The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him.* ³ *Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.* In view of what has been stated above and the purpose of this extended tour through a fair bit of the Roman Empire, at first glance we can be totally taken aback by what Paul did to Timothy. Timothy, his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois had all accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour on Paul's previous visit to their town. It is very possible that prior to her conversion that Eunice and her mother Lois were backslidden Jews who had lapsed in their faith through marrying outside their Jewish faith. This would have been remarkably easy to do if there were not enough Jewish men in that town (twelve required) to constitute a synagogue. There is no indication that any other members of the

family showed an interest in following Jesus. Timothy by now in his 20s (probably) had been an active worker in two local churches in Lystra and Iconium. The members of those congregations spoke very highly of him to the apostle. Paul saw that he had the potential for a much wider ministry and wanted to include him in one of his longer term mission teams. He saw in him the potential to have a ministry like Silas, the colleague who had replaced Barnabas on Paul's missionary journeys. Why then did Paul require Timothy to get circumcised when that was no longer compulsory for all male Christians after the Jerusalem Council decision? Was he reverting to legalism? No! Paul made a clear distinction between rights and responsibilities. He was free not to circumcise Timothy –a right. But to insist on that freedom for Timothy, a Jew, (a Jew is historically defined as a person born to a Jewish mother, the father may or may not be Jewish but that does not affect the child's ethnic designation as Jewish), would have greatly hindered any future work he had amongst Jewish communities. In the Turkish Jewish communities in which Paul grew up the commitment to Orthodox Judaism was very strong. They were determined not to be assimilated into the wider Gentile and pagan community and instead maintain their cultural identity and faith practices. Timothy's family, if my understanding is correct, would have been known as backsliders from Judaism and undoubtedly in such contexts Timothy would have been quizzed about his conformity to the Jewish law. The issue for Paul was this: is there something that could hinder the other person from hearing about and responding to Jesus? Is there something about the way I live that that person could use as an excuse for not committing their life to Christ? If I identify something even if it is legal and permissible for me as a believer then I will alter my lifestyle to ensure nothing gets in the way of the other person coming to faith in Jesus. Not because I have to do that but because my number one goal in life is seeing people come to Christ. I remember Daly Thompson, the great British decathlete, talking about the lifestyle sacrifices he made to be the athlete he was. He did not see the restricted diet, early nights and the other choices he made as a problem because it was all part of a bigger picture, a grander vision of what his purpose was in life as a champion decathlete. For Paul his mission statement is given in Philippians 1:21: *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.* How would you and me define our purpose for living in a sentence? (c) **The Principle at Stake** (I Corinthians 9:19-22) ¹⁹ *Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.* ²⁰ *To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law.* ²¹ *To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law.* ²² *To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.* Was Paul a suitable role model for Woodbine Willie, the World War One British Army Chaplain who was reputed to have made spiritual compromises to an astonishing degree? No Paul had a higher goal. He as a Christian wanted to respect the heartfelt concerns and practices of the people he sought to win for Christ, without compromising his core convictions and values. Therefore, when he was with Jews he kept all of their dietary laws and religious practices, which was easy for him as he had grown up in the strictest branch of the Judaisms of his day. However, when working in a predominantly Gentile community he lived, where possible, in the way they did, culturally speaking, with a view to communicating the Christian faith in an effective manner to his Gentile friends. This principle was understood clearly by Hudson Taylor, a prominent Christian missionary in China. He and the missionaries associated with him, dressed like the Chinese, adopted their hairstyles, lived in similar houses and ate the same food so that local people recognised that becoming a Christian did not mean becoming a Westerner, but as authentic Chinese believers in Jesus. For us today the same principle applies. We will focus

on a person's need of Jesus, not on other secondary matters that may or may not need to be addressed after they come to Christ.

2. Preparation and Openness (Acts 16:6-10)

(a) The Planned Itinerary (Acts 16:6a, 7a)⁶ *Paul and his companions travelled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia... When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia...*



Asia was a large province to cross before they had the vision of the man from Macedonia pleading with them to bring the gospel to Greece. Paul's plan was almost certainly to methodically make his way through the major urban centres of that part of the Roman world from Pisidian Antioch in the centre of what is now Turkey, travelling south to Perga and Attalia and then following the coastal route through Asia and then into Bithynia. His strategy was to establish a church in the major communities and then ask the newly formed congregation to take the responsibility for planting new causes in the smaller towns and villages nearby. Bithynia was a region he had never visited with the gospel and contained some large towns such as Nicaea, Nicomedia and Chalcedon. Much to their surprise God directed Paul and his companions to go to the port of Troas, a walk of between 200 and 300 miles. This is a big enough detour in the car or by train –on foot it was a very long journey.



(b) **The Divine Intervention** (Acts 16:6b, 7b) *having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia... but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to...* Has God intervened ever into your nicely ordered plans? You have been busy telling the Lord I'm going to do this for you and thenthen something happens that these plans have to be laid aside? Our sincerity and that of Paul's not in question, but God had a different plan for this missionary journey so that some particular people might hear the good news and be saved. Paul didn't make it to Bithynia, though Peter did (as I Peter 1:1 appears to indicate when he wrote a letter to churches he had visited in Turkey) sometime later. Paul was a pioneer who was determined to break new ground and establish churches in locations not previously visited by other missionaries. He made this point in Romans 15:20: *It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation.* Luke does not record how Paul felt about God changing his plans. However, the important issue for Paul and us is that we trust the Lord that He knows what is best for our lives and the pathways that we take.

(c) **The Significance of the Change** (Acts 16:8-10) 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.* Macedonia, part of Greece, was the first place in Europe to hear the Christian gospel. Europe was the place where the gospel survived during the terrible dark days of the Middle Ages and from which the great missionary movements of later centuries would take this good news to the rest of the world. Paul had no idea of the significance of this appointment; neither would Philip when he met the Ethiopian official who took the gospel back to his homeland in east Africa. There is not doubt that there will be conversations and actions you and I participate in, with respect to our faith, that have a significance far greater than anything we had ever imagined. Sometimes

we get a glimpse of the bigger picture; often we have to accept by faith that God alone has this perspective, but we trust Him to take care of that future.

3. **Innovation and Adaptability** (Acts 16:11-15)

(a) **Taking the gospel to ‘little Rome’** (Acts 16:11-12) ¹¹ *From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day on to Neapolis.* ¹² *From there we travelled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.* Our second map lists the places Paul and his friends visited on the way to Philippi. They had decided to start their witness in Macedonia in its leading city, rather than methodically working through the different towns along the way. For reasons unknown to us they held to this strategy. However, their usual evangelistic pattern of beginning in the synagogue with Jewish people could not happen as there wasn't a synagogue there. It is likely that they spent a few days looking for a synagogue before rightly concluding that there wasn't one. However, they were made aware that there were a handful of ladies who faithfully met for a prayer meeting on the Sabbath in that town and they found out the location for that event. This took real sustained effort. It was not a chance meeting. God may have given them a revelation about going to Philippi, but once there it was dedicated hard work in carrying out the work to which God had called them. Our service too is based on prayer and dependence on God, yet equally requires our dedicated and at times sacrificial commitment to His cause, for the accomplishment of the calling He has entrusted to us.

(b) **Building Friendships with people** (Acts 16:13) ¹³ *On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there.* The approach they had to take was different. This was no synagogue with its regular service patterns and structure. However, it was a group of people who needed to know Jesus. Time was spent on that day and possibly some other occasions building friendships with these ladies. Sooner rather than later they would have asked, why have you come to Philippi? When this occurred there was the opportunity to share the Christian faith. Friendship evangelism is not the whole story it is building relationships of integrity with people and allowing the Holy Spirit to provide, in time, openings to share our faith. What had worked in some other places was not suitable for this town. We too will have to use different approaches to the gospel to reach different people for Christ. The message never changes but how we share it through our words and our actions most certainly will.

(c) **Recognising God at work as we witness** (Acts 16: 14-15) ¹⁴ *One of those listening was a woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira, who was a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message.* ¹⁵ *When she and the members of her household were baptised, she invited us to her home. If you consider me a believer in the Lord, she said, come and stay at my house. And she persuaded us.* Why had God caused Paul to skip the vast province of Asia and send him to Macedonia? I believe that God's intention was to reach this multi-millionaire business woman Lydia, from the city of Thyatira in Asia, who was abroad working in Philippi at that time. [See third map picture here] Although clearly based in Philippi at that time, maybe she would have moved on and never heard the gospel by the time Paul and his companions would have visited years later. There are no chance meetings with God –only His appointments. Daniel was French and had been spoken to by Christians in his native land about Jesus. He decided to go away to secular England for a break from it to get away from his religious friends around Easter 1983. He first went to London and in one of the public squares heard an open air preacher proclaiming the same message he had heard in his homeland. He left London and went to Leicester on the Good Friday and heard the very

same message in another public square. On Easter Saturday he moved on to Lancaster. Coming down the hill from the railway station he came into the square near the then water fountain where a group of late teenage Christians with their two or three leaders, together with evangelist Graham Stamford were preaching the very same message. Daniel got the point and committed his life to Christ that evening! God wants to work through you –be prepared to be surprised at some of the conversations you will have. Almost certainly His desire is for all of us to be a link in the chain for other people coming to Christ –are you available to play that part? I trust so, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.

